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Navigating Precarity: the lives of London’s migrant cleaners

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Abstract

This study examines London’s migrant cleaners’ experiences of precarity and how they navigate those experiences. In the context of a neoliberal, anti-migrant climate in the UK, migrant workers have experienced intensified vulnerability whilst at the same time engaging in various forms of resistance. Existing studies on migrant cleaners are often focused on their working conditions and job insecurity, the gender aspect of those experiences, and their recent unionisation. Little regard has been paid to the reasons behind their decision to migrate, their initial experiences seeking access to London’s labour market, their living conditions and how their workplace experiences impact other, more intimate spheres of life. Similarly, whilst existing studies have analysed cleaners’ experiences of precarity and resistance at the collective level, individual cleaners’ personal understanding of those experiences has received little scholarly attention. This study builds on existing research by exploring cleaners’ personal experiences of and responses to precarity, drawing on a combination of participant observation methods and semi-structured interviews with cleaners and other key actors.

This thesis argues that in order to gain a deep understanding of migrant cleaners’ lives, it is important to adopt a holistic understanding of precarity, that encompasses experiences beyond the workplace. The research illuminates the complex and interrelated nature of precarity, revealing the connections between participants’ migration history, their experiences at the workplace, at home, and their general well-being. In exploring and evaluating migrant cleaners’ resistance practices, this thesis engages with existing debates on migrant workers’ organising and contributes to our understanding of the successes and limitations of recent collective mobilisation initiatives. Seeking to draw lessons from those organising experiences, it argues that successful campaigns have strategically combined different forms of resistance and puts forward worker empowerment and politicisation as key principles for organising.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AGM	Annual General Meeting
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CAIWU	The Cleaners' & Allied Independent Workers' Union
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
ET	Employment Tribunal
EU	European Union
FWR	Fair Wages Resolution
GOSH	Great Ormond Street Hospital
GP	General Practice
HR	Human Resources
HSE	Health and Safety Executive
IT	Information Technology
IWGB	Independent Workers of Great Britain
KCL	King's College London
LLW	London Living Wage
LSE	London School of Economics
LWF	Living Wage Foundation
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
NHS	National Health Service
NMW	National Minimum Wage
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PA	Personal Assistant
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RESF	Réseau Education Sans Frontières
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies
SSP	Statutory Sick Pay
UCL	University College London
USA	United States of America
UVW	United Voices of the World

1 CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

> I mean, from a person, look, a super shy person who didn't even know how to talk... From that person who only dedicated herself to work, her house, her daughters and nothing else. {...} So, a person who had zero social networks {...} To a person who... you get to know yourself, empower yourself... I don't know, it's like discovering another world.[1]

These were the words of Natalia, as she reflected on the journey that led to her transformation as a trade union activist.

In Quito, Ecuador, Natalia worked as a librarian and hoped to qualify as a teacher. Growing up, her parents would make ends meet informally selling groceries at the local market. Life was difficult, and their income was unpredictable. On bad days, when the rain was heavy or when they were being harassed by the police, her parents often came home empty-handed. This compelled Natalia's mother to move to Spain, where she hoped she and her family could have a better future. The family was separated for two years, until Natalia decided to interrupt her studies to join her mother, along with her father and siblings.

At first, the move to Spain went well. She had various low paid jobs, working as a secretary and a cleaner. She liked her jobs: she felt valued and had good relationships with her bosses. After a few years, she eventually opened a small shop and started a family of her own. Yet in 2008, when the global financial crisis hit, she started having difficulties and accumulating debt. After living in Spain for 12 years, she packed up her life again and moved to London, leaving behind her young daughter in the care of her parents.

She didn't know anyone in London. Relatives had put her in contact with an Ecuadorian lady who lived in the Seven Sisters area. For £150 a week, this lady let Natalia sleep on the floor, in a room she shared with strangers. She quickly found a cleaning job at a hotel in Central London. Paid per hotel room she cleaned, she would wake up in the early hours of the morning, cleaning as many rooms as she could. She worked day and night, hoping to save enough money to rent her own place and bring her daughter to live with her in London.

Natalia eventually secured a full-time cleaning job at a famous fashion retailer on Oxford Street and brought her daughter from Spain. To make ends meet, every aspect of her

[1] Natalia, former cleaner and UVW activist

life had to be well-planned, every expense had to be strictly calculated. Whilst she managed to pay rent, she sometimes struggled to put food on the table. Tight budgeting allowed her to stay afloat. But she lived with the lurking fear of losing her job. At work, she saw how colleagues were often arbitrarily dismissed, from one day to the next. One day, after returning from a holiday back home, a colleague who had been working there for over 17 years was told that her job had been given to someone else whilst she was away.

Nevertheless, Natalia quickly gained a reputation as a worker who would stand up for herself and her colleagues. She made herself be respected by her superiors and, unlike her colleagues, she could go on holiday or sick leave without fearing reprisals, earning the nickname of ‘La Princesa’ (the Princess). One day, she spoke back to a supervisor who was calling her and her colleagues ‘donkeys’. His response was ferocious. He started harassing her relentlessly, sending her to do the most unpleasant jobs. She sought help wherever she could. Eventually a colleague gave her the phone number of a man who represented workers like them. This man turned out to be one of the co-founders of United Voices of the World (UVW) union.

For Natalia, finding UVW and was like a light at the end of a tunnel. With UVW’s support, she confronted her managers at a grievance hearing, telling them about the abuse she and her colleagues had been suffering daily. This felt good. She saw that something could be done about her situation, that the barriers of managerial control could be pushed back. She wanted more of that. She attended trade union workshops and learnt about employment rights. After she convinced her colleagues to organise, stage a protest outside her workplace and demand the London living wage, she was dismissed by her employer. With the help of UVW, she took them to court and won the case. Today she is an experienced trade union activist, inspiring workers to fight to improve their situation every day.

Natalia’s story is emblematic of the harsh reality of the lives of low paid migrant workers in London, and of the transformative power of organising and resistance. However, there are important variations in migrant cleaners’ experiences in London. Due to language barriers, fears related to immigration status, and the general alienation associated with migrant life, many never seek support or take action to resist against their grinding precarity and harsh working conditions.

This thesis illuminates the experiences of the migrant workers who clean London's offices, shops, hospitals, and universities, the precarity that permeates their lives and their efforts to resist it. Valuable research has explored the lives of domestic workers, whose roles include cleaning (eg. Anderson 2000, Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002). These studies have highlighted the gendering of work in the intimate sphere, predominantly performed by racialised migrant women. Relatively little attention has been paid to the living and working conditions of outsourced cleaners. Whilst nevertheless important to our understanding of the experiences of outsourced cleaners, the gendered dimension of cleaning manifests somewhat distinctly in the workplace and domestic contexts. Whilst valuing the relevance of gender, I chose to focus on precarity as the main lens in my analysis.

Similarly, whilst there has been a surge of interest in labour studies literature on instances of collective mobilisation and cleaners' recent successes in reversing outsourcing (eg. Però 2020, Acciari and Però 2020, Wills 2008), relatively little regard is paid to the human, personal dimension of those experiences. There is still little understanding of cleaners' individual experiences of precarity, how workplace experiences impact other aspects of their lives, the psychological processes that are involved when they take action and their journey from experiencing workplace grievances to becoming political actors. Existing literature on migrant workers' precarity is often narrowly focused on workplace experiences. Through my conversations with migrant cleaners as part of my fieldwork research, I rapidly became aware of the complex, interrelated nature of experiences of precarity in different spheres of life. Therefore, in this thesis, I argue that migrant cleaners' precarity can only be fully understood through a holistic approach which considers various aspects of their lives, and how they connect and intersect.

The central research question of this thesis is: How do migrant cleaners experience precarity in different spheres of life and how do they navigate those experiences? This introductory chapter begins by setting the scene for the research, providing an overview of the research context. It then outlines the research question, sub-questions, and key findings, before concluding with a brief description of the thesis structure.

1.1 The research context

The experiences of Natalia and the other cleaners at the heart of this study have been shaped by major contemporary dynamics of labour, migration, and society. This section outlines the socio-economic developments and UK government policies that are key to understand those experiences.

1.1.1 *Neoliberal reforms and precarious work in the UK*

The extension of precarious work in the UK must be understood as part of a global ideological, political, and economic shift that has taken place over the last five decades. The restoration of production levels after the Second World War created the conditions for a long cycle of economic growth. This ended in the early 1970s, when declining profit rates generated a crisis of capital accumulation affecting most industrialised countries (Lapavitsas 2005). Governments responded to this world-wide economic recession, characterised by accelerating inflation and rising unemployment, by implementing a neo-liberal political project in the 1980s. Harvey (2005: 2) defines neoliberal ideology as:

> A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.

Whilst there is variation in the manner and the degree to which neoliberalism has been implemented in different countries, the shift towards a neoliberal political agenda has had many common features across the world (Aguiar and Harod 2006). These include a heightened fiscal discipline, by cutting domestic spending and privatising state-owned enterprises, as well as market-oriented economic reforms, through the liberalisation of international trade and the deregulation of labour markets - in other words, minimising legal interventions in the relationship between employers and employees. In the mid 1990s, this package of reforms was eventually articulated in the '10 point Washington Consensus', which prescribed the neoliberal economic project as the solution to global problems (Harvey 2005). Various forms of foreign pressure contributed to the wide diffusion of neoliberalism around the world. This includes diplomatic pressure and foreign military intervention; as well the activity of international financial institutions charged with regulating global finance and trade such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary

Fund, which made their financial support to countries in crisis conditional on the implementation of neoliberal reforms (Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2004).

Under the Thatcher government, the UK became a figurehead for this shift by aggressively pushing forward the neoliberal agenda before many other industrialised countries. Maintained by successive governments, both Conservative and Labour, the neo-liberalisation of the British economy involved a de-regulation of the labour market and a dismantling of trade union power, combined with a mass privatisation of public assets, intensifying competitive pressure (Harvey 2005). With the aim of lowering labour costs, labour market de-regulation involved attacks on both collective and individual mechanisms for regulation and dispute resolution. A series of legislative assaults on trade unions initiated under the Thatcher administration resulted in the de-collectivisation of industrial relations, with trade unions functioning in practice more as service providers for individual members than organisations aimed at securing better pay and work conditions for workers through collective mobilisation (Woodcock 2016).

Another element of labour market de-regulation has been the expansion of new contractual forms of employment, directly promoted by European Union policy (Arriziabalo 2019). The decline of manufacturing and the rise of the service sector have been associated with an increased polarisation between the top and bottom ends of the labour market (Gunderson 2013). This manifests in a growth in 'non-standard forms of employment', including temporary, part-time, agency work and subcontracting, which have been associated with insecurity and an increased risk of in-work poverty (Stone and Arthurs 2013).

In addition to legal reforms, privatisation and outsourcing were key weapons used to devalue labour power (Wills et al 2010). From the beginning of 1980s, the Tory government promoted the growth of outsourcing of public services through a series of reforms, outlined in more detail in Chapter Five. Vast numbers of workers were transferred from the public to the private sector, transforming their workplace experiences: competition between private contractors pushed down labour costs, resulting in low pay and inferior terms and conditions (Wills et al 2010).

The expansion of low paid, insecure jobs was compounded by welfare restructuring aimed at coercing people into work (Hardy 2021). Since the Thatcher era, reduction in public expenditure and the dismantling of the welfare state resulted in general welfare cutbacks for UK citizens as well as foreign nationals. Following the 2008 economic crisis, in a drive to

reduce unemployment, the UK coalition government introduced a regime of conditionality and benefits sanctions, reducing both the amount and entitlement to welfare benefits (Hardy 2021). This had the effect of limiting alternatives to low paid work, compelling individuals to take jobs they would otherwise have rejected. Increasingly tying up eligibility to the welfare system to a person's immigration status also facilitated the recruitment of migrant workers in the low paid sectors of the economy (May et al 2006). The effect of those measures has been the rise of in-work poverty and decline in living standards (Hardy 2021).

The combined effect of lower wages, reduced social protection and weakened ability to defend workers' interests through legal or industrial action has been to increase worker precarity (Stone and Arthurs 2013).

1.1.2 *The UK government's immigration policy: 'managed' migration*

Structural shifts in the global economy have fuelled increased concentration of migration towards countries in the Global North (Czaika and De Haas 2015). The global expansion of the neoliberal model and the imposition of structural adjustments to developing countries increased unemployment and inequality in the Global South. Relocation of some sectors of production and the sub-contracting of employment to countries in the Global South led to an extension of market relations and the development of infrastructure. These transformations had the combined effect of increasing international migration, with a significant movement of people from the Global South to the Global North, as well as from Eastern Europe to Western Europe (Wills et al 2010). Simultaneously, policy reforms in the Global North aimed at de-regulating the labour market led to the expansion of outsourcing and the creation of new, low paid jobs. Increased employer demand for cheap labour in turn fuelled labour migration.

Seeking to respond to employer demand for cheap labour whilst remaining accountable to the national electorate, the UK government adopted a policy of 'managed migration' by the early 1990s. The main aim of this regime was to manage migration in the interests of the UK economy, rather than limiting immigration per se (May et al 2006). Thus, the New Labour government sought to attract the 'brightest and the best', loosening controls for the global educated elite, whilst restricting entry for migrants from the Global South seeking asylum or economic opportunities, and tightening controls on illegal

immigration. This translated in increased border controls, security checks, and developments in the technical capacity for detention and deportation (Wills et al 2010). This trend was further deepened as the Immigration Act 2014 introduced the 'hostile environment' policy. With the aim of deterring illegal migration to the UK, this new regime made it more difficult for migrants to access work, housing, health care and other essentials of ordinary life by introducing a system of routine citizen-on-citizen immigration checks (Griffiths and Yeo 2020). Whilst targeting illegal migrations, these added immigration checks have had a far wider effect, further marginalising vast numbers of migrants, whether lawfully present in the UK or not (Griffiths and Yeo 2020). In January 2021, the transition to a post-Brexit system saw the end of free movement between the UK and the EU, restricting the possibilities for EU citizens to come to the UK for low paid work. Under the new system, most migrants coming to the UK for work now must apply for a 'Skilled Worker Visa', which requires evidence of employer sponsorship for a job that meets a certain skill and salary threshold (Portes and Springford 2023). As a result of this new policy, there was a sharp decline in EU migration, reducing labour supply in low paid sectors.

1.1.3 *London's cleaning sector*

Neoliberal reforms and the expansion of outsourcing over the past 40 years have transformed the cleaning industry. Widespread subcontracting of cleaning services has led to the proliferation of commercial cleaning companies, pushed by competitive pressure to minimise labour costs. The result has been a reduction of cleaners' wages and an intensification of their work (Aguiar and Herod 2006). The cleaning sector employs a high proportion of migrant workers: in 2017 in London, 82% of cleaners were born outside the UK (Office for National Statistics 2017). As in many industries, union density in the cleaning sector is low, and the absence of mobilisation remains the norm (Holgate 2021). Nevertheless, in recent years there have several notable instances of cleaners mobilising to improve their working conditions. Examples include the London School of Economics (LSE) cleaners' ground-breaking victory, for the first time reversing an outsourcing contract. This victory has had repercussions for the wider cleaning sector and trade union movement, as cleaners in other London higher education institutions and hospitals won campaigns to be brought in-house (Weghmann 2022).

How do these policy and industry developments impact the lives of migrant cleaners? Against the background of this bigger picture, this thesis engages with the stories of participants, their individual and collective experiences of precarity at work and beyond, their journeys to mobilisation as well as blockages along the way.

1.2 Research questions, approach, and key findings

Seeking to address these issues, the central research question is: How do London's migrant cleaners experience precarity in different spheres of life and how do they navigate those experiences? For purposes of analytical clarity, I have broken it down into three sub-sections: How do migration and workplace experiences combine to produce precarity? How do migrant cleaners experience precarity in personal spheres of life? What strategies do migrant cleaners deploy to navigate and resist experiences of precarity? Answering these research questions required an approach capable of capturing participants' subjectivity and intimate aspects of their lives. I therefore chose to use qualitative methods, namely in-depth interviews and participant observation, as outlined in more detail below and in Chapter Three.

In its analysis of cleaners' migration experiences, this thesis complicates the common conception of labour migration as a direct movement from one place to another, motivated purely by financial incentives. The research found that whilst the search for employment opportunities was central to many cleaners' decision to migrate to London, this was often intertwined with other personal, emotional, and idiosyncratic factors. It shows that their decision was often influenced by their gender, age, economic situation, and the extent of their social relations with co-nationals already living in London.

In regard to cleaners' workplace experiences, the research confirms the role of outsourcing in shaping working conditions. Specifically, it reveals how cleaners pay the price of business models founded on minimising labour costs, with minimal pay and terms and conditions, intense work rhythms and draconian disciplinary measures remaining the norm in the sector. The direct correlation between cleaning contractors' commercial imperatives and cleaners' workplace precarity contradicts the mainstream understanding of the employment relationship as a voluntary, mutually beneficial agreement between workers and employers.

The research makes clear that experiences of precarity are not confined to the workplace. It sheds light on the connections between labour precarity and the precarity experienced in more personal spheres of life, such as physical and mental health, housing situation, personal relationships, and general wellbeing. Throughout the course of this thesis, the findings highlight the significance of individuals' positionality, in particular their race, gender, and migration status, in shaping experiences of precarity. London's migrant cleaners face a myriad of interrelated, mutually aggravating issues and challenges in different dimensions of life.

The findings also challenge approaches to campaigning that focus on a single form of resistance. In its analysis of cleaners' experiences of resistance, the research found significant limitations to each method examined, revealing the need for a combination of different forms of resistance, subordinated to broader organising strategy. This thesis builds on existing literature on indie unions' successful initiatives organising precarious migrant workers in London by highlighting the difficulties faced beyond their initial stages, and suggests a way forward.

1.3 Thesis Structure

The thesis is organised in eight chapters. Chapter Two outlines the theoretical framework used in the analysis of the findings. It begins with an explanation of precarity as the main analytical lens used to apprehend cleaners' experiences. It looks at how dynamics of labour and migration produce various forms of precarity. Structural vulnerability, social reproduction theory and intersectionality are explained as key concepts to analyse the connections between cleaners' experiences of precarity in different spheres of life. The chapter then outlines everyday acts of resistance, theories on workers' mobilisation and sources of power to analyse instances of migrant cleaners' resistance.

Adopting a holistic approach to precarity, exploring experiences in different aspects of life, had certain methodological implications. These are elaborated in Chapter Three, which sets out the research approach and methods I employed to collect data for this study, namely participant observation of trade union meetings, parties, protests and picket lines, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with cleaners, trade union representatives, employers in the cleaning sector and other key informants. Ethical considerations, as well as

the issues that arose from my positionality as a researcher, are addressed throughout my discussion of the research activities.

Chapter Four and Five explore the processes that shape cleaners' experiences of precarity. Chapter Four focuses on participants' migration history. It takes a close look at their motivations for moving to the UK and the different factors that shaped that decision. It then examines experiences navigating the immigration system, showing that many participants' migration journey was not direct but fragmented in different stages, with most having first migrated to another European country before moving on the UK. Turning to their immediate experiences of precarity after their arrival in London, it reveals the significant barriers many faced when seeking to access to formal housing and employment, despite being mostly legally resident in the UK. As a result, many were forced to rely on the informal sector, exposing them to substandard practices.

Chapter Five then goes on to explore cleaners' workplace experiences. It begins with a brief history of cleaning and outsourcing, outlining the political and economic drivers of outsourcing. It reveals the consequences of cost cutting commercial strategies for cleaners, who gave accounts of minimal terms and conditions and intense work rhythms. Specifically, the chapter takes a close look at the different tactics used by employers to intensify work and minimise costs. It then explores how work intensification is maintained by cultivating an environment of fear, through draconian disciplinary measures and Human Resources (HR) processes. We see that such a work environment had a profound impact on cleaners' subjectivity and shaped their attitude towards their own occupation, transforming their perception of an activity that is purposeful in itself into undignified work. The relevance of cleaners' positionality in shaping their workplace experiences is highlighted throughout the chapter, as their migrant, gender and class identities combine to produce precarity.

The focus then shifts to more personal aspects of cleaners' lives, exploring precarity beyond the workplace. Chapter Six reveals the impact of cleaning work on their well-being, looking at their physical health, mental health, housing situation, personal relations, and ability to make plans for the future. It shows the complex, multi-layered nature of precarity, as experiences of precarity in different spheres of life cumulate and aggravate each other.

Whilst cleaners' experiences navigating precarity are explored throughout the thesis, Chapter Seven focuses on their resistance practices. It evaluates different forms of resistance, namely individual everyday acts, legal action, communicative strategies,

industrial action, and trade union campaigns. Cleaners' experiences reveal that each of these forms of resistance have significant potential as well as limitations when seeking to improve their conditions. Thus, no single tactic of resistance can be used as a panacea. Indeed, examples of successful organising campaigns suggest that these tactics are effective when combined under a broader, overarching strategy. Despite new independent unions' significant successes organising migrant cleaners, the chapter identifies the challenges they experienced beyond their initial stages, namely difficulties overcoming the servicing model and developing truly representative structures. It puts forward worker empowerment and politicisation as key guiding principles in union organising going forward.

The thesis concludes with Chapter Eight which brings together the findings and analyses in the preceding chapters. It gives an overview of the main findings in this research and discusses in what ways they contribute to our understanding of cleaners' experiences of precarity. A key overarching theme from the study is the interrelated nature of different forms of precarity, and the agency that cleaners demonstrate in navigating experiences of precarity. Throughout the thesis, I sought to give voice to individual cleaners and reveal their personal accounts of structural dynamics of labour and migration, as well as experiences of resistance. I end the thesis by outlining the lessons learnt from this research, discussing some implications for policy and union organising strategy, and suggesting some aspects that may require further research.

The aim of this introductory chapter was to set the scene for this research and provide an overview of the thesis. Before outlining the research methods used in this study, the following chapter sets out the theoretical framework used to analyse the empirical material throughout.

2 CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This thesis examines migrant cleaners' different experiences of precarity, and how they navigate and resist those experiences. The main analytical lens adopted is precarity, understood as a general condition of persistent insecurity and exposure to risk of deprivation of resources that are necessary for an individual's well-being. Whilst the concept is most commonly used to refer to job insecurity, this chapter suggests that it is important to adopt a holistic notion of precarity in order to explore the challenges migrant cleaners experience in different dimensions of their life.

Seeking to understand how social mechanisms produce a general sense of teetering on the edge permeating various aspects of life, this thesis draws on a range of theoretical tools. Firstly, the chapter delves into theoretical explanations of labour precarity, and argues that the Marxist understanding of the employment relationship must be applied to understand this phenomenon.

Next, it provides an overview of migration theorists' concepts of precarity of place and deportability as useful tools to understand the difficulties experienced by participants as migrants. It then explores the notions of structural vulnerability, social reproduction theory and intersectionality to understand experiences of precarity in more intimate aspects of life, and the connections between different forms of precarity. Lastly, it examines conceptual literature on different forms of resistance. Adopting a broad understanding of resistance, paying attention to everyday acts as well as more formal practices, the chapter examines theories on collective mobilisation processes and sources of power as useful tools to study migrant cleaners' experiences resisting precarity.

2.2 Precarity as insecure employment

2.2.1 Explaining job precarity: the sterility of the mainstream neoclassical approach and the necessity of a Marxist understanding of the employment relationship

The mainstream view of the employment relationship is that it involves a voluntary, mutually beneficial agreement between workers and employers. This view has limited explanatory

value and is unhelpful to understand the phenomenon of precarity. Neoclassical thought, based on methodological individualism, conceives society as the mere sum of individuals who behave as rational economic actors seeking to maximise their economic interests when making decisions (Becker 1981). Accordingly, the price of commodities is determined by the laws of supply and demand, and the wage consists in the optimal price of labour, being at the same time the price that employers are willing to pay and the amount of money for which workers are willing to do the work (Arriziabalo 2019). This entails that wages will rise to attract workers where appropriately qualified labour is scarce and will decrease where it is abundant (Todaro 1969). This emphasis on the individual to account for socio-economic phenomena is also applied to explain the determinants of labour migration. Neoclassical theorists view migration flows from developing to developed countries as the product of individuals' desire to improve their own living standards in the context of global inequalities in wealth and job opportunities (Abreu 2012). Social phenomena, whether migration flows or labour market patterns, are therefore understood as the aggregate result of the actions and decisions of individuals.

However, this approach has limited explanatory value. Its assumption of a natural form of human behaviour in which decisions are rational and seek to maximise personal utility is both simplistic and unrealistic, in that it fails to consider other, non-rational components of individuals' decision-making processes as well as structural factors which constrain their behaviour. As argued by Anderson and Ruhs (2010: 5), focusing only on the price of labour is insufficient to understand labour market patterns, which requires a multi-disciplinary approach:

> Examinations of national labour market data and employer skills surveys need to be complemented by more in-depth analysis and understanding of the 'micro-foundations' of staff shortages. This includes the micro- level factors affecting employer demand and labour supply and their interaction in particular local labour markets and within particular social contexts, for example, what is considered suitable work for women and men or the social status of certain types of jobs.

In addition, by considering the individual as the ultimate unit of analysis, neoclassical theory cannot successfully explain social phenomena. Macro social outcomes are seen as the aggregation of individual decisions rather than social processes (Hodgson 2007). But this cannot account for the existence of certain socio-economic trends, such as increased job precarity or particular migration patterns (Arriziabalo 2019). Neoclassical economic theory is

limited to the level of individuals' agency and does not provide a social explanation for socio-economic phenomena.

Marxist theory is a more useful approach to grasp the reality of precariousness and migration flows, by providing an explanation that considers constraints operating at the structural level. Accordingly, precariousness and migration flows can be understood as the effect of the rules that govern capitalist accumulation. Marxist theory sees the employment relationship as conflictual in nature, whereby workers and employers have diametrically opposed interests that accrue from their different position in the capitalist system. Whilst in principle 'free' to enter in an employment relationship, workers are in practice compelled to sell their labour power to survive (Marx 1867). Their labour produces value that exceeds the cost of production - namely the price of labour power and of the price of the means of production (in the case of cleaning, hoovers, chemicals, mops, ride-on machines…) - and generates surplus value, which is appropriated by the capitalist. This extraction of surplus value by the capitalist is defined as exploitation (Marx 1867). Employers have a structural interest in increasing the level of exploitation, expanding surplus value and their rate of profit. Increased levels of job precarity are a manifestation of this inherent trend towards maintaining profitability and increasing the degree of exploitation, through attempts to reduce labour costs. These take the form of an intensified and longer working day, reduced wages, and more insecure forms of employment. Job precarity can therefore be understood as the result of a demand for cheap labour, which is necessary to maintain profitability and essential to the capitalist accumulation process (Arizziabalo 2019).

It is essential for employers to have an available, alternative supply of labour, defined by Marx as the reserve army of labour. Whilst this surplus labour can be easily mobilised to fill shortages in times of high demand, its existence can also serve to keep wages low, as fear of unemployment disciplines the existent workforce into the acceptance of low pay and bad working conditions. Whilst Marx understood the reserve army of labour as locally available, constituted by the unemployed and other populations previously excluded from the labour market, capitalist development has also involved the mobilisation of labour from the countryside, other countries, and the colonies. Thus, the rise of strong unions in the 20th century as well as the development of welfare schemes, providing an alternative to low paid work, combined to increase the price of labour and constituted barriers to a cheap labour supply, which was circumvented by capitalists through increased recruitment of migrant

workers (Wills et al 2010). There is therefore a structural demand for migrant labour in capitalist societies, encouraging international migration flows to industrialised countries (Castles and Kosack 1973).

2.2.2 Contemporary manifestations of labour precarity

The neoliberal shift in the global economy from the end of the 1970s, implemented through the flexibilisation of the labour market, privatisation, and the dismantling of the welfare state, led to transformations in the world of work (Wills et al 2010). This involved a degradation of terms and conditions of work, decline in worker representation and the growth of non-standard forms of employment such as part-time, temporary and outsourced employment (Alberti et al 2018). In this context, precarity has become a prominent concept to broadly capture workers' experiences of insecure employment (Woodcock 2014). Precarity is described by Bourdieu (1998) as a: 'new mode of domination in public life . . . based on the creation of a generalized and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation'. This definition notes the disciplining effects of precarity: labour market deregulation and increased flexibility in employment arrangements enhance workers' fear of dismissal, which, in the context of high unemployment and the absence of a sufficient social safety net, drives the acceptance of low pay and bad working conditions.

Some authors, notably Standing, have argued that precarious workers constitute a distinctive, emerging social class called the 'precariat', characterised by the absence of different forms of employment protection, insecure income, and the lack of a work-based identity (Standing 2011). However, precarity is better understood as a generalised phenomenon of increasing job insecurity that arises from conditions inherent to the neoliberal capitalist system (Seymour 2012). Rather than being confined to a particular social group, precarity infuses the whole labour market and expands to affect increasing layers of the population. However, it is experienced particularly acutely by low paid workers (Branch and Hanley 2011).

Whilst precarity of work has a far-reaching impact on individuals, whose material welfare is largely dependent on their work, there are social security systems in place to compensate for unemployment and the effects of precarious work. The degree of social

security provided by the state therefore constitutes a key determinant of individuals' experience of precarity. In the neoliberal era, social security systems have been subject to various attempts to reduce entitlements, in relation to both eligibility as well as the scale of support. In tune with the neoliberal philosophy of responsibilising individuals for their unemployment (Standing 2011), restricting social benefits is also part of an attempt to reduce public spending, aimed at activating workers into the acceptance of low paid work. A common justification for this policy is the idea that there is a reservation wage, whereby workers are indifferent between being employed or unemployed (Blanchart 2017). Workers refuse jobs where the salary offered is below or equal to the reservation wage, as they are then better off claiming benefits. As the result, the fight against unemployment entails lowering benefits, forcing the unemployed to accept the low paid jobs on offer. However, this view fails to consider that it is the low wages and precarious nature of the jobs on offer that makes unemployment benefits relatively attractive. People will not be pushed into work if wages continue to fall. Reducing benefits, in the context of falling wages and deteriorating working conditions instead pushes individuals into a downward poverty spiral (Standing 2011). On the other hand, raising benefits means that the prospect of unemployment is less distressing, forcing employers to make jobs more attractive to the unemployed by raising wages. In other words, higher unemployment benefits may lead to higher wages and lower unemployment.

Maurizio Lazzarato, in his study of the social movement initiated in 2003 against the French government's attempt to tighten access to the social security regime enjoyed by workers in the entertainment industry, illustrates the role of the state in producing precarity. The specificity of the French intermittence regime is to guarantee income for workers in the entertainment industry between periods of work (Ribac 2003). This is due to the nature of a sector where work is discontinuous, with workers being commissioned for specific projects with different employers. Their precarity therefore cannot be conceived solely as an absence of stable employment, but as the result of a lack of protection and remuneration for the periods during which they are active but not directly employed. Demonstrating that work cannot be contained within employment and that the time spent unemployed can also be a time of productive work, entertainment workers made visible the precarity experienced beyond the workplace and shifted their demands away from wage levels and workplace conditions towards better security in their general living conditions. Lack of remuneration

during periods of unemployment, and more generally the erosion of public services and of social security, were all identified as drivers of precarity that threaten entertainment workers' activity and living conditions (Corsani and Lazzarato 2008). Far from being limited to the entertainment sector, Lazzarato argues that the problems raised apply to all, as unemployment is a generalised risk that is structural to the capitalist system, opening up a discussion around issues of precarious living conditions and social security.

Job insecurity, stagnating incomes and deteriorating social security all contribute to making people's working lives more precarious. The concept of job and livelihood precarity helps us ground the analysis of the working conditions and experiences of migrant cleaners in Chapter Five.

2.3 Precarity experienced as a migrant and deportability

Another dimension of precarity that has been much highlighted in recent scholarship and policy debates, and is relevant for this study, is that of migration status. States create categories of migration status to differentiate citizens from non-citizens. As well as constituting the basis for processes to authorise presence in a given territory, the distinction between citizens and foreign nationals also defines entitlement to certain rights and protections (Cole 2007). A common justification is the idea that rights and protections within a territorial state accrue from the membership in that state community (Fraser 2009). Whilst in most countries the lack of citizenship entails a restricted entitlement to social and economic rights, such as the right to work and receive benefits, this also involves, in certain contexts, limited basic protections of civil liberties, such as the freedom of expression and association (Cole 2007). However, citizenship is a political as well as a legal concept. Rather than a neutral concept that differentiates between citizens from foreign nationals, it is a political tool of exclusion. El-Enany (2020: 17) argues that contemporary British immigration law, by categorising and differentiating individuals along racial lines when authorising entry, is a continuation of colonial power:

> The categorisation of people into those with and without rights of entry and stay sustains and reproduces colonial practices of racial ordering. People without a right of entry to Britain, predominantly the racialised poor, are barred from accessing colonial wealth as it manifests in Britain today.

Indeed, processes of differentiation and exclusion are fundamental to capitalist exploitation (Bhattacharya 2018). Capitalism feeds on structures of domination, which naturally produce a highly exploitable underclass or reserve army of labour which, as seen above, is crucial to its mode of production. By reinforcing hierarchies, institutionalising differential access to resources and economic opportunities, the legal categorisation of individuals is a function of the exploitation of certain populations. The political and legal dimensions of citizenship do not necessarily coincide. Anderson (2013: 4) added to our understanding of the divisive function of citizenship by highlighting its normative value, evident in the existence of 'Failed Citizens' who are legally resident but socially excluded from the 'Community of Value' because of their race, dependence on welfare, or failure to obey the law.

Given the various facets of the concept of citizenship, who do we understand to be a 'migrant'? Legally, the term can refer to anyone subject to immigration controls. It is also used in data collection surveys to refer to people who have come to a country other than their country of birth to live or settle (Anderson 2013). 'Migrant' is a loaded term with a racialised dimension. Migrants are commonly imagined as BAME individuals, as illustrated by the widespread use of the term 'expatriate', rather than 'migrant', to denote white, foreign-born individuals. As highlighted by Anderson (2013), the term 'migrant' is often used normatively in public debate and the popular press to refer to individuals who are seen as others because they do not have the 'right' values or have a different 'culture', whatever their immigration status. To capture the different types of immigration and citizenship statuses of my participants, this thesis will adopt a broad notion of the term 'migrant', to denote any low-income foreign-born individual, who has come to live and work in the UK. Whilst individuals may have attained formal citizenship and be long term settled in their host country, they might continue to identify or be designated as a migrant, due to the combined effect of continuing high levels of exploitation, oppression, and exclusion from or limited participation in the social fabric of their place of residence (Hickman et al 2012). Because of this nexus between low income and identity as foreign born, my participants were characterised as migrants, but also identified themselves as such in their interviews. I therefore came to this understanding of the term 'migrant', defined from the outside as well as the inside. A potential implication of adopting this broad definition of the term 'migrant' is to create a flattening homogenisation of low paid foreign-born individuals and an overly

strict dichotomy between 'migrants' and 'non-migrants'. To avoid an impoverished understanding of the diverse experiences of London's migrant cleaners, this thesis seeks to highlight, where possible, the differences in their experiences of precarity, shaped not only by their status as foreign-born, but also by their race, gender, class, level of education, as well as length time spent in the UK.

Whilst non-citizens vary considerably in the extent to which they experience hardship, depending on their wealth, nationality, level of education and 'skill', the division between citizens and foreign nationals is a key driver of precarity. Banki (2013) proposes 'precarity of place' as a concept to capture the challenges faced by migrants. She argues that as rights and eligibility to certain resources accrue from citizenship and membership in a particular nation-state, there is a distinctive form of precarity experienced by non-citizens. 'Precarity of place' is defined as the absence of permission to remain in one's physical location and the vulnerability to removal from that location. Banki argues that this vulnerability to removal from a physical place, combined with limited entitlements to rights, has wide-reaching implications for the level of social engagement and attachment non-citizens can develop in relation to that place. Accordingly, it entails a condition of teering on the edge, living with a constant threat which hasn't yet materialised: "precarity of place describes the condition of not quite homeless, not yet deported or detained." (Banki 2013: 5) Similarly, De Genova (2002) developed the notion of 'deportability' to describe the effect of the constant threat of deportation, rather than deportation in itself, on migrants' day to day lives. The illegality of deportable subjects is produced by the state, which creates hierarchies of migration statuses. Beyond the inability to plan for the future, precarity of place, or deportability, has a knock-on psychological effect, instilling a fear of moving from one place to another, of using public transport or social spaces (Banki 2013: 9).

The precarity of place migrants experience on the day to day is also reinforced by a global trend towards the internalisation of borders, imposing borders in everyday life and responsibilising individuals and the private sector for carrying out immigration checks. The UK's Hostile Environment policy, introduced by the Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016, is an example of this process of 'everyday bordering' (Yuval-Davis et al 2017). As the policy generalised routine citizen-on-citizen checks, immigration controls are now embedded in everyday activities such as applying for a job or for welfare benefits, using the National Health Service (NHS) and renting housing privately (Yeo 2018). In addition to further

marginalising undocumented migrants, the Hostile Environment policy has far-reaching implications, affecting all migrants as well members of racialised minority groups (Yuval-Davis et al 2017). It further embeds discrimination, with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) residents more likely to be checked, as the targeting of lawful residents from the Windrush generation by the Home Office made clear (Yeo 2018). Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (2019), in their study of everyday practices of bordering and their impact on members of society, have demonstrated how such processes undermine access to jobs, healthcare, housing and education for migrants and racialised minorities. In the sphere of employment, they show that many migrants with a legal right to work in the UK are being refused employment due to employers' fear of penalty, highlighting once again the wide-reaching implications of the hostile environment policy.

Although no definitive claims can be made as to the extent of this phenomenon, the psychological effects of deportability are likely to affect migrant workers' labour market choices, deterring many working under sub-standard conditions from changing jobs, for fear of possible consequences. As a fluid social condition that is produced by government policies and legislation, precarity of place therefore does not only operate on undocumented migrants as a distinctive, sealed social category, but generates a pervasive fear of removal permeating the everyday life of many noncitizens. These ideas will be applied in Chapter Four to consider research participants' migration journeys and initial experiences in London.

2.4. Precarity as a migrant worker

The cleaners at the heart of this study are workers as well as migrants, and an in-depth investigation of their experiences must engage with the intersecting nature of these positionalities. Whilst 'migrant labour' cannot be considered a homogenous category, and is, just like the non-migrant labour force, segmented along lines of race, gender, and education levels, migrant workers are highly vulnerable to exploitation due to a combination of factors, namely the nature of the migration process, states' policies restricting their labour market choices and employer behaviour.

Migrant workers are desirable to employers as a highly exploitable workforce. Marx's notion of the reserve army of labour is useful to explain this phenomenon. As seen above, recruiting migrant labour is part of an effort by capitalists to keep wages down and profits

up, avoiding the rising cost of labour caused by labour movements and the development of welfare systems. Relative to the local workforce, migrant workers are pre-disposed to meet employer demand for low-cost labour: as a result of global inequalities, migrants have a 'dual frame of reference', whereby they assess their wages favourably by home country standards and are more likely to accept low paid work that locals reject (Waldinger and Richter 2003, Piore 1979). Some also argue that due to the expectation of a temporary stay, migrants are more likely to see work instrumentally rather than as part of the development of a career (Piore 1979). Migrants may have few social attachments in their destination country, making them more likely to work long, antisocial hours. The need to support dependents in their home country or to pay debts incurred as a result of the migration journey may be extra motivations to endure low pay and poor working conditions (Anderson 2010). Thus, the nature of migration processes mean that migrant workers constitute a highly exploitable labour supply.

This vulnerability to exploitation is reinforced by the state. Government policies on immigration, visa conditions and entitlement to social rights leave migrant workers in an institutionally precarious position and facilitate the development of a migrant 'reserve army of labour'. De Genova (2002), using the example of the history of the USA's immigration policies, argues that the state adopts a 'revolving door policy', whereby mass deportations co-exist with the importation of undocumented migrant workers. Immigration controls are thus enforced selectively, whereby 'some are deported in order that most remain (un-deported) as workers, whose particular migrant status may thus be rendered "illegal"'(De Genova 2002: 439). Whilst the ostensible purpose of immigration controls is to limit immigration, by producing illegality they serve to fashion a highly exploitable labour supply that meets employer demand.

Similarly, Anderson (2010) highlights the role of the state's immigration policies in shaping migrants' position in the labour market, through the creation of different visas categories which restrict migrants' labour market choices. For example, Skilled Worker visa holders' right to stay in the UK is tied to their employment with a specific 'sponsor' approved by the Home Office. If the sponsor chooses to terminate the employment contract, the visa holder then has 60 days to leave the UK if they do not obtain employment with another authorised sponsor (Gov.uk 2022). Work permit holders are thus not only dependent on their employer for their earnings, but also for their right to the remain in the UK. Such a high

level of dependence on their employer reduces their bargaining power, undermining their ability to resist abuse and low pay. Indeed, studies have shown that migrant workers earned higher wages once they were able to switch to an immigration status that did not tie them to a specific job or employer (Sumption 2019).

In addition, the widespread exclusion of most migrants from welfare schemes further constrains their labour market choices, leaving them no alternative but to accept the jobs on offer (Wills et al 2010). Whilst refugees and EU migrants granted permanent residence under the EU Settlement Scheme have the same access to state benefits as UK nationals, this does not apply to migrants who entered the UK through family reunification, as spouses of parents of UK citizens (Ibid). Migrants on Tier 2 visas, who depend on their employer's sponsorship for their continued residence in the UK and cannot leave their position without securing another, have no access to state benefits (Anderson 2010). Following the accession of the A8 countries to the EU in May 2004, recent arrivals from those countries had to demonstrate continuous employment for a period of over a year before they could access the welfare regime (Wills et al 2010). Finally, undocumented workers have no other option but to work in order to survive. We therefore see how the state plays a critical role in rendering migrant workers precarious, producing illegality through immigration controls, and limiting the access to the labour market and the benefits system.

An appreciation of the impact of employer demand and recruitment practices is also essential to account for migrant workers' vulnerable position in the labour market. The nature of migration processes and states' immigration and visas policies are not the sole drivers of precarity: many foreign-born workers remain 'trapped' in low paid, precarious jobs, despite having lived in the UK for many years and not being subject to immigration controls, as EU or naturalised citizens for example (Anderson 2010). Indeed, race and nationality discrimination, poor language skills and lack of recognition of qualifications are all factors which prevent migrants from moving out of low paid, precarious jobs (Wills et al 2008).

Racism is a significant aspect of migrant workers' experiences of oppression. Robinson (1986) argued that the segmentation of society along racial lines is inherent to capitalist social relations. Accordingly, racism structured society long before the emergence European industrial capitalism and colonialism, with European proletarians being in racially oppressed positions. Capitalism emerged from and extended these existing discriminatory

practices. Today, the ethnic segmentation of the labour market is reinforced by employers' racial preferences. Waldinger and Richter (2003) argued that employers tend to perceive migrants and BME workers as better suited to work seen as demeaning or dirty, because they are already treated as subordinates in wider society. Whilst a white, native worker might feel entitled to something better, racialised migrants are seen as less likely to complain. Thus, it is also psychologically easier for employers to assign unpleasant tasks to and dismiss complaints from an employee who physically does not resemble them. Whilst due to inevitable time constraints, it was not possible to focus on processes of racialisation of cleaners, I highlight examples of the latter in the discussion of the field-based evidence.

Lack of English language skills is also a key factor that limits migrant workers' labour market mobility. In the words of Waldinger and Richter (2003: 55): 'As the instrument by which communication occurs, language is a basic skill to nearly any job.' Learning the dominant language in the host country is therefore a key to get ahead and integrate in the labour market. However, social isolation, combined with limited interactions involved in the jobs they are offered, prevent migrants from learning the language. The existence of ethnic enclave economies, where recruitment processes rely heavily on community networks and the use of migrant workers' mother tongue predominates, also reduce pressure to learn the dominant language (Waldinger and Richter 2003). This however carries the cost of limited labour market mobility, confining migrant workers' employment opportunities to specific segments of the labour market.

Employers' lack of recognition of foreign qualifications also prevents migrant workers from 'moving up' in their employment. In their study of London's migrant division of labour, Wills et al (2009) documented the marked downward occupational mobility experienced by foreign-born workers in London: as many as 24% of their respondents had university level qualifications or previous professional experience in education, accounting, or agricultural science, yet were working in low paid jobs.

A strand of research explores the active role of employers in structuring the terms and conditions of the jobs they offer with a view to employing migrant workers. Saucedo stresses employers' intentionality in creating undesirable jobs, such as low wage occupations in the service, hospitality and construction industries, through their preference for controllable migrant labour, rather than migrants' choice to take up jobs that natives do not want (Saucedo 2006). Migrants' social conditions, such as immigration status, fear of

deportation, lack of community links and language deficiencies, constrain their choices within the labour market. Employers exploit those conditions by creating jobs that are so undesirable that only the choiceless will take them. Specifically targeting migrants when choosing their workforce, they conduct word-of mouth hiring through social networks that exist within migrant communities. Thus, rather than being purely a consequence of labour market dynamics, the attributes of 'migrant jobs', such as low pay and poor working conditions, are also created and maintained by employers' choices.

Path dependence also plays a role in employers' recruitment of a high number of migrants for certain jobs. Gordon and Lenhart (2007) argue that jobs can hardly regain social status once they have been performed by stigmatised groups, even if pay and conditions improve. There is, in the words of Cornelius (1998: 1), a 'structural embeddedness' of the demand for migrants in the economy. For the sake of stability and convenience, industries recruit from already used pools of migrant workers, and become increasingly reliant on migrant labour. This is especially the case if recruitment happens through social networks and referrals by current employees, as employment and migration networks become self-feeding (De Haas 2010, Massey 1990). The demand for migrant labour therefore becomes an institutionalised, structural feature of the labour market. Castles' (2006) work on post-war guestworker programme in Germany illustrates this phenomenon. As an instrument for 'importing labour but not people' (Castles 2006: 742), the program was intended to ensure that migrants' stay remained temporary by restricting their rights and limiting family reunion. However, employer demand for migrant labour became permanent, despite an economic downturn and rising unemployment levels in the mid-1970s. Migrants who had initially entered as guestworkers gained social rights, were joined by their families and became permanent settlers (Castles 2006). The government was unable to turn migration off like a tap, as migrant workers became economically and socially embedded in Germany. Whilst the 'import' of migrant workers was intended to be temporary, employer demand for migrant labour became structurally embedded in the economy. We can therefore see how employers play an active role in shaping labour market structures, resulting in a high concentration of migrants in low paid jobs.

The Covid-19 pandemic made abundantly clear the dependence on migrant labour of key sectors of our economy. The pandemic created a surge of interest in the concept of 'essential labour', as certain workers rapidly appeared essential in an emergency situation

when governments around the world implemented lockdown measures. Low paid workers that were previously invisible - cleaners, health workers, carers, workers in the food industry- were suddenly ‘at the frontline’ during the crisis (Gago 2020). Migrant workers were disproportionately employed in those frontline jobs, and disproportionately exposed to covid-19 as a result (Croxford 2020).

An adequate understanding of migrant cleaners’ lives requires attention to the multiple dimensions of the precarity they experience. So far, I have looked at the notions of labour precarity and precarity of place. I argued that the intersection of their migrant and worker identities produces a particular form of precarity, whereby migrant workers are in a structurally vulnerable position in the labour market. However, the cleaners in this study do not only experience precarity as migrant workers. They are also vulnerable in a more holistic sense, as human beings exposed to the risk of death. The following section explores this form of precarity experienced in everyday life.

2.5 Social precarity

Precarity has not only been observed in the spheres of work and migration but has also been a key theme in exploring people’s lives from a more holistic and existential perspective. Butler’s work is seminal in this regard. She argues that precarity defines all human life, as all lives are temporary in nature and vulnerable to destruction. It is, however, a social condition as well as an existential condition: “precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other” (Butler 2009: 14). Lives flourish or are made more precarious under certain socio-economic conditions, as institutions in place maximise precarity for some whilst minimising it for others. She provides a useful definition of precarity:

> That politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection. (Butler 2009: 25)

Thus, whilst precarity is a generalised human condition, not all lives are made equally precarious: in the context of socio-economic inequalities, some populations are at heightened exposure to risk of mortality and suffering.

Singer and Rylko-Bauer (2021) provide an example of the differential distribution of precarity in their account of the disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on certain populations. Using the concept of structural violence, defined as 'the often- hidden ways that structures of inequality, such as poverty, racism and discrimination, negatively impact the lives and well-being of affected populations' (2021: 8), they highlight the connection between social and health disparities. Social structural factors such as poverty, overcrowding, lack of access to health care are associated with both higher rates of transmission and of co-morbidity (such as obesity, diabetes, asthma, cardiovascular diseases), increasing the risk of mortality to Covid-19. The risk of severe disease and death is therefore concentrated among already vulnerable populations, as manifestations of structural violence cumulatively lower life expectancy and quality of life.

The concept of structural vulnerability, whereby some individuals are made vulnerable to death and injury through social mechanisms, is a key analytical tool applied in this thesis to understand the role of social structures in shaping migrant cleaners' experiences and conditions of life. As key aspects of existence that define an individual's well-being, Chapter Six will explore in particular migrant cleaners' physical and mental health, housing situation and levels of social connection.

A key determinant of life expectancy and quality of life is individuals' ability to maintain themselves and care for others. Social reproduction theory is a useful lens to capture experiences of precarity in those intimate, domestic spheres of life. Defined by Brenner and Laslett (1991: 314) as "activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily basis and intergenerationally", the notion of social reproduction captures the processes necessary to sustain and reproduce the workforce, enabling capitalist production. It includes, among other daily forms of labour, cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping, raising children, caring for relatives, and maintaining social and affective bonds. Fraser (2017: 29) argues that crises of social reproduction are intrinsic to the capitalist system, as its built-in drive to unlimited accumulation has the effect of undermining capacities for reproductive activities. In the current neoliberal era, the dismantling of social protection and the worsening of working conditions lead to a reduction of real wages below what is needed to cover basic costs of living. This results in an erosion of workers' capacity to maintain themselves through reproductive activities. Boltanski and Chiapello (2018: 833) observe that workers' wages only

reflect the time they spend at work: unlike other commodities, the price of labour power is inferior to the cost of its full production:

> Someone who buys a tomato in principle pays for the cost of its production, from the generation of the seed through to the earth, fertilizer and attention lavished on it. He does not simply rent the time that it spends between his plate and his stomach. This, however, is the kind of situation that is becoming ever more frequent as regards labour, since the costs that arise prior to employment (education, training, maintenance during periods of inactivity and rest), or after it (rebuilding strength, wear and tear, ageing), are increasingly excluded from the wages paid.

This is evident in the existence of 'the working poor' who, despite being employed and earning a salary, are unable to support themselves. One example is young individuals employed in so called 'mini jobs' in Germany (precarious part-time jobs limited to 15 hours per week) or under apprenticeship contracts in Spain, whose salaries do not allow them to build an independent life or access housing and who are forced to rely on family support or indebtedness for their subsistence (Arriziabalo et al 2019). This crisis in reproductive capacity results in a general degradation of conditions of life, eroding mental and physical health, productive capacity, and ultimately affecting life expectancy. The accumulation of disadvantages leads to situations of chronic precarity, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2018: 768) note: "because of the pitfalls and problems that accumulate on it, the path {workers} are obliged to follow renders them likely to be unable to escape their condition but, on the contrary, to sink into it, sometimes to the point of exclusion".

Social reproduction is gendered, as care and domestic labour is performed primarily by women. Whilst social reproduction constitutes a tremendous amount of work that is crucial to sustain labour power, most of it remains unpaid, and is conceived as a personal service rather than a genuine contribution to capital. Mezzadri (2020) highlights the socially constructed nature of the separation between production and reproduction: by sustaining the current labour force, reproductive activities are crucial to generate value and reproduce the capitalist system. The gendering and devaluation of social reproduction are in fact two sides of the same coin. Patriarchal ideology plays a key role in invisibilising women's reproductive work in the household (Mezzadri 2020). This then paves the way for cheapening the cost of women's work in the realm of paid employment, where reproductive tasks, seen as the natural attribute of women, are devalued (Teeple Hopkins 2017). As a social reproductive activity par excellence, cleaning work is socially devalued, which is

manifest in low pay and a high rate of exploitation, undermining cleaners' own social reproduction. In addition, the majority of my research participants are women, with caring responsibilities for children or relatives. As they perform both paid and unpaid reproductive work, at work and at home, this double devaluation of social reproductive work is key to understand the challenges they experience in different aspects of their lives.

2.6 Intersections and edges of precarity

The fact that multiple forms of precarity intertwine, accumulate, and exacerbate one another has been widely recognised by researchers (Banki 2013). Early on in my research, intersectionality appeared as an adequate approach to explore the connections between the different forms of precarity and oppression experienced by migrant cleaners. Intersectional theory usefully considers individuals as multiply disadvantaged by intersecting race, gender, and class identities (Crenshaw 1989) rather than suffering from disconnected sources of discrimination. But how and why does that intersection occur? What is it exactly that holds racism, sexism, and class exploitation together? Social reproduction theory builds on intersectionality, accounting for the connections between relations of domination as an effect of the unity of the capitalist system of production with racialised and gendered oppression (McNally 2017). Rather than merely intersecting, social relations of gender, race and class are better conceived as co-constituted. Indeed, authors have highlighted the historical coincidence of key phases of capitalist expansion with colonial expropriation and the emergence of modern racism (Bhattacharya 2018), as well as with the dispossession of women's roles in the economy and in society (Federici 2004). Capitalism, racism, and patriarchy therefore cannot be conceived as self-contained structures that pre-exist their contact with one another: 'these relations do not need to be brought into intersection because each is already inside the other, co-constituting one another to their very core.' (McNally 2017: 94) They are better understood as part of the same, integrated system. In her work, Angela Davis (1981) demonstrated how already devalued, gendered social reproductive activities are further devalued when performed by Black women, epitomising the unity between relations of domination as parts of the same system. This framework helps ground our understanding of the connections between different dimensions of migrant cleaners' experiences.

What are the edges of precarity? Under what conditions do individuals stop being precarious and become socially excluded? As seen above, Banki (2013: 5) defines precarity as a condition of 'teetering on the edge', of 'not quite homeless, not yet deported or detained.' Precarity involves the notion of a threat which, when it materialises, pushes individuals into entrenched, severe forms of hardship, at which point they are better considered as socially excluded rather than precarious. Walker and Walker (1997:8) provide a useful definition of social exclusion '{It} refers to the dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society.' It affects individuals who are unable to access mainstream institutions that structure social relations and experience a combination of severe forms of hardship such as unemployment, homelessness, family breakdown… (Levitas et al 2007).

Wacquant (2008) noted the alienating and homogenising quality of the notion of a socially excluded underclass, imposing from the outside a derogatory label on a segment of the population. Indeed, criminologists have argued that stigmatising labels can perpetuate and increase criminal offending for certain populations (Liberman et al 2014). As individuals internalise the status ascribed to them, affecting their self-perception, their label then becomes self-fulfilling and shapes their future behaviour. In addition, stigmatising external societal responses to deviant behaviour then reinforce this process through increased surveillance by the criminal justice system and reduced social opportunities and connections, which cumulate to promote the likelihood of future offending (Liberman et al 2014). Similarly, the notion of an underclass may, through both internal and external mechanisms, further disadvantage individuals and reinforce social exclusion. Whilst attention must be paid to the potentially self-perpetuating effect of the notion of social exclusion, it is a useful concept to capture how exclusion from labour market and other mainstream institutions, as well as weak social attachments, combine to deteriorate individuals' prospects for improvements.

At the other end, there are more positive routes out of precarity, whereby individuals can be considered to have risen above it. Whether through social connection or a certain level of financial security, individuals can acquire a sufficient degree of security, whereby they are no longer teetering on the edge but are able to plan for the future and access opportunities for social and occupational mobility. This can be facilitated by entering what

Standing (2011) calls the 'salariat', a social group consisting of individuals in stable full-time employment, who enjoy paid holidays and other occupational benefits and develop an occupational career. Obtaining a secure immigration status can also broaden one's labour market options and enable one to access state benefits. Whilst no-one can be said to be permanently sheltered from precarity, these factors promote individuals' prospects for an improved quality of life. Agency and resistance, as routes out of precarity, are considered in the following section.

2.7 Agency and resistance

This thesis also explores migrant cleaners' agency and practices of resistance and draws on scholarship on everyday resistance as well as more formal collective mobilisation to understand the actions of migrant cleaners in Chapter Seven. While often resistance calls to mind grand public acts, such as strike action in the realm of labour resistance, a wealth of scholarship has drawn attention to everyday, individual acts of resistance. De Certeau's (1984) conceptual distinction between 'tactics' and 'strategies' is useful to sharpen the analysis of different resistance practices. Whilst strategies presume a certain control over one's environment and an ability to plan in advance, tactics are a type of action taken in the absence of time, distance and organised structures. As such, tactics involve a degree of improvisation and are 'always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing"' (De Certeau 1984). This resonates with Scott's (1985) concept of everyday resistance, intended to capture the various ways in which peasants seek to push back against their own exploitation through covert, individual everyday acts. Examples include 'foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth' (Scott 1985: 34). Such techniques are particularly adapted to situations where workers lack formal organisation, structures, or sufficient leverage to conduct open confrontation. Scott uses the example of slaves' recourse to typically covert practices of resistance in the Southern United States, due to the potentially deathly consequences of outright conflict. As such, everyday forms of resistance constitute 'the ordinary weapons of the relatively powerless groups' (1985: 29). In the context of casualised workplaces with low levels of union membership in the cleaning sector, covert acts of resistance constitute an important dimension of cleaners' struggle against their experiences of precarity.

How do more formal practices of collective resistance around the challenges experienced by migrant workers occur? What factors facilitate or hinder collective mobilisation? Conceptual literature on social movements and collective action has sought to answer those questions. Mobilisation theory is founded on the Marxist premise that society is formed by a ruling class and a subordinate working class, with conflicting interests. This conflict does not automatically translate into collective action on the part of the subordinate class, which requires consciousness and significant organisational resources to materialise (Kelly 1998). Thus, *processes of framing issues* are key to understand the origins of collective mobilisation (Goodwin and Jasper 2015). Framing is equivalent to a diagnosis, whereby a particular grievance is attributed to social and political causes and identified as a problem that needs to be addressed. This allows individuals to develop a common understanding of the problems experienced, which is necessary to devise coordinated action. In the context of the workplace, Kelly (1998: 27) argues that the framing of labour issues as an injustice, identifying them as 'wrong' or 'illegitimate', is crucial to the mobilisation process. Workers' self-identification as a social group and their attribution of the injustice to management then allows the transition from the perception of injustice to the formulation of common interests. However, the framing of an issue as an injustice is in itself insufficient to explain what nourishes mobilisation in the workplace, as unfairness defines the employment relationship under the capitalist system. The very nature of capitalist production is also a key source of mobilisation in the workplace (Atzeni 2009). Indeed, resistance is latent in capitalist production, as the drive to accumulate profit and increase the rate of exploitation through changes in the labour process - for example changes in pay systems or shift times, or the introduction of managerial practices that intensify rhythms of work – provokes a response from workers. Resistance is therefore triggered when the imposition of work oversteps the limit of workers' capacity to endure exploitation (Atzeni 2009).

Identifying an opportunity for meaningful action has been suggested as another key step in processes of collective mobilisation by the literature (Goodwin and Jasper 2015). Accordingly, a cognitive shift occurs when participants begin to think that they have a chance of success, driving them into action (Goodwin and Jasper 2015). Particular opportunities or political conjunctures can contribute to movement demands, such as media attention that is supportive of the cause or a crisis in government giving more leeway to social movements actors for example (Goodwin and Jasper 2015). In the context of the

labour movement, Kelly (1998) argues that workers' perception of the *costs and benefits* of taking action in a particular situation, and the current balance of power - such as the perceived social and material consequences of participating for example - constitute intervening factors that either facilitate or hinder collective action.

Once migrant workers engage in collective action, what kind of leverage do they have to obtain their demands? To a significant extent, people's capacity to realise their interests when they mobilise depends on their level of bargaining power. Wright (2000: 962) usefully distinguishes 'structural power' from 'associational power' to capture workers' different sources of bargaining power. Associational power derives from workers' ability to mobilise allies through trade unions, political organisations, as well as community organisations. Structural power refers to the power inherent in workers' position in the economic system, involving both 'marketplace bargaining power', which results from workers' ability to find alternative employment or source of income when they are dissatisfied with their working conditions, as well 'workplace bargaining power', which accrues to workers from their ability to withdraw their labour and disrupt or stop production (Silver 2003). Workers' abilities to deploy their structural and associational power vary widely, with variations in the former significantly affecting the latter and vice versa. Recent transformations in organisation of work and the expansion of subcontracting have led to an increased segregation of workplaces, affecting their worker's workplace bargaining power by undermining their potential to cause large scale disruption (Silver 2003). By improving the mobility of capital, globalisation has increased employers' ability to seek alternative sources of labour and has weakened workers' marketplace bargaining power. This has in turned affected workers' associational power, by de-legitimising trade unions and deflating beliefs in their ability to effect change.

Solidarity and engagement with other communities of interest is a key source of associational power. Some authors have highlighted the importance of alliance building in expanding social movements and achieving social change (Garcia Agustín and Jørgensen 2016). Because of the heterogeneity of subjugated populations, social groups must open up to other social actors in order to challenge the dominant order. As well as increasing power resources and widening their networks, building coalitions enable social movements to enhance their appeal by broadening the set of interests represented (Frege and Kelly 2003). The relevance of alliance building, benefitting the different groups involved, accounts for the

recent emergence of civil society movements in solidarity with migrants (Garcia Agustín and Jørgensen 2016). Attempts at building coalitions among workers of diverse occupational, ethnic, and cultural identities through trade union activities will be explored in Chapter Seven.

Acts of collective mobilisation cannot be evaluated purely in relation to their success or failure to achieve stated goals. Attention must be paid to the expressivist, as well as the instrumental qualities of social movements (Bassel 2013). By making power visible and challenging dominant cultural and social codes, social movements reverse existing power relationships and have a strong symbolic value (Melucci 1985). Demonstrations and other forms of direct-action interrupt everyday routine, creating spaces of freedom where marginalised social groups enter the public realm and become visible. By transgressing power relations and social codes, these forms of action enact as well as demand alternative political realities (Bassel 2013). As Melucci (1985: 813) argues, the existence of social movements in itself has significant value: "Movements realize the paradox of being both winners and losers. Since they challenge the dominant cultural codes, their mere existence is a reversal of symbolic systems embodied in power relationships. Success and failure are thus meaningless concepts if referred to the symbolic challenge".

The instrumentalist and expressivist qualities of social movements should be considered as overlapping rather than strictly distinct, as the "medium is the message and action sends back to the system its own paradoxes" (Melucci 1985: 812). Indeed, the reversal of existing power dynamics through direct action constitutes a transformative experience, empowering individuals and turning them into collective actors. Bassel's (2013) analysis of the Réseau Education Sans Frontières (RESF), a social movement that was created in 2004 in France by community members against the deportation of undocumented school children and families, provides a useful illustration. Members' actions involved supporting migrants through the regularisation process, attending court hearings, and sharing petitions with airline passengers and pilots. Whilst there is evidence of RESF's instrumental gains, as participants have in fact prevented deportation and raised public awareness, Bassel argues that the movement had a limited expressivist dimension: its mode of action is criticised as paternalistic, as the actions were led by activist members of the community rather than undocumented migrants themselves, limiting the movement's capacity to challenge existing power relations and enact alternatives through its actions. Beyond the achievement of

concrete results, instances of migrant cleaners' collective mobilisation are also analysed in Chapter Seven in relation to their symbolic value and the message they express.

In exploring migrant cleaners' resistance in Chapter Seven, I adopt a broad notion of resistance, remaining attentive to everyday acts as well as more formal collective mobilisation. I look at how processes of framing issues as well as unanticipated offensives by employers can spark consciousness and resistance. I adopt Wright's (2000) distinction between associational and structural power to understand cleaners' strengths and weaknesses when they engage in collective action, as well as Bassel's (2013) notion of the instrumentalist and expressivist qualities of social movements to critically evaluate the resistance strategies deployed.

2.8 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to provide an overview of the existing literature that gives us the conceptual tools to examine migrant cleaners' experiences of precarity and resistance. Having regard to the various forms of precarity experienced by migrant cleaners, the neo-classical understanding of migration flows as the product of individuals following economic opportunities and reaping the rewards for their work is impossible to sustain. A holistic understanding of precarity, approached through various angles, is particularly apt to understand the experiences of migrant cleaners, who are vulnerable to labour precarity as workers under capitalism, as non-citizens subject to immigration controls and as migrant workers whose vulnerability to exploitation is reinforced by government policies and the actions of employers. A less well researched, but equally stringent aspect of migrant workers' experience, is the precarity they experience in more intimate spheres of their lives, undermining their capacity to maintain themselves through social reproductive activities. A broad approach to resistance, having regard to everyday individual acts as well as more formal, collective practices is adopted to examine migrant cleaners' experiences struggling against precarity.

This thesis engages with the theme of precarity throughout. Whilst Chapter Four focuses on participants' migration experiences and the difficulties they experience as migrants, the concept of job precarity is applied more specifically to Chapter Five. Migrant cleaners' experiences of more intimate forms of precarity and the connection between

different experiences of precarity are explored in Chapter Six. Finally, Chapter Seven examines and evaluates migrant cleaners’ resistance practices, using a broad understanding of resistance.

3 CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

3.1. Introduction

The main objective of this research is to understand how migrant cleaners navigate experiences of precarity in different spheres of life, and the connections between those experiences. This had several methodological implications. Apprehending precarity holistically, exploring the difficulties cleaners experience at work and beyond, required a research strategy capable of capturing their life narratives and intimate spheres of their lives. With qualitative methods, I was able to gain access to participants' interpretations of their own realities, and develop a nuanced, fine-grained analysis of their experiences. This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in this study and explains my choice of two distinctive qualitative research methods, namely participant observation and semi-structured interviews. First, I explain my personal motivations for choosing to research the lives of London's migrant cleaners. This is followed by a section where I describe my research approach and explain the methodological choices made. I then explain in detail the use of participant observation and in-depth interviewing methods during my fieldwork. Finally, I set out my strategy to analyse the data generated. My positionality and the ethical issues that arose during the research are discussed throughout the chapter.

3.2. My personal motivations and pre-fieldwork involvements

My decision to research the lives of migrant cleaners was inspired by my experience entering the privileged and marketised world of a top university in Central London whilst being exposed to the dire reality of university cleaners' working conditions.

Mid-November 2016, I joined with a couple of friends the national student protest against the Higher Education Bill. The proposed changes to the UK higher education system would allow universities with high student satisfaction scores to raise their fees in line with inflation, making the relationship between universities and their students increasingly transactional (Ratcliffe, 2015). As a final year undergraduate student at King's College London (KCL), I had a growing sense of frustration with the UK Higher Education system. Whilst studying in swanky refurbished buildings, I had little contact with professors but was

regularly asked to complete student satisfaction surveys. Living in London on a tight student budget, I was piling up debt and had no clear career plans.

About one month later, on my way to a lecture, I was distracted by a group of workers blowing vuvuzelas, banging pots and dancing deliriously in front of the main entrance to the campus. Drawn to the merry chaos, I stopped and joined the crowd. A woman with a kind face smiled at me. She told me that the cleaning company that employed them had just announced collective redundancies and a reduction in working hours. This was against the backdrop of cleaners being already understaffed and overworked. Before heading to class, I enjoyed the agitation and surveyed the scene. It seemed like two worlds were colliding. 'We are not the dirt we clean' read a placard carried by one of the protesters, whilst the walls of the giant brutalist building featured photos of eminent KCL alumni, promising current students a bright and successful future. For the first time, I saw the austere Strand campus convulse with life.

During my final year as an undergraduate, I threw myself head-first into student campaigns in solidarity with cleaners at King's College London, the London School of Economics (LSE), and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). With university friends, I attended trade union meetings, prepared sandwiches for striking cleaners, made banners and disrupted key university events to bring attention to the cleaners' plight. Campaign meetings would bring together supportive academics and students, outsourced cleaners, trade unionists and other activists. Cleaners shared stories of excessive workloads, whilst academics deplored insecure contracts and students lamented piling debt and an uncertain future. I was fascinated by the breadth of solidarity. The campaign seemed to have made the frontiers dividing social groups more porous, facilitating exchange between individuals who would otherwise only rarely speak to each other. As seen in the previous chapter, rather than a condition limited to the lowest paid, precarity seemed to be a generalised phenomenon, expanding to affect increasing layers of society and permeating all aspects of life.

Universities' treatment of their cleaners contradicted the public image they cultivated as institutions that put forward principles of social justice and equality. Despite their multimillion pounds budgets, those who cleaned their buildings were struggling to make ends meet (Jones 2017). Our protests were often approached by fuming students asking us to tone down, deploring that the noise was disrupting their revision when they

were paying so much for their studies. These two coexisting social realities, sharing the same space yet living in parallel worlds, seemed somehow closely related.

This gap between the experiences of students and cleaners epitomised London's concentration of corporate wealth and knowledge production alongside low paid, precarious work. The relatively glamorous lifestyle of high achieving students and high-income young professionals was underpinned by large numbers of precarious migrant workers paid close to the minimum wage (Sassen 1991). How do some of the lowest paid, most precarious workers in the UK labour market experience life in one of the world's most expensive cities? Fascinated by this polarisation in the experiences of different social groups, I decided to investigate a less visible aspect of life in London, by exploring the stories of those who clean its offices, universities, and fashion stores.

As my PhD project began in September 2018, I became more closely involved in the work of United Voices of the World (UVW), a grass roots union born from London's Latin American cleaners. I was particularly drawn to UVW: whilst Unison, the recognised union at KCL and the LSE, acted more like a mediator between cleaners and management, UVW's approach was from below, staging festive protests, with workers at the centre of the action (Marotta and Hughes 2018). I was a regular participant of solidarity parties, fundraisers, union meetings and employment law trainings, and actively supported outsourced cleaners' campaigns beyond universities, in sites such as the Ministry of Justice for example. Around October 2018, I started volunteering for UVW, assisting with general casework as well as with English lessons for Spanish speaking members.

It was not until I became a UVW staff member in March 2019 that I realised that what was happening on the picket line was only the tip of iceberg: the vast majority of cleaners I met through casework had little knowledge of their employment rights and had no experience of collective action. My role as a UVW caseworker involved supporting and advising members on disputes with their employers, as well as representing them and accompanying them at grievance and disciplinary hearings at their workplace. Although I mostly represented outsourced Latin American cleaners, who made up about 60% of UVW's membership, I also helped workers in other sectors, including hospitality workers and security guards. Common cases related to excessive workload, unpaid wages, disciplinary processes, and bullying practices. Once I was allocated a case with a member, an initial one-to-one appointment at the office was arranged, during which the member explained their

ongoing issues at work. I would then usually write a formal email to their employer's Human Resources department on their behalf, outlining the problems and reminding them of their legal duties and failures as employers, or represent them at workplace disciplinary or grievance meetings. Where the issue could not be resolved with the employer, I would, with the support of an experienced barrister working at the union, initiate legal proceedings at the Employment Tribunal (ET), depending on the legal merits of the case.

Beyond the cases I was officially assigned and responsible for, I also gave ad hoc support to members coming in to UVW's office. Issues varied widely and ranged from problems at work to matters related to tax, immigration documents, housing situation, or obtaining shared custody of children. As well as referring members to organisations that provided specialised support for wider, non-employment related issues, I often gave practical assistance to members by for example showing them how to access their payslips online, translating emails or letters from employers, and helping them complete paperwork.

Throughout my work as a trade union representative, it was often impossible to limit my support to purely employment-related matters. My interactions with members easily slipped from advice on specific issues at work to more informal conversations about their general work situation and personal lives, whilst on the train or bus to a meeting at their workplace for example. More than a just a place to obtain advice on employment issues, UVW's office was social space, where members would spend time sharing food, chatting between themselves or with members of staff. Common topics of conversation in the office included the cost of living in London, abuse at work, plans for return to their country of origin, navigating the system for obtaining benefits, immigration status or a hospital appointments, childcare, loneliness, and mental distress. This early realisation that the difficulties faced by cleaners extended well beyond the workplace informed my choice to apprehend precarity holistically later on in my research.

While working at UVW, I also had considerable contact with employers in the cleaning sector. A significant part of my work involved accompanying members to workplace hearings, assisting them in presenting grievances or resisting disciplinaries and dismissals. I gained an insight into Human Resources (HR) logic, managerial practices, and the organisation of cleaning work. Representations took place at the companies' head offices, or, in the case of larger companies, at the cleaners' workplace, which would allow me to see with my own eyes the premises they cleaned on a daily basis.

My experienced at UVW also exposed me to the workings of ET proceedings. My work involved advising members on the legal merits of their case, drafting legal documents and representing them at the ET, at preliminary hearings and final hearings. Whilst I represented UVW members at three final hearings, most cases did not reach that stage, and a compensation was negotiated and agreed with the employer. I became aware of the limited extent to which workers' rights can be defended through legal battles: the meagre protections of workers under UK Employment Law, the ET's bureaucratic inertia and ludicrous delays in processing claims - made worse by the pandemic – (Mc Closeley and Senegri: 2020) and the various practical and administrative hurdles were some of the many obstacles members had to face when going through the process.

Those pre-fieldwork involvements as a student activist and UVW caseworker were fundamental to my research: they inspired me to research the lives of London's migrant cleaners in the first place, but also facilitated my access to the field and informed my research approach.

3.3. My research approach: the individual perspective in the analysis of the social world

> How can we give explanations without pinpointing individuals? How can we avoid making the interview and its analytic prologue look like a clinical case preceded by a diagnosis?
> (Bourdieu et al 1993)

Understanding social phenomena involves a degree of abstraction from empirical data to theoretical analysis, at the risk of reducing participants to specimens, blurring the distinctions in their individual experiences. On the other hand, in the absence of theoretical analysis, research becomes the accumulation of individual stories and cannot explain social facts. In their study of the harm of neoliberal reforms in France, the authors of *The Weight of the World* took up the challenge of explaining the structural causes of social suffering, whilst at the same time giving a voice to individual participants, bringing to light their own point of view. Whilst each case studied - ranging from the story of an unemployed steel worker to that of a farmer - was intended to be representative of the collective experience of suffering of those left behind in the neo-liberal world, weight was given to participants' individual perspectives and the meaning they attributed to the hardship they experienced. Proceeding from the premise that various dimensions of social experience – such as poor housing,

unemployment, and racism - combine to produce social suffering and exclusion, the lives of the participants were apprehended comprehensively, through in-depth accounts of their day-to-day reality. In line with an emphasis on the subjective experiences of hardships, the authors highlighted the relative character of social suffering, determined by the individual's specific position in a given social setting as well by objective, material conditions (Bourdieu et al, 1993). Methodologically, this entailed an approach capable of capturing individuals' life stories: conducting in-depth interviews which, through dialogue, can reveal the social world from the point of view of those who experience it.

This approach inspired my research in two ways. Firstly, seeking to apprehend precarity through the eyes of those experiencing it and capture the nuances in those experiences, I privileged cleaners' own perspectives. Secondly, my intention was to explore the challenges cleaners experience beyond the workplace, adopting a holistic understanding of precarity. This epistemological position had important methodological implications. A comprehensive notion of precarity, apprehended through individuals' subjective experiences, cannot be measured quantitatively: a nuanced analysis of individuals' experiences required a qualitative approach (Morawska 2018). Paying attention to cleaners' subjectivity also required being open to the themes that emerged from their narratives rather than adopting a preconceived notion of precarity. I therefore chose to conduct semi-structured, 'life world' interviews (Kvale 1996: 30) with participants. To capture individuals' point of views, the interviews could not be restricted to purely objective, concrete information, and had to include questions about participants' opinions and feelings (Madison, 2005). With these considerations in mind, I asked participants general questions about their lives, what they liked and didn't like about living and working as cleaners in London. I also asked about their housing, personal relations, physical and mental health to capture intimate aspects of their lives, beyond the workplace. Conducting in-depth, lengthy interviews enabled me to cover varied dimensions of life whilst giving space to participants' creative expression and reflection on their own experiences.

Throughout my research, I viewed migrant cleaners at the heart of this study not as objects to be studied, but as active participants in producing knowledge (Madison 2005). Approaching the research in this way informed my decision to conduct participant observation, which allowed me to see participants 'in action', gaining an insight into how they behaved and related to each other and broader society (Kihato 2010). Participants'

active role in the research was also facilitated by a flexible interviewing approach, adapting to participants' own priorities and concerns rather than imposing a preconceived agenda (Morawska 2018). In this regard perhaps my approach differs from other studies that have explored migrant cleaners' experiences of precarity, such as for example the work of Wills and others (2010) in *Global Cities at Work*: rather than reaching out to large numbers of participants to conduct questionnaire surveys and highly structured interviews, I prioritised depth over scale, conducting lengthy, conversational interviews with migrant cleaners with whom I had a developed a good rapport through participant observation activities. This allowed me to collect rich, multi-layered accounts, where participants shared interpretations of their own experiences as subjects with agency (Madison 2005). The following section explains in more detail how participant observation and semi-structured interviews were used to collect this information.

3.4. Participant Observation

My choice to conduct participant observation was led by a desire to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of cleaners' experiences. Learning about the context of cleaners' lived experiences required not only talking to cleaners individually and asking them pre-prepared questions, but also participating and observing their everyday life (O'Reilly 2011). Conducting participant observation was also key to gaining access to an otherwise relatively hard to reach group of people (O'Reilly 2011). My command of Spanish was instrumental in that regard: when I interacted with cleaners, they were able to express themselves in their native language, using their own words to express a range of emotions, which facilitated rapport. By immersing myself in day-to-day trade union activities as a caseworker and activist, I was able to meet cleaners, engage in conversations, and gain an insight into the kind of concerns and problems they faced. I would take a note of common conversation topics, which would later inform the focus of the interviews. I started my research diary in September 2019 and collated 40 pages of field notes. Participant observation consisted of two main activities: the observation of public and semi-public events and keeping a reflective diary of my experiences as a UVW caseworker.

3.4.1. Public and semi-public events

During my fieldwork, I followed the trade union activism landscape in various ways, attending and observing trade union parties, employment law and mental health workshops, campaign strategy meetings, Annual General Meetings (AGMs), protests, and picket lines. In the period between October 2019 and March 2020, many of the events organised by UVW and the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) – another grassroots union that mainly represents precarious migrant workers -, were centred around supporting the outsourced workers' campaigns at University College London (UCL), St Mary's Hospital, the Royal Parks, and the Ministry of Justice. At virtually every event, at least three languages were spoken, and every sentence was simultaneously translated in English, Spanish and Portuguese.

Attending these public and semi-public events was key to gain an insight into how migrant cleaners acted collectively in moments of resistance but also how they shared and reflected on their experiences of precarity together. I was able to see how the cleaners interacted with each other, as well as with workers in other sectors and from different communities. I witnessed how groups of cleaners in different workplaces showed solidarity and were inspired by each other's struggles. As I observed cleaners during moments of resistance, I saw how decisions were taken collectively and different tactics were deployed. Listening to their speeches on the picket line, I noted the empowering value of direct action. Observing them in group situations during union workshops and meetings also highlighted how their perspectives could differ, how they could disagree and experience events differently. In campaign strategy meetings, cleaners shared their motivations for going on strike, what they hoped to gain from strike action, as well as their fears and concerns.

The pandemic significantly limited opportunities to meet and have face-to-face interactions with cleaners. During this period, I adapted my fieldwork plan and turned to online research (Lupton 2020). As lockdown measures were implemented in March 2020, union events were either cancelled or set up online. Cleaners' disproportionately low participation in online workshops and meetings confirmed the extent of the digital divide between different segments of the labour market (Holmes and Burgess 2022): technology was driving a wedge between UVW members working in low paid, manual jobs on the one hand and white-collar workers in the charity, graphic design, and architecture branches of

the union on the other. For a large proportion of members who would otherwise rarely use computers in their day-to-day, setting up a Zoom account was an endeavour. Many had no laptops and would half-follow meetings from their smartphone. Others were not able to attend an online meeting in a quiet, private room. From baby groans and sounds of rattling kitchen utensils emerging in the background, it was a clear that many were multi-tasking. Throughout the pandemic and until the end of my fieldwork period in March 2021, I continued to attend zoom meetings when they were maintained but relied mostly on interviews for my research.

Whilst I mostly observed these events and had limited individual interactions, I made sure that those I interacted with knew that I was a researcher conducting participant observation (O'Reilly 2011). I took extra care to ensure informed consent when attending more intimate events, such as mental health or sexual harassment workshops for example. The latter were run by UVW's Women Officer as well as a trained therapist and UVW activist, who invited me to join after they had obtained confirmation from the participants that they felt comfortable with my presence as a researcher. As well as allowing participants to share issues and experiences, these groups provided concrete coping mechanisms and practical tools to deal with sexual harassment and mental health issues. Rather than regular weekly discussion groups, these meetings were mostly organised by volunteers in an ad hoc manner. When attending workshops and group discussions, my role as a researcher was made clear to the participants. I used the round of introductions at the start of the meetings to introduce myself, explain the research and how I would use the information in my thesis. Conscious not to let my research goals intrude upon this precious time for members, I attended these events as an observer rather than as a fully active participant. After the meetings, I had the opportunity to have individual conversations with some of the participants over some snacks. I would take notes afterwards, writing down my thoughts, the general themes and ideas discussed. My command of Spanish, combined with the fact that I was fully integrated in the UVW community, meant that my presence was accepted in those events and people felt comfortable to share their experiences with me. However, I could not call myself an insider: as a socially privileged white student, I did not share the cleaners' experiences of precarity. In addition, my position as an observer, as well as a participant, meant that I inevitably had to stand back, constantly analysing what I saw and heard (O'Reilly 2011).

As a long-term staff member fully integrated in the UVW community, it would have been easy for cleaners to forget that I was doing research. With informed consent being a dynamic process (Madison 2005), I was conscientious to remind the cleaners that I was doing research and regularly sought to reconfirm their consent. For example, it was not uncommon for union members to open up to me and share difficult experiences in informal settings, such as at the end of union workshops or meetings over a coffee. On those occasions, whilst listening considerately, it felt important to remind them that I was acting in my capacity as a researcher.

3.4.2. Reflective diary of my experiences as a UVW caseworker

Between September 2019 and March 2021, I also kept a reflective diary of my experiences as a UVW caseworker. This involved taking note of common issues that arose in casework, what I learnt about the reality of cleaning work and the structure of the cleaning industry, and my reflections on Employment Tribunal and Human Resources processes derived from my interactions with employers as part of my work. After explaining my research project, its goals and how the information would be used in my thesis, my colleagues at UVW agreed that I take research notes drawn from my work experience. The primary purpose of taking field notes of my work was to familiarise myself with the general context, identify patterns of issues and inform interviews. Occasionally, I was particularly interested in a story that arose from casework and that I wanted to use in my thesis. In those instances, once the case was closed, I invited the member for an interview, where I asked them to elaborate on their case in more detail.

My UVW colleagues were the main gatekeepers for my research and overall had a very positive influence on the process (McFayden and Rankin 2016). Early on, I engaged with them in conversations about the process and purpose of the research, which meant that they understood my project and believed that it was important. They were supportive and cooperative, often signposting events that could be relevant to my study or putting me in contact with potential interviewees, as explained in more detail below. Perhaps the fact that I was useful to the organisation also motivated them to help me. As I was not only a staff member, but also a long-term UVW friend and activist who spent a considerable amount of my free time helping as much as I could, the relationship was mutually beneficial.

3.5. Interviews with cleaners

Whilst participant observation allowed me to meet cleaners and develop a general contextual understanding of the challenges they faced, in-depth engagement with individual experiences required organising individual interviews. This section gives an overview of the sample and interview process, before discussing access, and the ethical and positionality issues arising from the process.

3.5.1. Sample

Table 3.1 provides information on the interviewees. The names in this table correspond to pseudonyms, some of which were chosen by the participants themselves. The information provided in the table has been edited to protect the identity of the interviewees. Thirty-four cleaners and former cleaners were interviewed, twenty-six of whom were of Latin American origin. They came from fourteen different countries across Europe, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa , and the Caribbean. Most of the participants of Latin American origin had first migrated to Spain, where they had spent several years before moving to London after the 2008 financial crash. Many of them spoke little English and were interviewed in Spanish. Whilst most were motivated to migrate to the UK mainly by the prospect of employment, two had come as asylum seekers, and seven had joined a partner or family member. Only nine of the cleaners interviewed were male. This ratio is broadly representative of the cleaning workforce, as only 19% of elementary cleaning operatives are men (Office for National Statistics 2018).[2]

Almost all participants combined several cleaning jobs. The companies they worked for included large multi-national facilities management companies, as well as small or medium size companies. Their worksites were diverse and included: two prestigious universities in Central London, a pharmacy chain, a leisure centre in Chelsea, two hospitals, a primary school, a media company, a recording studio, a cosmetics chain, a fashion retailer, a luxury fashion shop, an advertising company, a hotel, a museum, and office buildings. Except

[2] This percentage refers to cleaning operatives and domestic workers. For cleaning operatives alone, the percentage of men is likely to be higher.

from the cleaners working at the LSE and the hotel, all interviewees were outsourced employees. Many of the interviewees had higher level education and had experience working in other sectors in their homeland before working as cleaners in London.

Participants were in part purposefully selected: I invited members who I believed had rich experiences they would be willing to share (Patton 1990). Most of them were members who had had significant problems at work, had experience standing up against their employer, were strike leaders or generally active union members. Practical convenience also guided my selection of participants, as I sought to contact members with whom I had developed a good rapport through my work at UVW, who had a successful outcome to their case or more generally had a good experience with the union.

Table 3.1: Participant Information

Name	**Age/estimated age**	**Gender**	**Country of birth**	**Date of arrival**	**Reasons for migration**
Gabriel	unknown	Male	Ecuador	2010s	Came to find work after the economic crisis in Spain
Johnny	20s	Male	Bolivia	2010s	Left with parents who were seeking better employment opportunities
Peruana	60s	Female	Peru	2000s	Migrated to care for a relative
J. D.	40s	Male	Colombia	2000s	Claimed asylum
Lucia	40s	Female	Ecuador	2000s	Sought a better live and better education for her children
Sabine	40s	Female	France	2010s	To find work
Naty	40s	Female	Ecuador	2010s	To find work and join family members

Alvaro	60s	Male	Ecuador	2000s	To find work
LaPiti	40s	Female	Dominican Republic	2010s	Was unemployed and came to find work
Justine	40s	Female	Venezuela	2010s	Liked London and moved to overcome heartbreak and divorce
Nida	40s	Female	Lithuania	2000s	Came to find work
Blackberry	50s	Male	Kenya	2000s	Claimed asylum as an LGBT person
Woman for Truth	60s	Female	Jamaica	2000s	Joined daughter and niece in the UK
Julia	50s	Female	Jamaica	2000s	Joined daughter and niece in the UK
Rosa	40s	Female	Ecuador	2010s	Family reunification – joined daughter in the UK
Chelita	40s	Female	Ecuador	2010s	Was unemployed following the economic crisis in Spain and came to find work in the UK
Clara	unknown	Female	Ecuador	2010s	Was unemployed following the economic crisis in Spain and came to find work
Tamara	unknown	Female	Colombia	2010s	Was unemployed following the economic crisis in

					Spain and came to find work
Katitus	40s	Female	Ecuador	2000s	Fled the economic crisis in Ecuador and liked the royal family
Peter	40s	Male	Peru	2000s	Joined partner on spouse visa
Pullo Anne	unknown	Male	Mauritania	2010s	Claimed asylum
Isabella	50s	Female	Colombia	2010s	Came with her son to follow his dream to live in London and learn English
Mariola	50s	Female	Ecuador	2010s	Was unemployed following the economic crisis in Spain and came to find work
La Voz	50s	Female	Ecuador	2010s	Was unemployed following the economic crisis in Spain, came to find work and join her son in the UK
Naomi	40s	Female	Nigeria	2000s	Came to find work
Valentina	40s	Female	Ecuador	2010s	Came to follow her daughter's dream to study in English and to overcome heartbreak

Jorge	60s	Male	Colombia	2010s	Came to find work after the economic crisis in Spain
Rodrigo	50s	Male	Cuba	2000s	Joined his wife in the UK
Marga	50s	Female	Cuba	2000s	Joined sister and obtained claimed asylum in the UK
Speranza	50s	Female	UK	Born in the UK	N/A
Natalia	40s	Female	Ecuador	2010s	Came to find work: became unemployed after 2008 crisis
Nadiuska	40s	Female	Spain	2010s	Came to find work
Charlie	40s	Male	Ecuador	2000s	Joined family
Celia	40s	Female	Bolivia	2000	Joined family

My sampling strategy could perhaps be critiqued for failing to represent the diverse experiences of the wider workforce in London's cleaning sector. Almost all participants interviewed were UVW members, a unionised minority in a sector where union representation is low (Focus on Labour Exploitation 2021, Equality and Human Rights Commission 2014) – an indicator of the precarity cleaners experience. There is therefore a possible bias, as the perspectives of un-unionised cleaners have been less explored. However, the cleaners I interacted with cannot be considered as a homogenous group. Because of members' different reasons for joining, UVW brings together people with diverse experiences, as well as divergent attitudes to work and understandings of trade unionism. Adopting an in-depth interviewing approach also meant that cleaners shared their life stories and told me about their initial experiences working in London before they became unions members, often reflecting on the difference unionisation made to their workplace experiences and their life more generally. Thus, although the experiences of participants cannot be compared to those of un-unionised cleaners, they can be contrasted with their

past experiences, before they had contact with unions and other support organisations. Additionally, there is a potential bias in that Latin American cleaners predominate in my sample. The cleaning sector has large concentration of workers from countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa (Wills et al 2010). Whilst the sample includes representatives of each of these groups, Latin American cleaners are clearly over-represented: Wills and others (2010), in their study of London' migrant division of labour, estimate that 19% of London's cleaning workforce come from Latin American and Caribbean countries. This imbalance again reflects the predominance of Latin American workers in UVW's membership. However, interviewing mainly Latin American cleaners who were UVW members also had the advantage of allowing me to have rich, intimate conversations. Conducting the interviews in participants' native language, namely Spanish, and the rapport I had developed with them through trade union activities were fundamental in that regard. As my intention was always to obtain an in-depth account of cleaners' experiences of precarity, I chose to prioritise depth over breadth and representativity.

3.5.2. The interviews

When interviewing cleaners, I broadly followed a semi-structured interview guide, covering a wide range of themes. Questions were inspired by my observations and evolved in the course of the fieldwork. Starting with basic background questions in relation to participants' country of birth and the date of their arrival in the UK, it then focused on their immigration history, asking about their lives prior to coming to the UK and the reasons for leaving their country of origin. It included questions about individuals' workplace experiences, asking about their terms and conditions as well as their opinion and emotions around work. Finally, the interviews addressed individuals' experiences in other spheres of life, inquiring into their housing and family situation, their mental and physical health, their overall well-being as well as their broader projects and concerns about the future. With the start of the pandemic, I adapted the interview guide to address how their work and lives were affected by the spread of covid-19 and isolation measures (see appended interview guide).

I adopted an interactive, conversational approach, seeking to create the conditions for a dialogue between equals (Kvale 1996, Madison 2005). In order to make participants feel as comfortable as possible, I avoided creating a ceremonious atmosphere (Kvale 1996). I

only occasionally checked the interview guide and jotted down notes to ensure that I was not leaving out anything important. As well as attempting to systematically address participants' terms and conditions (hourly rate of pay, working hours, benefits…) I used more open questions, seeking to invite them to talk openly about their experience and the issues that were important to them. Rather than steering the conversation in a predetermined direction, my approach was flexible and open to discuss unexpected dimensions of their experiences (Kvale 1996). This had the advantage of allowing me to capture participants' individual idiosyncrasies whilst identifying patterns and commonalities in their experiences (Madison 2005). This conversational interview-style gave participants the opportunity to reveal their own perspective and discuss themes and issues that might not have occurred to me otherwise. This also meant that participants were often curious about me and also sought to ask me questions, reversing the roles. I would engage with their questions whilst steering the conversation back towards their experience, trying to balance their desire for dialogue with my research aims.

Overall, the participants appeared to experience the interviews as enriching and enjoyed sharing and reflecting on their experiences. They provided rich accounts, sharing anecdotes and expressing emotions. They were generally very talkative, and would often digress, prompting me to gently bring the conversation back to my focus. When interviewing members once their case had been closed, I sometimes sensed that there was almost cathartic value to our conversations. Free from the practical constraints within the union office walls, many participants seemed relieved to have the opportunity to tell me the full version of their story, expressing their emotions and providing details to contextualise their case. In this sense perhaps my research usefully complemented my role as a caseworker, which, for purposes of efficiency, required me to quickly synthesise problems and identify relevant evidence and legal issues, and did not leave space for members to share their stories.

Many seemed particularly passionate when talking about their first experiences as union members and mobilising against their employer. I found that participants could sometimes be more elusive when I asked about their lives in their home country or their family situation, perhaps due to the personal nature of those questions. On a few occasions, participants shared accounts of past traumatic events, such as experiencing problems with the social services, immigration detention, homelessness or being undocumented. I tried to

be sensitive to their tone and expression, noticing when they seemed particularly emotional. I was careful not to probe them to give information that they were not ready to share and would suggest another topic to discuss or remind them that the interview could be paused or stopped anytime. When necessary, I also signposted participants to relevant support organisations.

The quality of the interviews was somewhat affected by the pandemic and the change from in-person to phone or zoom interviews. I found that conversations were shorter and less natural, and that participants discussed personal areas of their lives less openly. Whilst it was more difficult to establish a rapport online, sometimes patchy internet connection also meant that the sound was fragmented, and conversations flowed less easily.

3.5.3. Navigating access, ethics and positionality when conducting interviews

For the first few months of fieldwork, interviews arose from the relationships I developed through casework at UVW and my general involvement in union activities. For many members, standing up against their employer was daunting and emotionally draining, and accompanying them through this experience was especially bonding. However, the familiarity I often developed with members as a caseworker was not always an advantage when carrying out fieldwork research. Due to heavy workload and capacity issues, tensions occasionally arose with some members. Some felt let down and disappointed when the outcome of their case was not successful, which damaged the relationship and ruled out inviting them for an interview. However, most of the cleaners I met through my role as a caseworker grew to trust me and were keen to discuss a wide range of topics. I organised interviews with cleaners with whom I had a good rapport. Cleaners shared with me their stories in a location of their choice, often a café near their home or workplace. Although I always made it clear that I would pay for drinks, many adamantly refused to let me do so, perhaps due feelings of shame or discomfort related to accepting gifts, or an awareness that gift giving often exacerbates power imbalances (Madison 2005).

My access to interviewees was later complicated as I changed job roles and isolation measures were implemented during the pandemic. In March 2020, I became an ET caseworker, which involved more solitary work and less first-hand contact with cleaners. Initial casework had been to an extent collaborative: I would help members in their

communications with their employers, accompany them at workplace hearings, and we would think together about how to obtain a desirable outcome to their issue. My relationship with members as an ET caseworker was less horizontal: I navigated the technicalities of the law and wrote to the tribunal on their behalf, rather working with them in partnership. Those more vertical power relations made me feel less comfortable with inviting UVW members I had worked with for interviews, and as I was not developing trusting relationships with cleaners through my work anymore, I had to rely on attending union events and using my existing contacts to find research participants.

As in person union activities were cancelled during the pandemic, I struggled to meet cleaners, and quickly exhausted my repertoire of existing contacts. Some of my colleagues at UVW introduced me via WhatsApp to members with whom they had a good relationship and who they thought might be interested in speaking with me over the phone or via Zoom. My colleague Violeta was instrumental in that regard. As an incredibly dynamic and committed member of staff, she knew members well. Whilst at that point the cleaners whom I invited for interviews were people I had never met before, I found that they were generally willing to help me.

For in person interviews, participants confirmed their consent by signing a consent form after I provided them with a participant information sheet (appended at the end of this thesis), which explained the purpose of my research, the interview procedure and how I planned to store the data collected. A translated version of those documents was provided to Spanish speakers. I would read with them both documents, answering any questions and making sure that they had understood the information before starting the recording. During the pandemic, as the interviews were conducted over the phone or zoom, it proved difficult to obtain participants' written signature, as the majority did not have access to a printer or scanner. I sent to participants the consent forms and participation information sheet prior to the interview. At the start of the interview, I asked participants to confirm that they had read and understood the documents, and that they agreed to give their consent before starting to record. Most of the cleaners interviewed preferred to be anonymised and chose their own pseudonyms. In addition to using pseudonyms, I was careful to remove potentially identifying information. Participants generally expressed no concerns about the research. On one instance, I deleted a section of an interview transcript after being requested to do so by one of the participants.

Some aspects of my background and identity have potentially influenced the interviewing process. Whilst allowing me to meet cleaners and build with them a relationship of trust, my position as a caseworker also had its pitfalls. I soon noticed that my role and my knowledge of English and employment law enhanced the power differential in my relationship with UVW members, who would often refer to me with respect as *la abogada* (the lawyer). I would remind them that I was not acting as qualified lawyer, and, although I knew that by using this denomination, they did not necessarily misunderstand the nature of my role, it indicated an awareness of the power that my knowledge and experience gave me. Indeed, as I caseworker, I had the potential to make a material difference to their lives: effective representation could help them keep a desirable job position or obtain significant financial compensation from a settlement or an ET claim. Maintaining clear boundaries between my roles as a researcher and caseworker was key to avoid misleading participants and ensuring their consent (Ward et al 2021). This was facilitated by adopting a range of tactics. When interviewing cleaners, I made sure to clearly communicate the function and focus of my research (Ward et al 2021). I only interviewed members whom I was not personally representing on an ongoing case. Whilst I sometimes interviewed UVW members I had represented in the past, I only contacted once their issue was resolved, making it clear that I was acting only in my capacity as a researcher. This was not entirely straightforward in practice: as UVW often lacked the capacity to promptly respond to members' queries, any minute they had with a trade union representative, or even just with someone who spoke English, was a precious opportunity to obtain advice in relation to an issue they faced. Whilst I offered to help in cases of easily solvable, practical problems, I would not take on the responsibility of opening a new case, and when needed referred them to colleagues at UVW or other organisations able to support. Despite these precautions, I am conscious of the possibility that some participants might have accepted to be interviewed in the hope that I help them with a potential case in the future.

It is clear that my position as a UVW caseworker and activist helped me build a rapport with the cleaners I interviewed. I shared with most participants a sense of common purpose and ownership in respect to the union. I had become a natural part of union events and parties and would often run into research participants at AGMs or picket lines, where together we would chant slogans in support of striking workers. In this sense, the cleaners I interviewed were never passive objects of research (Madison 2005): the interviews were

enriching dialogues, where participants felt comfortable enough to comment on the union's inner politics and express opinions on recent developments or decisions taken. Speaking Spanish fluently was also crucial to develop a close relationship with members. I soon understood that the language barrier was a strong component of their sense of alienation living and working in London and being able to speak their mother tongue with me was for them a real relief.

Perhaps my background as a non-British born student also generated affinity. The precarity I experienced was not comparable to theirs, yet as a foreigner I also saw life in London through the eyes of an outsider. This meant that participants felt open to criticize British culture and complain about some aspects of life in the UK when speaking to me. However, I knew I would always remain an outsider among the cleaners whose lives I researched, which would limit my ability to fully comprehend their experiences (Iosifides 2018). As mentioned above, I remained in a structural position of power as white middle-class doctoral student (Madison 2005). Whilst I had significant freedom to decide how to use my time, most members' lives were tightly punctuated by work and other responsibilities. Union social events which would almost form part of my routine were for them precious moments they had carved out of their lives, squeezed in between two cleaning shifts.

3.6. Interviews with other actors

I also conducted a small number of interviews with other relevant key informants. The purpose of the interviews was to have more focused conversations to explore the perspectives of union organisers and individuals working to support cleaners and low-paid workers on the challenges involved in campaigning against precarity, as well as of employers, to seek their perspectives on how the sector operates, emphasising that I was interested in understanding the changing pressures facing cleaning companies.

Table 3.2: Other key informants

Name	Sector/activity	Organisation	Job role
Violeta	Trade union	UVW	Campaign organiser

Natalia	Trade union	UVW	Former cleaner and campaign organiser
Louis	Trade union	UVW	Campaign organiser
Guillem	Trade union	IWGB	Caseworker and campaign organiser
Charlie	Trade union	IWGB	Organiser and former cleaner
Celia	Trade union and Charity	UVW	Former cleaner and UVW activist
S.	Charity/NGO	Living Wage Foundation	Program manager
Yvan	Cleaning contractor	Large Facilities Management Company	Former CEO
Georgia	Cleaning contractor	Large Facilities Management Company	HR Partner
D. P.	Cleaning contractor	Mid-size UK based cleaning company	CEO
K.	Cleaning contractor	Small cleaning company	Manager

Setting up interviews with employers proved challenging. I contacted a total of twenty-two employers, mostly via email, which I would then follow up with a phone call. I received only four responses: two positive and two negative ones. One of the latter was of a manager whom I had met in the past over the course of workplace trade union representations. He explained in his email that it would have been against his interests to be interviewed by a UVW caseworker - already we see the tension and mistrust between employers in cleaning contractors and trade unions. One of the employers contacted responded positively to my email, where I had referenced to an article written by him on a facilities management

website as a ‘hook’. The other employers interviewed were approached through personal contacts of mine, which proved to be a much more successful tactic. Accessing trade union activists and other individuals working to support migrant workers was much easier, most likely because I was already part of the community of trade union activists and shared with them common values and interests. Generally, I found that these interviews were open conversations where participants were ready to explore union politics and the challenges of campaigning. Arrangements for confirming participants’ informed consent were the same as for cleaners, as explained above.

3.6. Analysing the material

Interviews with migrant cleaners and other actors formed the main body of data.
My first step when analysing the data was to transcribe all interviews, of cleaners and other actors, into password-protected word documents, translating into English those that had been conducted in Spanish. Transcripts were saved on my password-protected personal laptop. Once uploaded onto NVivo software for analysis, each interview was then colour coded to organise the data. Initially, I created codes that reflected the main topics covered in the interview guide: participants’ motivation for migrating and their arrival in London, experiences working in the cleaning sector, experiences in other spheres of life, strategies to navigate experiences of precarity. After reading the transcripts more closely, I noted recurring themes or types of statements within those broader topics such as, for example, participants’ attitudes and emotions feelings towards cleaning, the political opinions and values expressed, and their aspirations for the future. Based on these different types of data, I created another layer of ‘sub-codes’ and again colour-coded the text accordingly. Each code and sub-code were then thoroughly analysed, paying attention to emerging patterns and commonalities, as well as significant divergences in participants’ accounts. Next, I added my participant observation notes onto NVivo, and after close reading, colour-coded them using the same codes and sub-codes as for interviews. I then analysed the data across the different themes and sections, attempting to identify connections and causalities between participants’ experiences in different spheres of life.

Organising the interviews and participant observation data in different codes enabled me to compare it systematically with other bodies of data. Indeed, a second stage of analysis

involved triangulating the fieldwork data with the data obtained from secondary research conducted prior to the fieldwork, as part of an attempt to map the field. The sources used included academic research, government reports, Office for National Statistics data, as well as local media coverage.

3.7. Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed my research approach and methods that I used to investigate experiences of precarity among migrant cleaners. Exploring their everyday lived experiences of precarity, understood holistically and from their perspective, required employing qualitative research methods. Participant observation allowed me to develop a rapport with cleaners and learn about the context of their experiences, which also informed the interview questions. By conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews, asking participants to narrate their life stories, I gained access to their interpretation of their everyday reality, allowing me to develop a nuanced understanding of their experiences of precarity. Throughout this chapter I have reflected on my positionality and the ethical issues that arose during the research. Whilst working as a union caseworker was a key asset for my research, it required maintaining careful boundaries and paying attention to clear communication and power relations. After explaining how other actors were interviewed, I outlined my analytical strategy. The following chapters analyse the findings collected through this research.

4 CHAPTER FOUR: MIGRATING TO LONDON

4.1 Introduction

> Because when one is leaving their country, it is difficult. I left… firstly I emigrated to Chile [from Ecuador]. I left because of [heartbreak]. Because I didn't want to know anything about this man, I wanted to be far away from him. In Chile I was looking after children as a nanny. […] So, in Chile, it was fine, I was thinking of staying there but my family had emigrated to Spain at that time, so I decided to go to Spain. This was my migratory trajectory. […] And now I am in the United Kingdom. This was because my son couldn't find work, he was unemployed, he had benefits. I had a job seeker's allowance in Spain. This stopped and they gave me a benefit called […] social salary, which is the bare minimum salary for people who live in poverty. So, I didn't want to be… without doing what I know, what I like, if I can work, why should I live with so little money? […] I was unemployed in Spain, I got pregnant, I had [my daughter] […] Then, [my son] went to London. He went before me, in 2016 I think, like a year before me. There was lot of… at the time there were the people who died, there was a lot of terrorism at the time. I couldn't sleep well. I told my son that as well as wanting to work I wanted to be with him […] Because I had a very bitter moment when I heard that there had been an accident in a club and many young Latin American people died. My son was working, he wasn't responding to my messages. I felt very bad, and this made me decide to come to London.[3]

La Voz' interview excerpt shows that her migration experience was not a direct journey to a specific destination, for the sole purpose of finding employment. Rather, it involved multiple stages, each time considering diverse, conflicting factors. Her migration journey was the product of the interaction of structural economic incentives on the one hand - namely unemployment in Spain due to the global economic recession - with personal life events and the desire to follow family members on the other. Her experience illustrates the complexity of my participants' motivations for moving to London, whereby the search for job opportunities was often intertwined with idiosyncratic, emotional considerations.

This chapter explores migrant cleaners' multiple motivations for moving, how they navigated the UK immigration system, and their initial experiences settling in London. Drawing on interviews with cleaners and existing studies, this chapter asks: What were the motivations for participants' decisions to migrate to London and how did they negotiate immigration regimes? How did participants experience precarity immediately after their arrival? In so doing, it uses the concept of migrants' 'dual frame of reference' (Piore 1979, Waldinger and Lichter 2003) as well as a multi-dimensional approach to migration decision-making (De Haas 2010, Seven 2020). It is argued that whilst the desire to improve their

[3] La Voz, office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish

financial situation and seek a better life for themselves and their loved ones was at the heart of most participants' narratives, this was intertwined with more personal and contextual considerations. This observation challenges a more reductive engagement characterising people as simply 'economic migrants', purely motivated by financial incentives. Participants' stories show that for many, the period immediately following their arrival in London was one of acute precarity and uncertainty, during which immigration controls combined with administrative hurdles to hinder access to formal employment and housing, rendering them more vulnerable to abuse and sub-standard practices. The chapter shows that many migrant cleaners experience extreme levels of precarity during their early days in London, despite having EU or UK citizenship. In so doing, it contributes to academic debates on the relationship between immigration controls and precarity and adds to existing studies that focus on the absence of citizenship or legal residence as the main vector of precarity.

The chapter starts with an analysis of the varied reasons for participants' decision to leave their homeland, their movements prior to arriving in the UK and their expectations of life in London. This is followed by an overview of the current UK immigration framework and participants' experiences navigating this system. Finally, it explores the challenges participants faced when seeking to settle in London, and the precarity they experienced immediately after their arrival.

4.2 Migration Drivers

4.2.1. Financial motivations

As seen in Chapter Two, labour migration to advanced capitalist economies is driven by a structural employer demand for cheap labour. Due to global inequalities, migrants have a dual frame of reference and assess wages favourably by home country standards (Piore 1979, Waldinger and Lichter 2003). They are therefore more likely to accept low paid work that locals reject. Indeed, the prospect of economic and employment opportunities were at the core of most participants' decision to leave their country of origin. More than half of the 34 cleaners interviewed mentioned migrating for economic reasons, seeking a better life for themselves and their loved ones. This was often expressed as a need to escape unemployment and a difficult economic situation in their home country. The 1980s and

1990s saw a significant movement of Latin Americans to European countries as a result of increased poverty and economic instability following neoliberal structural adjustment programmes implemented across Latin America (McIlwaine 2011). Most Latin American respondents reported experiencing significant limitations in their home country. Many deplored limited employment and educational opportunities for themselves and their children. Some depicted their lives as one of mere survival, having enough money to pay rent and cover day-to-day necessities, but not to make savings, have any long-term projects or hope of sending their children to university. This is illustrated by Tamara's account of her life in Colombia:

> I was a single parent, and this is one of the main reasons for leaving my country. Because my job was fine to live on the day-to-day, it covered all my expenses, rent, the school for my two sons, clothes, and food, but I couldn't save anything. It is a country where it is very difficult to make savings. And of course, with time passing my sons were growing up, I wanted them to go to university, I wanted to give them a better future, and this is why I decided to emigrate to Spain with my sons. It was the reason why I left my country. To give my two sons a better future.[4]

The hope of a better future, rather than pressing material needs or poverty, was central to most participants' account of their decision to migrate. Indeed, the capacity to migrate is not necessarily proportionate to the need to migrate, and the poorest social groups are often not able to undertake such journeys. In his study of forced migration from Sri Lanka and Somalia, Van Hear (2006) highlighted the importance of social class in enabling and shaping migration movements and showed that only those who can mobilise sufficient resources – whether social, economic, or cultural – can undertake a migration project. Thus, whilst Celia had a decent job and salary in Bolivia, she decided to leave because she had higher ambitions for her professional life:

> And I was paying for my own things and I was able to. […] And if I hadn't had dreams, I would have probably had stayed there and I would have been okay. Because there were lawyers earning $200 [per month] and I was earning a little bit more. But my problem is that I wanted to… I thought: 'if I cannot study, I will always be a PA for the rest of my life, I will not have a degree, here in Bolivia to get a good job you really need a degree'. I wanted to do a masters, it was impossible. And I thought: 'I have to leave this country, there is no hope for me here.[5]

[4] Tamara, office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish
[5] Celia, former cleaner and UVW activist

Emigrating thus appeared to many as the obvious strategy to improve their economic situation.

It was also perceived as a clear route towards upward social mobility in their home country, informed by an understanding of life abroad as one of prosperity and success. Schuster and Majidi (2015) have highlighted the existence of a shared imagination of migration destinations as lands of opportunity among migrant sending communities. Such images were particularly powerful for participants who had grown up in high-emigration regions and had been exposed from a young age to the migration stories of acquaintances, feeding expectations of economic success abroad. LaPiti recalled that travelling became her life project after she saw people returning to her village from the United States:

> So, when people came back to Dominican Republic after staying in the USA, we were astonished. We would look at them like they were gods. They had a particular smell, their skin looked smoother, they had a particular way of presenting themselves. Their appearance changed a lot. This is how they would now see me if I went back there. But we are only talking about appearances. When I saw these people, I decided that I wanted to go to the US as well, so travelling became my dream.[6]

The prospect of earning money rapidly to pursue projects in their home country was also prominent in participants' discourses. Piore (1979) argued that the temporariness of migration and the prospect of attaining a higher social status upon return to their home country are incentives for migrants to take up employment at the bottom end of the labour market in wealthier countries. Accumulating capital was a key motivation for migrating for some participants, who shared their initial plans to work in London, make savings in order to start their own business or build a house in their home country. These projects were sometimes abandoned or postponed by participants, as they encountered difficulties making savings due to low wages, the high cost of living in London and the impact of the pandemic. For example, Johnny said:

> We have the project of getting a house [in Bolivia]. I also send a bit of money to my dad. […] We're thinking about it, we're not sure. I'd like to start a business there because you can make money in that way. […] Because after the pandemic I don't know if it will be as easy to find work as it was before. It's difficult to have objectives at the moment. My objective was to save £20, 000 in one year so I could start a business and be self-employed. I don't like working for someone else.[7]

[6] LaPiti, cleaner at a cosmetics store, translated from Spanish
[7] Johnny, former cleaner in a pharmacy chain, translated from Spanish

Notably, rather than undertaking a one-off, direct movement from their country of origin to their final destination, most participants engaged in 'stepwise migration', sequenced in multiple stages (King and Skeldon 2010, Toma and Castagnone 2015). Indeed, many had lived in another E.U country before moving on to the UK: among the 34 cleaners interviewed, 18 had previously lived in Spain, two in Saint Martin (a Caribbean Island owned by France and the Netherlands) and one in Italy. Due to colonial ties and a shared language, Spain has been an attractive destination for Latin American migrants. This was bolstered by a large-scale demand for labour, especially in domestic work, construction, and agriculture, in the context of Spain's booming economy in the early 2000s. A relatively liberal immigration policy was adopted to meet employer demand for cheap labour. In 2001 the Spanish government signed a bilateral agreement with Ecuador to provide work visas for around 25,000 undocumented Ecuadorians (McIlwaine 2011). In 2005, Spain undertook a mass regularisation process, granting legal status to foreign workers who had been residents for over six months. This allowed many migrants to bring their families, find better jobs, access unemployment benefits and affiliate with the social system (Arango and Jachimowicz 2005). Most of the participants who had previously lived in Spain had intended to permanently settle there but were compelled to move to the UK in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. All had lived in Spain for a significant period of time - with an average of 14 years, a minimum stay of 9 years and a maximum of 22 years. Many had developed strong social ties, worked in different jobs, and had some mobility in the labour market. Some formed families, owned or were in the process of acquiring a home. Yet many became unemployed as the 2008 financial crisis hit the Spanish economy. Indeed, one million jobs were lost in Spain in 2008, and the unemployment rate for the Latin American population reached 27.7% in 2009 (Herrera 2012). The construction and hospitality sectors, both of which employ a high proportion of migrants, were particularly affected. LaVoz' account above illustrates the situation many participants faced in Spain in the aftermath of the financial crisis, as their entitlement to unemployment benefits expired and they struggled to pay rent.

In contrast, London was seen as a city where it is easy to find work. Researchers have argued that the neoliberal restructuring of wealthy economies and the demand for cheap labour for the service industry has led to the increased use of non-standard employment practices, such as casual work and sub-contracting, which then became a pull factor for international migrants (Castles 2010, Wills et al 2010). These transformations increased the

ethnic segmentation of the labour market, which has sustained the demand for cheap migrant labour. The prospect of rapidly finding a job in the service industry was an incentive to move to London for my participants. London's labour market was imagined as flexible, with jobs accessible to all regardless of age or previous employment history. For example, Nadiuska said:

> In Spain it is completely different to London. In London, everyone can do hospitality jobs but in Spain it is different. And then I just moved to London because my cousin was here and she was like: 'you like hospitality, there are a lot of jobs here, a lot of job opportunity, why don't you move here? It's better for salaries'[8]

4.2.2. The complex layering of the decision to migrate

Whilst financial motivations were central to most participants' decision to move to London, this was often intertwined with idiosyncratic and emotional incentives. In his study of refugee migration from Syria, Seven (2020) showed that individuals' decision to migrate can be understood as the product of a combination of factors, classified as either root causes, proximate causes or intervening factors. Root causes are factors that persist over time, often forming the foundation for the decision to migrate. Proximate causes are tipping points that trigger the decision to move, which is then either facilitated or hindered by intervening factors (Seven 2020). Seven's analysis helps to unpack my participants' decisions: whilst economic hardship, lack of employment opportunities and the hope of providing a better future to family members were often at the core of participants' decision to leave, this decision was often triggered by a specific event, such as the failure to obtain a promotion, the sudden loss of income, a break-up, or a family tragedy. Thus, whilst Celia had long been frustrated by the lack of employment opportunities in Bolivia, her decision to leave was triggered by her bosses' refusal to give her a pay rise: "This job really was little money. I said to this woman: 'Look, [another employer] offered me $700, I'm not asking you to pay me $700, but pay me $500, at least double what I earned.' They said 'no'. And when they said 'no', I decided to leave. And within three weeks, I was going."[9] Similarly, as seen earlier in this chapter, after being unemployed in Spain for a long time, it was concerns about her son who lived alone in London that eventually triggered LaVoz to move.

[8] Nadiuska, cleaner at King's College London
[9] Celia, former cleaner and UVW activist

Love and affective ties were also important components to participants' decision to migrate. Indeed, several moved not for their own financial interests, but for their children's education, to support or live with their loved ones, or follow their children or partner's dream. Thus, Isabella migrated because of her son's dream to live in London:

> When I was in Colombia, I was happy there, but my dream to come here was because of my son. Because my son's father is British. He's fully British. So, we got separated, we had many problems, and he abandoned my son. We never heard anything from him again. But my son's dream growing up was always to go to London. And I would tell him that we would go one day, but I knew that it was a very expensive city, to bring up a child by myself. In the end I managed to obtain his documents, so we came to London, but we were supposed to come for only a three months' holiday. But when we had to return my son told me that he didn't want to return, that he felt happy in this country.[10]

For some, this decision went against conventional financial wisdom. To stay in London, Isabella had to spend her personal savings and work long hours cleaning. Valentina's move to London involved a loss of social status, as she had to give up her career as a nurse:

> My decision was because I have a 17-year-old daughter and she wanted to study in English. So, as it was more expensive and I couldn't afford it, I had to… I did have a job in Italy. I had to resign from my job. There I worked as a nurse. And my daughter couldn't be here by herself with no family member, so I decided, for her own well-being, to leave my job and come here with her. So, I had to accept the work I could find, which was not easy.[11]

Similarly, Rosa resigned from her job and gave up on a relatively desirable situation in Spain to follow her daughter in London:

> Then I decided to move here to be with her. I already had a job in Spain, and my boss told me: "Where are you going? Here you have a job, you have everything! And people speak your language, over there people won't speak your language!". And I said: "Yes, but here I am not with my daughter. Here I am single, my husband and I are separated, my husband is living somewhere else…" My family life in Spain had failed. So, I had to come over here.[12]

In her study of migration between Bolivia and Spain, Martinez Buján (2015) highlighted the gendering of care and the decision to migrate. My findings point to the same dynamics. Indeed, caring responsibilities and the best interests of children and other relatives were much more prominent considerations for the women than the men I interviewed. Out of the 9 male participants, only one cited, among the reasons for moving,

[10] Isabella, former office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish
[11] Valentina, former hotel cleaner, translated from Spanish
[12] Rosa, former cleaner in a luxury store in Central London, translated from Spanish

the best interests of a relative. In contrast, this was mentioned as a key consideration by half of the women interviewed. Whilst professional and personal development were by far the dominant considerations for men, some of whom hoped to make sufficient savings to later start a business, women often valued employment opportunities in relation to their relatives' best interests, as obtaining a better paid job was seen as instrumental to obtaining financial security and maximising educational opportunities for their children.

The presence of relatives, friends and acquaintances in the city was also a crucial factor shaping participants' motivation and ability to migrate to London. There is extensive evidence of the influence of community networks on migration decision-making, encouraging people to move by reducing the costs and risks, as well as increasing the benefits of migration (Toma and Castagnone 2015). Migrant networks facilitate movement: already established migrants share information about the destination country, employment opportunities and general living conditions, which prospective migrants use to assess the feasibility of their migration project (Seven 2020). De Haas (2010) highlighted how migration processes become self-perpetuating through the development of migrant networks and communities in destination countries. In particular, McIlwaine (2011) has shown how Latin American migrants have developed transnational ties across Europe and mobilised their social capital, facilitating their movement and access to the labour market. Indeed, many participants were encouraged to come to London by already settled migrants, who told them about the opportunities there. For example, Clara's decision to leave was heavily influenced by accounts from friends and relatives who had found work elsewhere in Europe: 'Then the crisis happened in Spain and people started to emigrate. So, I didn't emigrate [at first]. People would go to Germany, others to France, or to London, they would tell me 'You should move here, you can earn a lot more here'[13]. Social connections could also be relied on by participants for material support, guaranteeing that their basic needs would be met immediately after their arrival. Participants often mentioned finalising their decision to move after being assured that they would be provided with accommodation and help with finding work once in London. For example, Tamara said:

> When I came here, I'd had a colleague in the [video game arcade] where I worked in Spain, and she initially came [to London]. I never lost contact with her, and we would see each other before I was

[13] Clara, former cleaner in a luxury store in Central London, translated from Spanish

> dismissed from the game room. Because things were going badly, she asked me why I wouldn't come, she said that she would give me a hand. So, it was an option that made me come. When I arrived, she was the one who hosted me and my son.[14]

Emotional, idiosyncratic motivations also influenced participants' decision to migrate. Curiosity, thirst for adventure and the desire to start life afresh to overcome depression, heartbreak or a family tragedy were also evoked by some participants. For example, although she was motivated to emigrate by the lack of economic opportunities in Ecuador, Katitus chose the UK as her destination almost on a whim:

> Some went to Spain, others to the US, others to Europe. I remember that from this country I would always see Princess Diana. When I watched TV, I would always think: 'what a nice country'. Because I wasn't interested in leaving my country. But I always thought: 'this country seems nice'. I liked Diana's personality; how noble she was. So, I always had this good image of British people […] As I told you, Princess Diana played a big role in my decision. So, I decided to come here, as an adventure. At the beginning everything is an adventure, everything is a game.[15]

Justine ended up staying in London expectedly, after falling in love with the city during a holiday visit:

> So, I never thought I was ever going to work and live in London. I only came because it was my daughter's birthday and she wanted to celebrate with her cousin who lived here. I initially only came on holidays for 20 days. I soon as I arrived, as I came out the plane and set foot on the ground in London, I fell in love with the city. So, I stayed for 20 days, then I went back to Venezuela and three months later we came back to London. My daughters wanted to learn English and I wanted to distract myself from the problems I had in Venezuela and I came.[16]

Finally, some participants were forced to leave their homeland to flee danger. Four had faced discrimination or been persecuted by the authorities in their homeland. J.D. from Colombia had been threatened by members of a paramilitary group hired by his employer because he had been involved in trade union activities in the factory where he worked. Pullo Anne, from Mauritania, was persecuted by state authorities for organising demonstrations against the discrimination experienced by black people in Mauritania. Both reported having left precipitously as soon as they found out that they were being pursued. Others' flight was more considered and planned; this included Blackberry from Kenya, who identified LGBTQ+ and left Kenya where homosexuality was criminalised, and Marga from Cuba who had been persecuted by the authorities for protesting against the Cuban government.

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[14] Tamara, office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish
[15] Katitus, cleaner at Crown Estate, translated from Spanish
[16] Justice, former cleaner in a media company, translated from Spanish

Overall, these findings show that migrant cleaners chose to move to London for various reasons and in multiple ways. Whilst employment opportunities were at the core of most participants' decision to migrate, some did not cite economic factors as part of their decision making. In addition, the search for better opportunities was often intertwined with more personal, emotional factors. The research also shows the relevance of gender and social connections in shaping migration decisions and experiences. This complex layering of migration decision-making, informed by various interrelated factors challenges a neo-classical understanding of labour migration as the product of individuals' rational decision to maximise their economic capital (eg. Becker 1981). Rather than a conscious movement from one source to one single destination for a specific financial purpose, participants' movement was often informed by various factors, involved multiple stages and could be the unexpected outcome of personal life events. The cleaners at the heart of this study were not only workers driven to move to London for economic reasons, but also human beings with their own desires, personalities, family imperatives, and affective ties.

4.3 Navigating the UK Immigration Regime

Legal channels to enter the UK for low skilled migrant workers from the Global South are limited. After the accession of the so called 'A8 countries' to the EU in May 2004, employers were expected to fill their low paid vacancies with workers from within the enlarged EU rather than with workers from the Global South, and labour migration policies became more restrictive (Anderson and Ruhs 2010). The 'Tier 3' visa, initially intended for 'low skilled' workers, was suspended after the EU enlargement. In 2007, with the aim of limiting low skilled migration from outside the EU, the UK government implemented a points-based system, allocating points to migrants based on their earnings or level of education, only admitting those with sufficient points (Anderson 2013). Under the current post-Brexit system, migrant workers can only enter the UK if they possess a visa – existing work visas include, among others, the Skilled Worker visa, which depends on sponsorship from a UK employer approved by the Home Office, the Health and Care Worker visa, the Youth Mobility Scheme visa, and the Seasonal Worker visa. Given the limited opportunities for migrants from the Global South to legally enter and work in the UK, how can we account for the high proportion of migrants from Latin American, African, and Caribbean countries

working in London's cleaning sector? The pathways adopted by participants to enter the UK and navigating the immigration system were wide ranging: whilst the majority moved to the UK as EU citizens, small numbers had claimed asylum and obtained refugee status, entered as family members of EU or British citizen, had a spouse visa, entered as a tourist and overstayed, or entered without valid documents.

4.3.1. Entering the UK with an EU passport

Most of my participants - 20 out of the 34 cleaners and former cleaners interviewed - entered the UK with EU passports and were not subject to immigration controls. Whilst the majority had Spanish citizenship, this also included one Lithuanian, one French, one Italian and two Dutch citizens. All except the French and Lithuanian nationals were born outside Europe and had acquired EU citizenship through residence in another European country, mostly Spain, before their arrival in London. Prior to 2007, Spain did not require nationals of most Latin American countries to apply for a visa (Martinez Buján 2015). As seen earlier in this chapter, Spain undertook a mass regularisation process in 2005, granting legal residence to foreign workers. All research participants who had previously lived in Spain ultimately became Spanish citizens. As EU citizens, they enjoyed free movement rights and could then live and work in the UK. The case of Rosa, from Ecuador, illustrates the migration journey to London that many of my participants experienced.[17] She migrated from Ecuador to Spain with her partner in the early 2000s. As an Ecuadorian national, she did not need a visa to enter Spain and worked undocumented for five years, after which she managed to regularise her status. Two years later, she acquired a Spanish passport, which gave her the freedom to move around the EU. In 2018, she moved to the UK to work and live with her daughter. Her account illustrates how applying for Spanish nationality was for some a conscious strategy to navigate the immigration regime and improve their mobility:

> It took us two years to receive our Spanish nationality. I didn't want it at first. But my husband always knows about this kind of thing would tell me: "But [Rosa], that will be good for us, we'll be able to travel." Because with the [Spanish residence card], you can travel back to your country, but you can't travel to other countries in the EU. You can only go to Ecuador. With the double nationality, you can go everywhere without any problems. I said: "Well, well, let's do it then". We went to Italy. How nice!

[17] Rosa, former cleaner in a luxury store in Central London.

> It felt great. In the airport no one made my life difficult. They didn't say anything to me… You can travel wherever.[18]

Although the participants who entered the UK with EU passports were not subject to immigration controls, some nevertheless experienced deportability. Defined by De Genova (2002) as the subjective, psychological effect of the possibility of deportation on individuals' day to day lives, deportability can affect individuals despite their legal residency. The effects of deportability were notable in some participants' cautious attitude in respect to claiming benefits for example. Natalia from Ecuador, who came to the UK in 2009 as a single mother with a Spanish passport, recalled her incredulity when she first received benefits in her bank account. She could not believe that she was entitled to this money as a non-British citizen and was convinced she had committed fraud and would be deported if found by the police.[19] Thus, despite having in theory equal social and economic rights as EU citizens, some participants felt wary to enjoy those rights and resources. They had an ingrained sense of disenfranchisement and of constantly being on the verge of illegality, perhaps the effect of a wider experience of social exclusion as low paid, BME migrant workers. This illustrates the socio-political as well as the legal nature of the concept of citizenship, which functions as a tool of exclusion, shaping individuals' subjective positioning in society (El-Enany 2020).

Participants who had EU passports enjoyed the right to live and work in the UK and could apply for settled status to continue enjoying these rights after Brexit. However, for many, this process was not without difficulty. During my fieldwork research and experience working at UVW, it became clear that many UVW members had little knowledge of the what the EU settlement scheme involved of how to apply for settled status. Several distressed members came to the office shortly before or on the day of the deadline for applying asking for help with their application. Language barriers, lack of time and IT skills were all factors that hindered access to information and were significant obstacles to obtaining settled status. We can therefore see that, despite their status as EU citizens, many experienced difficulties navigating the immigration regime.

4.3.2. Other routes to status

[18] Ibid, translated from Spanish
[19] Natalia, former cleaner and UVW organiser, interviewed in November 2019

For participants who did not have EU citizenship prior to arriving in London, navigating the UK immigration system was much more complex. All except one now have British citizenship, refugee status or permanent residence as the spouse or parent of a British or EU citizen. For many, the route towards obtaining permanent residency or a stable legal status was a long and arduous process, which involved several visa applications over many years, switching between different immigration statuses. Five had experienced irregularity at some point over their stay in the UK, suffering extreme precarity in many aspects of their lives.

The participants who had claimed asylum deplored the length of the process to obtain refugee status. All three had to wait for long periods of time before they were granted asylum, ranging from six months to almost three years. Pending the outcome of their asylum claim, one participant had been detained. Due to being barred from working and to the negligible state support provided to asylum seekers (currently amounting to a weekly allowance of £45), two of them reported having to work illegally or rely on support from relatives to survive. JD, who arrived in the early 2000s from Colombia, recalled working irregularly for over 15 hours a day in order to make ends meet and pay the debt he owed to his parents, who had mortgaged their house to pay for this journey. He mentioned working under constant fear of being reported to the immigration authorities and deported to Colombia during that time.[20]

Some of my participants' experiences navigating the immigration system involved switching between different visas and working in violation of the conditions attached to their status. These negotiations with immigration law resonate with Ruhs and Anderson's (2010) concept of semi-compliance. Used to describe the situation of migrants who are legally resident but working in breach of the restrictions attached to their immigration status, it introduces the idea of various degrees of migrant 'illegality', with some migrants complying with some aspects of the law but not others. This can be illustrated by Celia's story.[21] In 2002, she travelled to the UK from Bolivia as a tourist, with the intention of staying to work and bringing over her son. In Bolivia, along with 80 other migrants preparing to travel to the US or Europe, she had been trained by a travel agency, leaning about what to expect during her stay as an undocumented migrant, and what behaviour to adopt during airport interviews. Once in the UK, she worked illegally, paid below National Minimum

[20] JD, former cleaner at the offices of a major British TV network
[21] Celia, former cleaner and UVW activist

Wage. Despite already knowing English, she signed up to an English language course in order to obtain a student visa, which allowed her to stay in the UK. She would then work over the maximum of 20 weekly hours her student visa allowed. As she needed to show evidence of a 90% attendance rate into order to retain her visa, she would attend all the English classes but, like many of her classmates, used that time in class to catch-up on sleep due to exhaustion from working long, unsocial hours. She continued working irregularly using the name and national insurance number of her partner, who was an EU citizen. In 2004 she married her partner, obtained legal immigration status as the spouse of an EU citizen, and was able to bring over her son from Bolivia and work legally.

By illustrating the often complex and tortuous route to residency, with migrants often shifting immigration statutes over time; Celia's example reveals the tactics migrants deploy when negotiating the restrictive UK immigration regime, at the moment of entry and beyond. Rather than being passively subject to immigration rules, migrants actively engage with the system, deliberately switching statuses and strategically selecting the most favourable visa options (Anderson and Ruhs 2010).

4.4. Arrival in London and the role of migrant networks

Participants' social connections were crucial to overcome the difficulties many experienced with respect to paperwork, navigating language barriers, finding work and accommodation, and shaped their initial experiences and ability to adjust to their new life in London. As seen earlier in this chapter, the presence of friends or relatives already living in the city was for many a strong incentive to move to London. It is widely acknowledged that social connections largely facilitate adjustment to the host country (Poros 2011). Bourdieu's (1987) concept of social capital, which refers to the range of resources that can be derived from social connections and group membership, is useful to understand the way participants mobilised social bonds to navigate life in London. The assistance received through community networks mainly took the form of sharing information, providing short term accommodation as well as help finding work. Due to significant language barriers, assistance from an acquaintance was often crucial to obtain National Insurance, sign up with a GP, register children at school, open a bank account or carry out any other administrative task that settling in a new place entail. Some participants reported having paid someone to

translate for them when at appointments with the GP, to do their paperwork or to help them finding work or accommodation. The benefits derived from mobilising social capital, which can then be converted into economic capital by facilitating access to jobs for example, are illustrated by JD's account: "We're doing well because within our group of friends we support each other. When one of us doesn't have a job, another calls him. And between all of us we would find something, work in construction, in whatever."[22] Many participants reported that their co-nationals had been extremely generous and supportive, providing them with short term accommodation whilst they were finding their feet in London. The hosts were often poor households living in small flats. The situation was often straining for both hosts and guests, who had to live in overcrowded conditions whilst working long, unsocial hours. Tamara's account illustrates the difficult cohabitation many experienced after their arrival:

> When I arrived [my friend] lived in a tiny flat with her daughter. My son and I had to buy an inflatable mattress and sleep in a corner whilst I was looking for work. She told me: 'I'll host you whilst you get you bearings and then you can leave the house'. […] It was difficult because I am someone who really respects other people's space. And I was also grateful for the fact that they had given me a hand. So, I didn't want to disturb. […] My friend's partner would also get up very early to go to work. They would sleep in the living room, and the kitchen was in the living room as well, and we were using a corner. So, if someone needed to use the kitchen, they had to turn the light on, so my son would prepare me a hot meal with a piece of bread. And many times, I would eat in the bathroom with the bread to not turn the light on, to not disturb, because I knew that this man had to get up early.[23]

While mostly beneficial to new arrivals and mitigating against precarity, migrant communities could also be extremely exploitative. It is often assumed that co-nationals demonstrate significant solidarity to each other, overlooking the existence of exploitative practices within communities, although the latter have been highlighted by researchers (McIlwaine 2011, Poros 2011). This ambiguous role of community networks, which function simultaneously as tools of inclusion and exclusion, was evident in my research. Almost all participants reported securing their first job in the UK from within their community. Elephant and Castle and the Latin Village in Seven Sisters were rapidly identified as Latin American enclaves where it would be possible to meet co-nationals, obtain information and start looking for work. Yet social networks do not offer equal opportunities to all (Poros 2011). Informality functions to favour some over others, with access to jobs and housing

[22] JD, former cleaner in a TV channel's office translated from Spanish
[23] Tamara, office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish

often depending on having key social connections. Many participants reported that in the cleaning sector, desirable, relatively well-paid jobs for longer shifts were typically only advertised within exclusive, tight knit nationality groups. Mariola deplored the nepotism and lack of transparency in the search for work and housing in the informal sector:

> It's not like, for example, in Ecuador, when you are looking for work, there is a newspaper where there are job offers. When you go to Spain it is also something similar. But not here! Or could it be that I didn't look properly, or that the language was the main obstacle? But for example, when you go and look for a house, what they tell you at the time is: 'Go to the Elephant and Castle building, there is a store inside and there they put up adverts of places that you can rent'. Things like that. At the time, the life of migrants seemed very, very sad to me. […] Very informal. And you first had to know strategic people to ask or get in touch. Because if you fall on someone who takes advantage of the circumstances, you are lost. [24]

Many were forced to rely on migrant networks because of their difficulties finding work and housing through official channels. For example, language barriers meant that Tamara had no choice but to search for jobs through the Latin American community:

> I went to Elephant where they speak my language because this is another problem, when you don't speak the language in the country. This makes finding work a lot more difficult. I went to Elephant, asking around at the restaurants. I found work washing plates in a restaurant, as a kitchen porter. It is incredibly difficult.[25]

The reliance on informal arrangements within their community exposes migrants to the risk of abuse and sub-standard employment practices (Poros 2011). Four participants reported being paid below the National Minimum Wage whilst working in restaurants in Elephant and Castle following their arrival in London. Similarly, immediately after her arrival, Valentina was recruited by a Colombian woman she met at Latin American shop in Elephant and Castle who ran an agency supplying cleaning staff to hotels. She was never given a copy of her contract, and her earnings fell short of the minimum wage, as she was expected to clean an unrealistically high number of rooms per hour:

> Practically she didn't pay me per hour but per room. If the room was large, if it was a suite, they would pay us £2 per room. So, I had to clean so many rooms to be able to get the £50 a day, because at the end of the month, my salary was £500, £600 maximum. That is what I would get, working 7 days a week.[26]

[24] Mariola, former office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish
[25] Tamara, office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish
[26] Valentina, former hotel cleaner, translated from Spanish

New arrivals were also exploited by co-nationals in their search for housing. For example, Natalia reported being charged £150 a week by a family friend to sleep on the floor of a living room she shared with a stranger during her first weeks in London:

> N: Yes, when I arrived here, the woman who hosted me said: 'Here is your corner'. There was not even a bed, I had to buy a mattress.
> C: And you stayed there for a month and 3 weeks?
> N: Yes, that cost me £150 a week […] I didn't like living in that corner in the living room I shared with this man. In Spain I had never shared a room. I had shared a flat, but not a room. And with a man! It was very awkward. I had nothing to sleep on, nothing to cover myself. I had to use my clothes to keep myself warm. It was terrible. [27]

Similarly, Chelita reported being charged extortionate sums of money by an acquaintance in exchange for help finding housing:

> It was quite hard to be honest. It was very difficult because the language here is horrible. The language blocks you, there are moments when you want to do a procedure, get some documents. For example, if you want to get benefits, you want to apply for something, you can't do it without the language. So, you've got to find someone and pay. For example, to find a school for my son, I had to pay, because no- one... Because everyone is working, everyone is doing their own thing […]. I remember that I was also had to look for a flat, I had to pay this girl to help me find a flat. […] She was someone who my friend knew. Depending on the type of people who rent the flat, they get a promotion. And I remember that at that time, she charged me £400, for my son and I, and the paperwork according to her. The paperwork that needed to be done and I don't know what.[28]

Many participants of Latin American origin reported not trusting other Latin Americans in London. The reasons for mistrust were linked to a sense of competition and individualism. Some expressed the wish to distance themselves from co-nationals. In the words of Johnny:

> I don't want to say anything bad about people from Latin America. […] I would have thought that Latinos, people who come from the same country as me would help me. But it's the opposite, these people are so selfish, I don't understand why. They don't tell you all the truth, they don't share what they know so that they can secure the better jobs for themselves.[29]

Two participants reported being deliberately given incorrect information by co-nationals when seeking to access jobs, housing, or services. Chelita was told by a family friend that she could only apply to register her son at one primary school, resulting in her son being unable to go to school for over eight months.[30] As seen above, Natalia was misled by a family friend

[27] Natalia, former cleaner and organiser at UVW, translated from Spanish
[28] Chelita, cleaner in a luxury store in Central London, translated from Spanish
[29] Johnny, former cleaner at Boots, translated from Spanish
[30] J., cleaner at Chanel, translated from Spanish

into thinking that she risked being accused of fraud and deported if she claimed benefits. She later realised that this woman had deliberately given her incorrect information to dissuade her from claiming benefits because she envied her situation as an EU citizen*: "*I understood that she was not legal in this country. So, as we had come with papers from Spain, she also said: 'You guys come with your habits, you come with your airs, looking like you already know everything'.*"[31]* Previous research has illuminated divisions among migrant communities according to immigration status (McIlwaine 2015). Indeed, many of my Latin American participants who had Spanish passports reported being perceived by other Latin Americans as privileged and over-confident.

4.5 Navigating life in London in the early days

For nearly all participants, the period immediately following their arrival in London was one of severe precarity in relation to housing and employment, as well as of considerable mental and physical strain. Many also expressed disappointment about the kind of work available and their low salaries, and struggled to adjust to their new lives.

In many cases, an uncomfortable living situation made initial experiences in London difficult. This often involved staying with a friend or an acquaintance, sleeping on the floor of an overcrowded, small flat. Many mentioned getting very few hours' sleep due to lack of privacy, working unsocial hours and having to sleep during the day when others were awake and using the space. This is illustrated by LaPiti's description of her living arrangements during her first three weeks in London:

> [It was] in [street in East London]. There I had to sleep on the floor for 21 days. Without a mattress or anything. With the cold. So, I couldn't sleep. The woman, as soon as she got in the bed, she would sleep like a dead person, no one could wake her up. So, her partner would watch films all night, and I could not sleep at all. […] I worked… I don't know how many hours. Sometimes I would be in the house for only 2 or 3 hours, and once there I couldn't sleep. 2 or 3 times I had to sleep in the toilet, that was the only place where I could rest.[32]

This experience was physically and mentally draining for most participants. It was often combined with working extremely long hours: the pressure to rapidly earn money to be able

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[31] Natalia, former cleaner and trade union organiser at UVW, interviewed in November 2019
[32] LaPiti, former cleaner at a cosmetics store, translated from Spanish

rent their own place meant that many were compelled to work as many hours as possible and accept any work offered to them. In the words of LaPiti:

> L: Once I found work, I couldn't stop. I didn't ask what type of contract it was, I didn't ask anything. They could give me dog shit; I would take it because the only thing I wanted was to be able to leave that floor. I needed money to rent a room and leave that floor. So, they would make you sign zero-hour contracts and make you work lots of hours.
> C: So, in the end you managed to rent your own place?
> L: Yes
> C: how long did it take you?
> L: About a month and a half. But I wouldn't stop working[33]

In addition to the language difficulties mentioned above, most of my participants faced significant administrative barriers in their search for formal employment and accommodation, despite having the legal right to live and work in the UK. Their exclusion from the formal labour and housing markets was reinforced by several interrelated factors: whilst many could not sign a formal rental agreement without providing proof of employment, it was impossible to find formal employment without owning a bank account. Obtaining the latter in turn required proof of address, which was difficult to provide as many had informal living arrangements, staying with family or friends. The difficulties faced by low paid migrants in accessing banking have been widely documented. In the UK, the financial exclusion experienced by migrants is between 3 to 10 per cent higher than for the UK born population (Datta 2012). This is reinforced by the UK government's hostile environment policy. Intended to prevent irregular migrants from opening bank accounts, section 40 and 42 of the Immigration Act 2014 created a scheme requiring banks to check the immigration status of each new customer (Yeo 2018). An overzealous and discriminatory application resulted in significant numbers of individuals being wrongly classified as irregular migrants and denied bank accounts. In the absence of a universal right to a bank account in the UK, banks have considerable discretion whether to offer or deny their services (Financial Conduct Authority 2023). Whilst banks are required to comply with the Equality Act 2010, which prohibits them from discriminating based on protected characteristics when providing services, participants reported being repeatedly rejected from banks, which they associated to bank officers' racism. For example, Celia said:

[33] Ibid

> So, in order to get my visa, I would need proof of address, which I managed to get, a bill, and then you also needed a bank. And no bank would open a bank account. No one. I would go to banks, even my own bank now, Natwest. I would walk in, and the minute I spoke and they heard my accent they would just close the drawers and say 'Sorry, no we cannot open, no sorry'. No after no, I tried so many places.[34]

Such exclusion from the banking system has far reaching consequences for integration into host countries. As access to formal employment is contingent on having a bank account, it further forces migrants to rely on social networks and informal arrangements, rendering them vulnerable to abuse. This is illustrated by La Voz's experience:

> For me it was very difficult to open a bank account. I couldn't speak English, I didn't know London, I wasn't working. I got one online for £20 called Monzo. And when I started working, they didn't pay me because they supposedly couldn't pay me on that account. I got ripped off, they didn't give me the job, and I had spent money.[35]

The interaction between access to employment, banking and housing already reveals how experiences of precarity in different aspects of life can aggravate each other, a point which will be explored in more detail in Chapter Six.

Nearly all participants said that cleaning was the only kind of work they could find when they arrived in the UK. Many mentioned being struck by how difficult it was to communicate and navigate their lives in London without speaking English and were surprised to not be able to find other work than cleaning. Most had worked various jobs before moving to London and had higher or secondary education, and therefore experienced significant deskilling. Many participants had never worked as cleaners before and described their first experience as a 'shock'. In the words of Sabine:

> Where I was… In Victoria, a large building with I don't know how many toilets. It would make me cry. I was crying with despair and rage thinking: 'How did I end up doing this?'. I had to find a job, and that was the only place where they accepted me at the time. I didn't stay for long. But I'll remember this forever.[36]

In the cleaning sector, it is common for new arrivals to be given the hardest, most unpleasant jobs. This typically involves cleaning toilet seats or doing end of year deep cleans in student halls of residence for example. Some participants mentioned that new employees

[34] Celia, former cleaner and UVW activist
[35] La Voz, cleaner at , interviewed in March 2021
[36] Sabine, cleaner in a recording studio, translated from French

were often given the heaviest workload in the cleaning team. For many, this situation improved gradually, and with time they were able to find less unpleasant cleaning jobs. For example, Sabine said:

> Now it's better because with time you get to find places where work is bearable. I've always started cleaning toilets. That's the only job they recruit cleaners for because no one wants to clean toilets. You have to start cleaning toilets, and then later… Now I'm cleaning offices, dusting, cleaning tables, hoovering. It's a bit less difficult. I mean, personally, cleaning toilets depresses me. The unpleasant smell, the chemicals. So yes, the beginning was very tough.[37]

Many also reported struggling to adjust to working unsocial hours. In the words of Chelita:

> The situation was terrible because… I wasn't used to getting up that early. To be honest, I didn't know that here the jobs that we do, because let's say that these are jobs that Latin Americans, or people who don't know English do. So, when I came here, I didn't know that I would have to get up at 3 am, go to bed at midnight. I wasn't used to it. They would tell you: 'yes, there are jobs' etc… But it was extremely difficult for me to adapt myself to this life.[38]

In their accounts of their initial experiences in London, many participants said they felt homesick, isolated, and lonely. For some, this was due to family separation. It is common for households to initially send one family member abroad to secure housing and employment. As many as seven participants were single mothers when they first arrived in London and had initially left children behind with family members. They would support them by sending over remittances for a period of up to five years, before eventually bringing them over to London once they had secured a stable employment and housing situation. Many described the pain of living apart from the children. For example, Celia said:

> I would cry every day. I don't think that there was a single day when I didn't cry. A little bit. At least a little tear. I would call him, and I would speak to him, every other day. And there wasn't WhatsApp or Skype or anything, so it was very difficult. I would just cry all the time. That's it. And I would work, work, work. And I think that kept me distracted[39]

For many of the participants who had previously lived in Spain, their initial experiences in London were marked by a sense of decline in social status. Most of the men had worked in construction or transportation during their time in Spain; whilst the women mostly had hospitality, cleaning, or care jobs prior to living in the UK. Two women had

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[37] Ibid
[38] Chelita, cleaner in a luxury store in Central London, translated from Spanish
[39] Celia, former cleaner and UVW activist

worked as secretaries, and one had owned a grocery shop. Most had worked in precarious, low paid jobs, in relatively weak positions in the labour market. Some mentioned having worked undocumented and recalled having experienced exploitation and abuse at some point during their stay in Spain. However, the majority also enjoyed some upward mobility in the labour market and had been able to move jobs several times, acquiring skills and experience in different sectors. Some also mentioned regretting the relationship of trust and respect they had with their bosses in Spain and the social contact they had with colleagues and customers, something which they felt they lacked when working as cleaners in London.

For this reason, many experienced their secondary migration to the UK as a regression. Rather than resulting from a planned decision fed by a desire to build a better future, the move to the UK was mostly triggered by a sudden loss of income, of affiliation to the Spanish social security system or the exhaustion of unemployment benefits. Most had left Spain reluctantly, leaving behind friends and family as well as a country which offered a comfortable life, a familiar culture, and a shared language. As migrating to the UK was not initially part of their migration plan, some expressed feeling out of phase with conventional life cycles, being in their fifties yet having to start again from zero after having established themselves in Spain. The particular vulnerability of older migrants, who experience a discontinuity in their life course, is well established (Ciobanu et al 2017). For many, migrating to London involved moving from a relatively stable employment situation and good quality of life, to living in overcrowded accommodation, far away from family, in a foreign city with an unfamiliar language. In the words of Guillem, former trade union representative at the IWGB:

> I've had a lot of conversations with members that I represented. You would always see that: going to Spain, finding stability, having a family, finding a stable job, find a house, pay a mortgage. And then suddenly everything is disrupted. There is this story of this guy that I met. […] He is a really kind guy from Colombia, who did many odd jobs in Colombia and then eventually left to Spain on his own, managed to get a license to operate special cranes. He then brought his family with him, and eventually got a job as a crane operator, in a harbour close to (a large city in Spain). So, he was moving these massive blocks of concrete of 10 tons each. And he was on this crane, hundreds of metres from the floor, moving these 10 tons blocks. And there was this pride about being up there, moving these massive weights. He was respected as an operator because he could speak to people and command them in Spanish. And he owned a flat, had a mortgage. […] Then the crisis hits. There is no more construction, he cannot operate cranes anymore and he leaves. After 3 months he ends up living in one room, in a shared home without his children or his wife. And that's demoralizing. [40]

[40] Lopez, former trade union representative at the IWGB, interviewed in April 2020

The difficulties settling in London experienced by my participants, many of whom had EU passports, qualifies the focus on immigration controls and hierarchies of immigration status that has predominated in academic studies of migrant workers' precarity. Much attention has been paid to the role of illegal or precarious immigration status in shaping migrants' experiences of oppression. Studies of undocumented migrant labour have shown how illegality and the associated fear of deportation produces uncertainty in everyday life and forces workers into the acceptance of extreme levels of exploitation (De Genova 2002, Bloch and McKay 2016). Anderson (2010) has in turn examined the condition of migrant workers who do have the legal right to live and work in the UK, but whose visas limit their length of stay and labour market options. As seen above, the Skilled Worker requires visa holders to work only for a license holding employer for the duration of their stay. Termination of their employment could therefore result in the sudden loss of their right to remain in the UK, reinforcing their dependence on their employer. In contrast, most of my participants were neither illegal nor subject to immigration controls but in fact had EU or UK citizenship. They nevertheless experienced a high level of precarity, and the discrimination, language, and administrative barriers they faced undermined their access to formal employment, housing, and the banking system.

In this sense, De Genova's (2002) concept of deportability, which focuses on the everyday vulnerabilities that derive from illegal presence in a national space, is ill-adapted to describe the challenges faced by most of my participants. The latter's experiences immediately after their arrival in London are better captured by Banki's (2013) notion of 'precarity of place'. The term is useful to understand the challenges and pressures of migrant life, experienced not only by undocumented migrants, but by noncitizens more generally. Defined as the vulnerability to removal from one's physical location, it describes the sense of 'teetering on the edge' (Banki 2013: 5) experienced by migrants, and its impact on their everyday life. Not yet in secure employment or housing, my participants felt in the early days following their arrival the anxiety of being on the verge of homelessness, destitution, or being forced to return.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter analysed participants' motivations for migrating to London, as well as their negotiations with the UK immigration regime and their initial experiences navigating life in London. As the stories narrated above illustrate, motivations for migration were complex and multi-layered. Economic incentives and the desire to seek a better life were often intertwined with more idiosyncratic factors, whilst the presence of relatives or friends in the country of destination greatly influenced the decision to move. The complexity of participants' migration decisions show that the cleaners at the heart of this study are not only economic agents, but also human beings with their own desires and emotional attachments. Whilst participants' routes to status were wide-ranging, the majority entered the UK as EU citizens. The research shows that participants actively engaged with the immigration regime, deploying tactics to maximise their mobility, and switching between different statuses. Overall, these findings challenge the neo-classical understanding of labour migration as the pure product of rational economic decisions, whereby migrants move directly to a single destination, motivated by financial incentives only.

Whilst migrant community networks were a significant source of support for participants, they could also be extremely exploitative. I argued that the period following arrival was one of particularly extreme precarity, during my participants faced significant barriers to formal housing and employment, forcing them to resort to informal arrangements where they were vulnerable to abuse. This extreme precarity experienced by new arrivals, despite their EU citizenship, shows the need to move beyond De Genova's (2002) concept of deportability to understand the specific challenges of migrant life.

5 CHAPTER FIVE: CLEANERS' WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES

5.1 Introduction

> Well, I had never worked as I cleaner, I didn't know what to expect, I had no experience. And it's a very tough world, it's like a jungle.[41]

'A jungle', 'the Wild West', 'worse than the army', 'a mafia', 'a monster', 'shameless liars', 'thieves', were the among the many metaphors participants have used to describe their employers and the world of contractual cleaning. Through their stories, they described the tough reality of cleaning work and the consequences of cost-cutting managerial practices on their everyday working lives. This chapter explores these experiences and asks: how do commercial strategies and managerial practices in the cleaning sector produce precarity and shape cleaners' workplace experiences? Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with cleaners and employers in the cleaning sector, it explores cleaning companies' business models and their consequences for managerial and Human Resources (HR) practices and, ultimately, for cleaners' workplace experiences. This chapter is conceptually rooted in a Marxist understanding of the employment relationship, whereby workers' and employers' interests are diametrically opposed, and the latter have an incentive to increase the level of exploitation for greater profit.

The outsourcing of cleaning services by organisations, which became a majority phenomenon as a result of neoliberal policies in the 1980s, led to a proliferation of intense competition among cleaning contractors, with business models founded on intensifying work and minimising labour costs. Prior research has highlighted the role of outsourcing in shaping cleaners' working conditions (Wills 2008, Luis and Aguiar 2006, Grimshaw et al 2014). My research builds on this literature by offering a deep dive into the cleaning sector, focusing closely on the different methods used by management to intensify cleaners' work, shaping their day-to-day experiences of work, their subjectivity and feelings towards their own job. The chapter starts by exploring the drivers of outsourcing and commercial strategies deployed by cleaning companies. It then analyses the impact of outsourcing on

[41] Justice, cleaner at a media company in Central London

cleaners' working conditions: employed under low pay and minimal terms and conditions, they are subjected to excessive workloads, which are maintained through a draconian workplace discipline. The grievances and complaints generated by harsh working conditions are crushed by HR practices tailored to further employers' interests. Finally, the chapter examines how undesirable working conditions and mistreatment on the part of employers shaped participants' own attitude towards their occupation as cleaners. Throughout the chapter, I highlight how oppression and exploitation combine, so that class, gender, race, and migration status interact to shape cleaners' experiences of work. As a heterogenous group, the cleaners had different experiences of exploitation and oppression, and I flag the extent to which those differences are shaped by the various facets of their identity.

5.2 The outsourcing model and commercial strategies

5.2.1. A history of cleaning

The emergence a specialised cleaning industry is a relatively recent phenomenon, resulting from significant socio-economic developments. Cleaning work was for a long time mostly done by women as domestic servants for the upper classes. Working for long hours and living with their employers, they mostly remained outside both the trade union movement and the formal economy (Rowbotham 1999). With the Industrial Revolution and the two world wars, women were increasingly brought into industrial work, where they were given the most unpleasant, lowest paid jobs (Alexander 1994). In workplaces, women were also disproportionately carrying out cleaning jobs as an outgrowth of their traditional domestic role. Until the late 1960s, in most large retail stores, factories and government buildings, cleaners and other facilities management staff worked alongside other staff performing core activities. This necessitated the development of complex human resources systems to manage the large numbers of people working within corporations (Weil 2014). As women workers whose work was casual and seen as unskilled, cleaners were neglected by the trade union movement and were amongst the lowest paid in the labour market (Alexander 1994). Indeed, the literature documented the existence of labour market segmentation in the late 1960s and a hierarchical stratification of jobs through grading systems within companies (Reich et al 1973). Nevertheless, directly employed cleaners in unionised workplaces were

likely to be covered by existing collective agreements and enjoy some security of employment as well as pension, holiday and sick pay entitlements (Rowbotham 2006, Weil 2014).

Cleaning services developed as a standalone industry along with the transition from a manufacture to service economy. In the 1930s, with the growth of large offices, the first specialist cleaning firms emerged. The cleaning industry expanded further in the post-war era and especially in 1968, when the Labour government sacked 4,000 directly employed cleaners to make civil service cuts (Rowbotham 2006). By the 1970s, a few cleaning contractors had transformed into large firms, whilst new small companies continued to emerge, as very little capital investment was required to enter the market. Narratives of the Night Cleaners' campaign in London in the early 1970s, where government office cleaners organised to demand improved conditions, already highlight the emergence of a cleaning industry where un-unionised women, many of whom of Irish and Afro-Caribbean origin, suffered low pay, anti-social hours and precarity (Rowbotham 2006, Alexander 1996). As contracting out cleaning services became a prevailing feature of the economy in the 1980s, cleaning developed into a large, multi-national industry.

5.2.2. The hey-day of outsourcing

As seen in Chapter One, the subcontracting of facilities services became commonplace in both the public and private sectors as the result of neoliberal reforms from the end of the 1970s. In the private sector, increased competitive pressure and the financialisaton of the economy led to growing demands placed on companies by investors. The latter play a disciplinary role, monitoring performance and forcing restructuring measures to reduce costs and increase businesses' profitability (Weil 2014). Corporations were thus required by investors to cut staff numbers and focus their attention and resources on their distinctive competencies that were central to their profitability, shedding non-core services that could be done by external parties at lower cost (Weil 2014). Simultaneously, technological developments also contributed to the expansion of outsourcing by facilitating coordination, as improved communication technologies made it possible to monitor the work of other, external businesses and ensure their compliance with agreed standards (Weil 2014). Private workplaces thus became increasingly segmented, as services in support of a firm's main

activities, which were previously carried out by workers directly employed by the firm, were outsourced to specialised companies, employing workers on lower wages and terms and conditions (Aguiar and Harod 2006). Thus, the percentage of private sector workplaces in the UK with 25 or more employees that subcontracted cleaning services increased from 55% in 1990 to 72% by 2004 (Blanchflower and Bryson 2010).

Whilst the outsourcing of facility services in the public sector became the norm in the mid 1980s, it was not pioneered by the Thatcher administration. Some local councils had unsuccessfully experimented with the outsourcing of refuse collection in the 1950s. The problems that ensued led the government to initiate an investigation. The Committee of Inquiry appointed in 1963 concluded that, in the interests of efficiency: “local authorities should not employ contractors to collect household refuse”. By 1981, only two councils in the whole of Great Britain had outsourced its refuse collection services. Likewise for the National Health Service (NHS), the proportion of contracts with private providers was negligible (Rentoul et al 1987). Until the 1980s, the outsourcing of public services had therefore remained a minority phenomenon.

From the beginning of 1980s, New Public Management, an approach to government reform that aims to run public services like businesses to improve efficiency and reduce costs, promoted the expansion of outsourcing. Firstly, the scrapping of the 1946 Fair Wages Resolution (FWR) in 1983 allowed outsourcing to become a mechanism to lower labour costs (Weghmann 2023). With the aim of preventing contractors from cutting wages, the FWR obliged companies contracted by the government to pay workers at least the same salary as the one agreed under collective bargaining or the average salary in that industry (Rentoul et al 1987). In order to do so, the British Government had to withdraw from Convention 94 of the International Labour Organisation, which aimed to prevent wages and working conditions from being affected by the price competition involved in public tendering (Rentoul et al 1987). In September that year, the Health Minister issued a circular instructing health authorities to put all hospital cleaning, catering and laundry services out to tender (Department of Health and Social Security 1983). In 1985, the Thatcher government pushed further for the move towards outsourcing public services to private providers by introducing compulsory competitive tendering for public authorities of services such as refuse collection, public building and park maintenance (Rentoul et al, 1972). In 2001, the New Labour government replaced compulsive competitive tendering with an approach founded on ‘best

value', where factors other than price had to be considered, whilst remaining competitive (Trade Union Congress and the New Economics Foundation 2015). In the late 2000s, outsourcing of cleaning services was ceased in hospitals in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (United Voices of the World, 2020). However, the contracting out of ancillary services has persisted in many ambits of the UK public service, with the UK government outsourcing around £100 billion of public services to private contractors each year by 2014 (Elkomy et al 2019).

It is presumed that the possibility of losing contracts and being replaced by another provider creates a competitive environment for contractors which creates incentives to lower costs and increase efficiency, allowing choice from a diverse selection of suppliers. However, a small number of firms seem to dominate the business of providing services for the government: in 2018, 30 firms won more than 1,000 contracts (Youle 2019). These included the multinationals Sodexo and Serco, both famous for providing prison services and holding coronavirus-related contracts, as well as the outsourcing giants Mitie, Interserve and ISS (Tussell 2019).

5.2.3. Drivers of outsourcing

Client organisations' decision to outsource is primarily driven by efforts to reduce costs, in both the public and private sectors (EHRC 2014). Whilst public sector organisations face pressure to outsource due to state funding cuts and government instructions (Youle 2019), private sector firms outsource ancillary services to maximise profits by minimising labour costs. Outsourcing reduces costs by introducing competitive forces: the threat that contracts with client organisations may be lost and offered to a lower bidder creates a competitive pressure to offer the lowest possible price (Elkomy et al 2019). By fragmenting the workforce, outsourcing ancillary services allows organisations to have, among the staff working on site, a section of workers with inferior annual leave, sick pay, paternity and maternity entitlements, lowering total labour costs (Evans et al 2007). This would not be possible in the absence of a subcontracting setting: outsourced workers are not covered by collective agreements, which would undermine employers' ability to cut pay and impose less favourable terms and conditions. In the context of a segmented workplace, unions have to gain recognition and negotiate separate collective agreements with each employer rather

than obtain one single agreement covering all workers (EHRC 2014). In addition, with cleaning work being disproportionately carried out by racialised workers on lower wages and less favourable terms and conditions, outsourcing disguises discriminatory practices which would be more easily prone to legal challenge if all workers were directly employed (United Voices of the World, 2020). Whilst client organisations set the terms for the contract and can determine wages and terms and conditions (Wills 2009), outsourcing conceals their responsibility for low wages. It enables segregation in workplaces, obscuring the extent of the race income inequality within organisations (Weghmann 2023). Indeed, cleaning contractors employ primarily BME workers with a migrant background, whilst in house staff is predominantly white (Wills et al 2009).

Outsourcing ancillary services also allows client organisations to shift managerial responsibility on to the contractor. Facilities management companies offer jobs among the hardest, lowest paid in the economy, which are sources of problems for management (Boltanski and Chiapello 2018). According to Yvan, the former CEO of two multi-national facilities management companies, few outsourced workers in facilities management choose their job by vocation: they constitute an 'unmotivated' workforce, representing significant HR management costs and 'a breeding ground for employment disputes'. He estimates the stress of managing grievances from dissatisfied workers to be the most common reason for corporate executives in Facilities Management companies to leave their job. The cost of managing dissenting workers can be illustrated by an anecdote from my experience as a UVW caseworker. As part of the Saint Mary's Hospital outsourced workers' campaign to be brought in-house, UVW's caseworkers filed a high number of cases and Employment Tribunal claims against Sodexo, the contractor employing them at the time. Sodexo's HR department at Saint Mary's Hospital became saturated with cases, resulting in the company hiring two additional HR partners to process complaints from outsourced workers on strike. Whilst being ultimately responsible for the cleaning services provided by Sodexo and having to bear the consequences of the disruption caused by the campaign, the hospital was not itself responsible for responding and negotiating these claims.

5.2.4. Commercial strategies in the cleaning industry

How do cleaning companies meet client demand for cheap contracts and adapt their business models to offer the lowest possible prices? Expansion, specialisation, and the minimisation of labour costs are key strategies in this respect. First, expansion is critical for facilities management companies to survive on the market. Growth places businesses in a positive spiral, generating more and more profit. As expressed by Georgia, HR Partner at a large multinational facilities management company:

> So, our strategy may be that we need to sell more. So, it's not just to save costs that we're already paying for, it's selling more business so we can increase our revenue and then effectively increase our profits. So, it's not always just about trying to cut costs, it's about how can we bring revenue in to make more profit. And that's always the preferred way.[42]

With outsourcing being so widely utilised in the business sector, facilities management companies expand by turning to public sector institutions, where outsourcing remains a minority phenomenon, seeking to obtain contracts with schools, hospitals and prisons for example. The global expansion of Sodexo illustrates this business strategy. Since it was founded in 1966, it has extended its reach to obtain contracts with an increasingly diverse range of organisations, providing services in office buildings, universities and prisons (Landel 2015a). Taking advantage of the recently growing trend towards privatisation of prisons in the UK, Sodexo now manages, under contract with the government, five prisons in England and Wales. This Facilities Management company also saw a business opportunity in the fight against the pandemic and became the largest provider of covid-19 testing centres in England (Tansley 2021). As the 18th largest employer in the world, Sodexo now employs over 420,000 people in 80 countries across the world (Landel 2015b). Contractors also gain cost advantages as they expand their production through economies of scale. Facilities management specialise in delivering their services at a large scale and can relieve client organisations of a complicated task. In the words of Yvan:

> A task that is relatively simple, such as cleaning or cooking, becomes much more difficult when it needs to be completed on a large scale, on a 24-hour basis. Anyone can cook a meal or clean for four people. But managing and coordinating cooking and cleaning in an organisation with 3,000 people is not the same. This is what suppliers like [company name] specialise in.[43]

[42] Georgia, HR Partner at a large Facilities Management company, interviewed in April 2021
[43] Yvan, former CEO of a multi-national facilities management company, translated from French

Second, cleaning contractors highlight the added value of efficient cleaning services through innovation and specialisation. When seeking to secure contracts with client organisations, cleaning companies face the challenge of marketing and selling ‘invisible’ work. Cleanliness is more easily defined *a contrario,* as the absence of waste, germs and disorder (Prost 2007). Cleaning work is often carried out when others are not present, with cleaners having little contact with those using the spaces they clean. Whilst cleaning is fundamental to the functioning of most economic and social activities, many undervalue the work that goes into keeping spaces clean (Aguiar and Herod 2006). Some cleaning companies claim that they are forced to pay low wages as a response to client organisations’ demand for low prices, overlooking the importance of cleaning:

> There’s a lot to value within the cleaning industry ... probably clients don’t see that because they just see it as cleaning and that’s sad because they’ll probably invest a lot of money on Christmas parties [...] every day that you come into your office and you find it clean, it’s due to the cleaners and when you have high expectation it’s only right that you’re paying the right money for it.
> (Cited in EHRC 2014:36)

However, the added value of cleaning becomes striking when cleaners withdraw their labour. Images of the floors of Barcelona airport scattered with rubbish (see Figure 5.1) as a result of the cleaners’ strike in November 2016 reveal what public spaces would look like in the absence of cleaning (Morris, 2016). The plane cleaners’ strike at Berlin Schönefeld airport in October 2019 had far reaching effects, preventing planes from taking off and causing airlines to incur significant economic loss (The Local, 2019). Dysfunctional cleaning services therefore affect the functioning of the client organisation, illustrating the fundamental role of cleaning as a precondition for other activities to take place: in hospitals, by preventing infections and allowing patients to be safely treated (Elkomy et al 2019), or in airports or retail, by making the space appealing to customers.

Figure 5.1: Bins overflowing at Barcelona airport, November 2016. Photo credits: The Telegraph

Cleaning companies thus emphasise the specialised, high quality of the cleaning services they provide when seeking to secure contracts with new clients. In line with a business strategy founded on expansion to different sectors and areas of life, large facilities management companies like OCS, ISS World, Sodexo and Mitie diversify and adapt their services to different client types (Landel 2015). The cleaning techniques, the equipment used, and the training of cleaners and their managers differ depending on the sector and the type of activity conducted by the client. Whilst offices in financial centres might expect a particularly high standard of cleaning, factories and warehouses will require specialised cleaning equipment such as industrial hoovers and specific chemicals. Health organisations also depend on specialised cleaning services, with cleaners trained to cooperate with medical staff to prevent hospital acquired infections (Elkomy et al 2019). Other spaces will require specifically adapted management techniques. Yvan mentioned the example of Sodexo's management of the cleaning of prisons:

> Cleaning in prisons is done by the prisoners themselves, who obviously are paid less than the National Minimum Wage. Managing a team of cleaners in a prison is very different from managing a team of cleaners elsewhere. Managers will need to be specially trained to manage a particularly difficult group of workers, who did not really choose to do that job.[44]

The versatility of Sodexo's services and its broad range of clients from diverse areas of social life - including university campuses and hospitals as well as prisons and space agencies – is an example of the strategy of diversification and specialisation adopted by cleaning

[44] Y., Former CEO at Sodexo UK, interviewed in August 2021

contractors. In line with the promotion of expert, specialised services, there has been a recent move towards the professionalisation of the cleaning industry. This is partly due to the development of new cleaning equipment, as well the rise of international cleaning standards (Aguiar and Harod, 2006) – a phenomenon likely to develop further with the covid-19 pandemic and the heightened attention paid to the role of cleaning in reducing virus transmission. Cleaning is increasingly viewed as a science, with cleaners receiving certified training from bodies such as British Institute of Cleaning Science (BICSc) for example (Ibid). The professionalisation of cleaning services is also put forward by contractors as part of their marketing strategies: Mitie Cleaning Services for example, lauds on its website the 'excellence' of its services and equipment and the BICSc training received by its cleaners (See Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2: Text and picture promoting the 'excellence' of the services offered on a cleaning contractor's website. Credits: Mitie Cleaning Services

Finally, cleaning companies compete to offer their services at the lowest possible price by minimising labour costs. The cleaning industry has several advantages in that respect. It is a labour-intensive industry, with labour representing 80% of total costs (Wills 2008). Its main expenses, labour and equipment, are variable and can thus be squeezed when needed. As noted by Georgia: 'If we need to make a savings, number one is always labour. Number two is then food, our supply chain - so we purchase the equipment, mops for cleaning and we then purchase food for catering. That would be number two. But labour

is always number one.'[45]

Because of the low level of mechanisation, cleaning companies have limited need for up-front, large-scale investment in assets. Barriers to entering the market are therefore relatively low, resulting in a large number of suppliers in extreme competition (Elkomy et al 2019). In 2020, almost 17,000 companies were operating in the sector, among which around 16,000 were small companies of less than 50 employees (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Table 7). The demand for low prices, combined with intense competition and the variability of the main expenses in the industry therefore lead to a race to the bottom among cleaning companies to reduce costs and offer the lowest possible price.

Beyond the intense competition and the client demand for low prices, cleaning companies reduce costs to maximise their own profits. We saw in Chapter Two that capitalists have a structural incentive to reduce labour costs and increase the rate of exploitation in order to expand surplus value (Marx 1867). With cleaning being a labour-intensive industry, the rate of exploitation is particularly high in the sector.

The nature of cleaning companies' relationship with their clients also facilitates practices that cut labour costs. Contracts between cleaning companies and the client are necessarily incomplete, as they cannot specify the legal consequences of every imaginable scenario. There is asymmetric access to information: cleaning is often done outside standard working hours, with the client having little or no contact with the people cleaning its spaces. As mentioned above, the results of cleaning work are not always observable, making it difficult to measure the quality of their service and to thoroughly assess the supplier's compliance with the contract. It is therefore possible for cleaning companies to grow profits covertly, by hiring less staff than stipulated on the contract for example, affecting the quality of provision. The incentive to reduce costs is further exacerbated by the fact that contractors directly benefit from methods that reduce costs, but have no direct interest in improving the quality of the service (Elkomy et al 2019). This opportunistic behaviour on the part of contractors can be illustrated with the account of Mariola. Recalling a conversation she had with an employee at the client organisation where she worked as a cleaner, her testimony

[45] G., HR Partner at a large Facilities Management company, interviewed in April 2021

provides an example of the cleaning company 'scamming' the client by not arranging for the cover of absent cleaners, contrary to the contract.

> [I said]: 'You as the client organisation have the responsibility to complain, because it is not only an employment issue, but it is a scam for you. Because on the contract there should be eight people, and when one person is absent because of illness or whatever, you should have eight people or if not two additional hours of work. I mean, one person should stay for 4 hours [instead of just two hours]. I could stay for longer, but I would need to be paid for the work. […] So, they are taking you for a ride.'[46]

A corollary of cleaning contractors' strategic focus on minimising labour costs is their reliance on migrant labour. Indeed, the contract cleaning industry depends on its ability to exploit migration and source cheap labour. As seen in Chapter Two, recruiting migrant labour is part of an effort by employers to keep wages low. Due to global inequalities, migrant workers have a 'dual frame of reference' and are more likely to accept low paid work that locals reject (Waldinger and Richter 2003, Piore 1979). Akin to Marx' (1867) reserve army of labour, migrant workers are mobilised by employers to fill low paid positions. The research confirmed employers' preference for migrant workers and their profiling practices during recruitment. Thus, when asked why she employed mostly Brazilian cleaners, the manager of small cleaning company said: "Brazilians are just hard-working. The English are just a bit lazy. Brazilians aren't scared to work the hours and they always want more hours; they always want overtime".[47] The widespread reliance on word-of-mouth recruiting contributes to concentration of specific ethnic groups in workplaces. For example, the CEO of a medium size cleaning company in London told me:

> I think it's just word of mouth. A lot of our managers are South American. A lot of them will recruit within their own nationalities and neighbourhood. And obviously word of mouth means that you end up with some contracts having more South Americans than others. And same with the Polish community, we'll end up with some contracts where they're nearly all Polish because they recommend their friends and family. So, it's probably because of word of mouth that we get such a concentration if you like.[48]

Employers actively recruit migrant workers whom they perceive as likely to endure harsh working conditions. Thus, Mariola reported that some cleaning managers were reluctant to hire Latin Americans who had previously lived in Spain because they were perceived as less

[46] Mariola, former cleaning supervisor at an advertising agency, interviewed in April 2021
[47] Katherine, manager of a small cleaning company in Oxford
[48] David, CEO of a medium size cleaning company in London

exploitable than those who had arrived directly from their home countries:

> For example, a manager told me that he didn't want people coming from Spain because they were very knowledgeable. And it is not that we were knowledgeable, but that we knew our rights as humans, and we are people who have the status of Europeans. So, they couldn't, how do you say, humiliate us, or for example exploit us at work.[49]

Thus, expansion, increased efficiency through specialisation and economies of scales, and cutting labour costs are strategies used by cleaning contractors to offer the lowest prices possible and meet client demand for cheap contracts.

5.3. How cleaners pay the price: the impact of outsourcing on their working conditions

How do these commercial strategies shape cleaners' working conditions and experiences? Participants' narratives illuminate the various forms of exploitation they experience, and the consequences of methods aimed at reducing costs on their pay, working hours, employment benefits, contracts, and their workplace environment.

5.3.1. Pay

Efforts to minimise labour costs firstly manifest in employers' efforts to drive down wages, with the National Minimum Wage (NMW) remaining the 'going rate' of pay in the cleaning industry (Grimshaw et al 2014). Among the 34 cleaners interviewed, 13 were being paid the London Living Wage (LLW), currently at £11.05, or above. 11 were being paid the minimum wage and 10 were paid an hourly rate between the minimum wage and the living wage. It is important to note that all the 13 cleaners who were paid the London living wage or above except one were employed at sites where a successful trade union campaign for the living wage had previously taken place. This illustrates a potential limitation in the data gathered from interviews, as all the cleaners interviewed were active members of a trade union who were likely to be employed under more desirable terms and conditions relative to the cleaning sector generally. Whilst the sample of interviewees might not be representative of the pay and conditions in wider cleaning sector, my data and other sources, such as

[49] Marioal, cleaner at an advertising company in Central London

Grimshaw et al (2014), suggest that in the absence of successful organising initiatives, low pay remains the norm, with most cleaners paid at or close to the minimum wage.

Many cleaners interviewed deplored their low wages, forcing them to work long hours and take up as many jobs as possible. For example, Rosa said:

> I am grateful because at least I found work. But I would be working from 9am and sometimes getting home at 11pm, 12am […] Every day. And then you get to the end of the month, and you realise that you can't make ends meet, that it is not worth working so many hours. Why work so many hours, spend all day in the street, not eating properly, not resting well? […] And they pay very little. Most cleaning jobs are paid minimum wage, I think it is £7.83. Something like that. The minimum.[50]

Three participants had previously worked as cleaners in hotels and reported experiencing 'piece work': whilst they were promised an hourly rate, in practice this depended on them cleaning a certain number of rooms. Both reported being set an unrealistic target number of rooms to clean for the time given, resulting in their salary being below the minimum wage. This is illustrated by Valentina's account:

> They paid me per room. The £7. 35, I don't remember exactly, I think it was the minimum wage at that time, practically she didn't pay me per hour but per room. If the room was large, if it was a suite, they would pay us £2 per room. So, I had to clean so many rooms to be able to get the £50 a day, because at the end of the month, my salary was £500, £600 maximum. That is what I would get, working 7 days a week.[51]

Employers also reduced labour costs by unlawfully deducting wages, a practice reported as widespread by participants and a common type of issue experienced by UVW members. This manifests in incorrect payslips, or unpaid holidays, sick pay, or overtime work. Some participants reported only being able to recover their unpaid wages after several weeks or months sending constant complaints to their managers. For example, Tamara said:

> Because you always have to fight over your pay. Always, always. In relation to holidays, the Christmas holidays. […] So, you always have to make sure that they give you your money, because the fight you get in with them is… […] And where I was working the manager would always tell me: 'don't worry, we will pay you this week'. It was always a struggle, I would never receive my salary for those two weeks, so I had to complain. The manager at the office would ask me if they had paid me and I would say no, the company would tell me that I had to speak with the manager. They would end up paying because I would fight for it, but they would only pay me a month later. For holidays it was the same. The pay would be incorrect, I always had to claim it. You always have to ask, and ask, and ask.[52]

[50] Rosa, former cleaner at a luxury store, translated from Spanish
[51] Valentina, former cleaner at a hotel chain, translated from Spanish
[52] Tamara, office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish

As I represented cleaners seeking to recover their wages as a UVW caseworker, managers' response often involved either ignoring our emails and calls or disputing that the cleaners ever worked the hours claimed. A recurrent practice of wage deduction particularly affected recently recruited cleaners: despite having worked at their new job for several weeks, they were never provided with an 'employee number', which they needed to clock in and out on the digital attendance management system at their workplace. Thus, when the cleaners saw that their employers had withheld their pay and sought to recover their wages, their managers' response was to claim that they had never attended work, as their hours were not recorded on the digital timesheets. Interestingly, Yvan acknowledged the existence of illegal practices and 'deviant behaviour' on the part of managers in the cleaning industry, which he explained as a consequence of the 'pressure to obtain results'.[53]

Cleaners' identity as migrants and language barriers were a key factor of risk of non-payment of wages. With UVW colleagues, I often observed that whilst unlawful deductions of wages were widespread, they seemed to mostly affect members who did not speak English, most likely because employers assumed that they would not be able to understand their payslips, access support or claim their wages. It is important to highlight the differences in my participants' experiences in this respect.

5.3.2. Working hours

> A world where one no longer finds a job, but hours
> (Aubenas 2010, Le Quai de Ouisterham)

Cleaning companies mainly offer part time work of only a few hours, compelling cleaners to combine several part-time jobs (Skyes et al, 2014). It is estimated that 78% of the cleaning workforce work part-time (ONS cited in Grimshaw et al 2014: 22). Out of the 34 cleaners interviewed, only eight had a full-time job at the time of the interview. Breaking up what would otherwise constitute a full-time job into several part-time jobs discharges employers from paying holiday, sick pay, maternity, and paternity leave as well as statutory breaks. This has the advantage of allowing them to obtain all the work they require, whilst committing to nothing more than paying for each hour worked, therefore reducing total labour costs

[53] Yvan, former CEO or a large Facilities Management company

(Arrizabalo et al 2019). Naomi's account is an example of this practice being used at her workplace:

> Because the 6 to 9 is standing all through! There's no way you can sit down, there's nowhere to sit, it's offices. And then from there you change your clothes, you're going to stand for another 4 hours there! So, there's no breaks. You know those jobs don't have break! I don't know why those jobs don't even have 15 minutes break. It's like doing 7 hours' job but they split it up. There was no break and they didn't say: 'oh you're doing a 7 hour shift, you're entitled to a 15 minutes break'. No. They split it up, so one side was three hours, you finish and then you go to the other side for four hours. So that means you're standing for seven hours. No break. That's what was killing so many people there.[54]

Despite doing cleaning as full-time work, with many of them working over 40 hours a week, most participants were classified as part-time workers, employed with different companies, and piecing together several cleaning jobs to make up a full workday. Johnny's working day is a typical example. Every day, Monday to Saturday, he wakes up at four in the morning and cycles from the small flat he shares with his family in South London to the city centre to arrive on time for the first of his four jobs, cleaning a pharmacy from 6am to 8:30am. At the end of his shift, he has just about enough time to travel to his second job, cleaning the floor of several banks from 9am until 1pm. He then has a three-hour gap until his next job, a break that is long enough to have lunch and a video call with friends back home, but too short for him to go home, have a nap and come back to work. He works again from 3pm to 5pm, and then at another job, from 6pm to 9pm. In addition to his four different jobs, Johnny takes on overtime work whenever it is offered.[55]

Many cleaners are running to different worksites across London, often covering large distances in a single working day. This is illustrated by Rosa's account:

> C: So, you were working all these hours for Bayleaf, on different jobs?
> Rosa: On different jobs, yes. This is why I was on the street all day. […] I would work on one site, have a two-hour gap, and then go to another site. I did not have time to go back home between my jobs.
> C: In how many different sites were you working?
> Rosa: About 4 or 5 different sites, every day. Sometimes I would finish one, and I would already have to run to the other one, I didn't even have time to have a sandwich. And I would get home really late.[56]

Full-time jobs, or even jobs offering more than two daily hours, were seen as gold dust by participants. For many, their work felt insufficient, although difficult and exhausting at the

[54] Naomi, former cleaner at a university in West London
[55] Johnny, cleaner at a pharmacy chain and other sites, translated from Spanish
[56] Ibid

same time. This is illustrated by Sabine's account, who said that working a three-hour shift was the main reason why she chose not to resign from a job she strongly disliked:

> I could have looked for another job. But it's a three hours shift, and that's difficult to find. They often want you to work on two hours shift, or just one hour. But a two-hour shift won't allow me to pay my food – with travel expenses and the time it takes to get there. I only take jobs of at least three hours, but very few companies offer you three hours.[57]

Many were working under arrangements that were inconvenient and not lucrative for them, forcing them to spend time and money on transport to travel between different locations for only a few hours of work, paid at a very low rate. For example, LaPiti reported being contracted to clean a store, more than an hour's commute away from her flat, for only one daily hour. Paid at the rate of £7.83 per hour, (the National Minimum Wage at the time of the interview), her wages barely covered her travel costs.[58]

5.3.3. Annual leave and sick pay entitlements

Most participants interviewed only received minimal benefits. As seen above, the main driver of the outsourcing of cleaning services is the possibility of employing cleaners on lower terms and conditions, with inferior annual leave, sick leave, maternity, and paternity entitlements. Most interviewees were entitled to only the statutory minimum of 28 days' annual leave. Some participants had annual leave entitlements that were superior to the statutory minimum – mostly as a result of successful campaigns to be brought in-house at their workplaces.

Out of the 34 cleaners interviewed, only nine were paid full sick pay when off sick. The rest were only entitled to receive Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), currently amounting to £96.35 a week, after four consecutive days of illness. All nine participants who received full pay when sick worked at sites where a successful campaign for sick pay or being brought in-house, on the same terms and conditions as directly employed staff, had previously taken place. SSP's low rate and limited eligibility, combined with the fact that it can only be received after four days of consecutive illness, meant that very few participants enjoyed any sick pay benefits in practice. A minority of participants were not entitled to any sick pay at

[57] Sabine, cleaner at a recording studio, interviewed in February 2020
[58] LaPiti, cleaner at a cosmetics store, translated from Spanish

all. To qualify for SSP, employees must earn an average of at least £120 per week and per job – it is not possible to combine weekly earnings from different jobs to meet the £120 threshold. This means that cleaners who have several part-time jobs in different companies may not be entitled to any sick pay at all, despite working on a full-time basis, as illustrated by Marga's comment:

> I still don't understand why they aren't paying sick pay to people who are only working two hours. This is something I never understood in this country. If you're working two hours you don't get sick pay. Why? It's not the same working eight hours and working two hours. But we're not only working two hours, we work two hours in this school, another two hours in that other school, you understand? So, when you get ill, as none of them pay you, you can't receive anything.[59]

The majority of participants on SSP reported having to force themselves to go to work whilst sick or injured to avoid losing pay on several occasions. Some recalled working whilst in extreme pain, suffering from injuries such as an anal fissure, a blocked back and broken bones. One participant even reported going to work immediately after experiencing a miscarriage. Cleaners' inability to take time off work when sick can have severe impacts on their health, as will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Whilst generally offering only statutory minimal benefits, employers deploy a range of practices that deter cleaners from claiming their sick pay and annual leave entitlements. As a UVW caseworker, it was not uncommon to encounter cleaners whose managers had refused to accept their sick notes. Johnny recalled being told by a manager that he would be dismissed if he called in sick.[60] Tamara also reported being required by her managers to give 48 hours' notice before taking sick leave, and being disciplined when she failed to do so:

> Whether you want it or not, whether you are dying or not, you must go to work. Because there is a norm that says that you are going to miss work, you must give 48 hours' notice. […] For example, at the rhythm with which I work, I started feeling pain in my foot […] One Friday, the pain was so strong that I couldn't go to work. So, I asked a colleague who worked at the same company […] if he could cover my work because I didn't feel capable of doing it. And I sent a message to the manager telling her that I couldn't work because my foot was extremely sore and I couldn't put it down, and that I had asked my colleague to cover me. This was first time after two years working for that company. The first time that I was going to miss work. And they started disciplinary proceedings. […] they said 'no', that I had to give notice 48 hours before. After all the stupid responses they gave me, I said: 'well next time, with my crystal ball, I will tell you 8 days early: "look, next Friday I will get ill, and I won't be able to go to work". No-one can tell in advance when they will get ill.[61]

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[59] Maria, cleaner at a school in South London, translated from Spanish
[60] Johnny, cleaner at a pharmacy chain in Central London
[61] Tamara, cleaner in office buildings in Central London, translated from Spanish.

Participants also experienced difficulties booking annual leave, with their requests being constantly rejected by managers, to the effect that they risked losing their annual entitlement for the year. For example, Gabriel said that in order to get his annual leave approved, he was obliged to notify his managers several months in advance and arrange for a colleague to agree to cover his work, as the company refused to pay for extra staff to cover absences: 'When I apply for holiday, I apply four months, five months before. And then you're supposed to provide someone to cover these places. And I say: 'You have to contract someone to cover this person. Why you don't contract someone?' And then he refused to explain this part.'[62] Another way of discouraging cleaners from taking annual leave was to cut their hours or dismiss them in their absence. This is illustrated by Speranza's account of a colleague who found she had lost her job upon her return from her home country:

> I think there is another worker that was… I don't know, I think she said her job, she came back from Ghana or something, but they had let her go and she didn't know about it until she got here. She let the manager know and management didn't put it forward and she didn't have a job when she got back![63]

During my experience as a UVW caseworker, it was not uncommon for cleaners seeking to access their maternity or paternity benefits to be threatened with dismissal (See also: Grimshaw 2014). One of my interviewees also reported that her employer had attempted to dismiss her upon her return from an agreed maternity leave. Finally, the widespread practice of illegally deducting holiday pay can also be considered as an attempt to deter cleaners seeking to enjoy their annual leave entitlement.

5.3.4. Contracts

Most of the participants interviewed had permanent positions at the cleaning companies that employed them. The majority combined several part-time, permanent positions at different companies for a fixed number of basic hours, supplemented by overtime or covers. However, most participants had been employed on a temporary basis at some point, early on in their careers or when starting work at a new company. This often took the form of covering staff absences, cleaning after specific events, or doing 'deep cleans', for a fixed period only.

[62] Gabriel, cleaner at a prestigious university in Bloomsbury
[63] Speranza, cleaner in a large park in Central London

Many participants reported not having a contract, or not being aware of what their contract stated on several occasions during their experience working as cleaners. For some, this was because a contract was never mentioned to them by their employers. Others recalled signing documents which had not been translated to them, and of which they were not given a copy to take home. Some participants reported requesting a copy of their contract several times but being ignored by their employer. Many also recalled being compelled to accept any work and put themselves at the disposition of the employer, regardless of the terms and conditions offered. For example, LaPiti said:

> There is a guy I know, he used to be my boss. He told me that he might help me get a new job. As I asked how much they would pay per hour, he said: "Don't ask, just start working. The more you work, the more money you will get". But when you are in need, what do you do? […] This is what I experience daily. "Shut up and do the work". He would say this to everyone.[64]

According to Natalia, a UVW activist and former cleaner, this behaviour is common amongst recently arrived cleaners, whose main priority is to earn money quickly, rather than to obtain a secure employment contract and to ensure that their statutory rights are being respected. She recalled having a similar outlook herself:

> Yes, they gave me a contract. As I had recently arrived, I know they made me sign something, but I didn't know what it was, I didn't even read it. I had no idea; I just knew that money arrived in my account. I only knew how much they would pay me per hour, and what my hours of work were. […] So, I do understand people who arrive here [at the union] and say that they don't know the name of the company they work for. Because they often say the only thing they are interested in is to work and earn money.[65]

Cleaners who did not have a written contract or were unaware of what it contained relied on the de facto situation to estimate how many hours they were contracted to work and the wages they were being paid.

Throughout my fieldwork research and experience working as a UVW caseworker, whilst few of the cleaners I met were employed under 'zero-hour contracts', most had contracts with variable hours – perhaps because, whilst the extent of the demand for cleaning services might be unpredictable, there is a stable demand for at least a minimal level of cleaning. A common type of contract held by the cleaners I met and interviewed thus

[64] LaPiti, cleaner in a cosmetics store, translated from Spanish
[65] Natalia, UVW organiser and former cleaner, translated from Spanish

guaranteed only a standard minimum of weekly hours – often 10 hours per week - which amounted to a mere fraction of cleaners' real working hours. For example, Speranza reported being employed under a 24-hour contract, despite having worked 40 hours per week for that company for the past 11 years:

> S: Hmm they say I'm on a 24 hour contract after working for 11 years, and I've always known I was on a 40 hours contract. So, that's one of my issues.
> C: So, they can use that to reduce your hours anytime?
> S: Yeah, when they want to, they'll say 'you're on a 24-hour contract'.[66]

Contracting cleaners for a number of hours well below their actual working hours limits employers' obligation to guarantee full-time work, allowing them to reduce hours when convenient. Throughout my experience working as a caseworker, it was not uncommon for cleaners employed under this type of contract to see their hours suddenly being cut off by their employer. For example, Natalia recalled instances of supervisors using their ability to give or reduce hours to dissuade cleaners from taking annual leave:

> All my colleagues were working when they were ill. They had to renounce to their holidays because the supervisors would say: 'if you take holiday then when you come back your full-time position is gone. You know that you've signed a contract of only two and a half hours. So, if you take holidays, I will give your full-time position to someone else.' For that reason, they would not take annual leave and say: I'll only take one day.[67]

5.3.5. Work intensification

Increasing work intensity is another way for employers to minimise costs. Throughout my fieldwork research, 'el trabajo es demasiado' ('there is too much work') was a common recrimination on the part of the cleaners I spoke with. Understood as an increase in work rhythm and workload (Askenazy 2005), intensification can be implemented through various managerial practices. Exacerbated by the fact that facility contracts often change every three to five years (Weghmann 2023), re-structuring is frequent in the cleaning world, with managers regularly re-organising shifts and reviewing the time allocated for each task to increase productivity. This tendency is illustrated by Yvan's comment: "An office like this one takes about four minutes to clean. We would try and reduce that to three minutes. At the

[66] Speranza, cleaner in a public park
[67] Natalia, former cleaner and trade union organiser at UVW

scale of a building with 400 offices, that makes a big difference".[68]

As a result, cleaners are expected to work fast and are imposed excessive workloads. Being set unrealistic targets and lacking time to do the work assigned was a frequent grievance among the cleaners I interviewed. Many deplored having to run across buildings to be able to complete the tasks assigned to them. As Johnny puts it:

> What I don't like is… You know that you have limited time to do the work. They tell you: 'you've got that many hours to clean this area'. Sometimes there is more cleaning to do than usual and you still have to finish at the same time. And sometimes you finish early, but you still have to stay until the end of the shift because they keep a record of the time at which you clock in and clock out. But the length of the shift is ridiculous given the amount of work![69]

One way of reducing labour costs by intensifying work involved reducing staffing levels to clean a certain area, without increasing the length of shifts. This is illustrated by Naomi's account:

> So, when [cleaning contractor name] people got it [the cleaning contract], things changed. So now they were giving large portion of jobs for the same hours, for I think the same payment or something. So, it really got to… it really got to a state where I had to stop. Because normally it's each person per floor. But when the company came in, and they did some… I don't know what happened. So now in the morning if they wanted to do offices, instead of doing [just] the first floor, you're given first, second, third floor.[70]

Justine, a cleaner at a large media corporation in Central London, gave an example of this method being deployed in relation to covers for colleagues on annual leave when the cleaning contract was transferred to a new company:

> We were transferred to [company name] in June 2018. […] They implemented this policy progressively. The first time it happened, we thought it was going to be a one-off, and we did not mind. Then later the company asked us to cover absent colleagues for 3 days. But as I asked if I was going to be paid for the extra work, they said I wouldn't, as we all had to work together as a team. The previous company used to recruit another person, or to give all the cleaners an extra hour to do the work. But not Sodexo. They never paid me for the extra work. It was a favour on the part of the cleaners. […] But they put this policy in place little by little. At one point a colleague went on sick leave for 3 weeks. They forced us to cover her work, saying: "this is your work, you've got to do it. You've signed a contract stating that you were at the company's disposal." But we all have different tasks to do! And if I have to cover someone else's job on top of my own work, I've got to be paid for it! Then, whenever someone went on holiday, we had to cover that person between all of us who were working.[71]

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[68] Y., Former CEO of a large facilities management company, interviewed in August 2021
[69] Johnny, former cleaner at a pharmacy chain, translated from Spanish
[70] Naomi, former cleaner at a university in West London
[71] Justine, former cleaner at a media company, translated from Spanish

Intensifying work can also be done by shortening shift times. J.D.'s account of the time given to clean the carpets at his workplace being cut from eight to five hours is one example:

> Also, we'd always been working eight hours, but now it's only five hours. They tell you 'If you want to work, it's 5 hours'. And because it's a Saturday, it's overtime – my contract states that I work Monday to Friday – they must pay £12 per hour, not £10.55 per hour. But they want to pay the same rate. So, they cut staff, they cut hours and they cut wages. And when you tell them this, they just say that it is possible to do the work in five hours. But I am the one who is cleaning carpets, I am the one who knows![72]

Both practices - cutting hours and reducing staff levels - have the effect of increasing the work needed to clean a space in a given period of time, forcing cleaners to work faster.

Intensified work and excessive workloads can have far-reaching consequences on cleaners' health, causing in the long-term severe injuries and musculoskeletal conditions, as explored in more detail in the following chapter. Interestingly, some female participants complained that women were often given more work and more difficult tasks in comparison to their male colleagues. In the words of LaVoz:

> The bad thing about my job at Mitie is that it is very unbalanced. There are strong, tall, and robust men, and it looks like they are only given tasks with the feather duster. I am the one who is sick, and they send me to clean toilets when I cannot bend down for example, they make me hoover when I can't, and they know it. […] They make me do difficult things when there are men of a certain type, who are strong and young, and they make them do easy things, like cleaning machines, like kettles and coffee machines. I could perfectly do that![73]

Florence Aubenas'(2010: 78) account of a gendered division of labour during her experience working as a cleaner on a ferry in France, where women were assigned the unpleasant, straining task of cleaning the toilets, is illuminating: '"Doing the sanis" meant cleaning the toilets, a major and exclusively female task on board. […] Men hoover, they use the sweeping machine, clean the restaurants or the bars, prepare the bed bunks for the night crossings. They never scrub the toilet bowl'. In line with gender stereotypes whereby men are skilled at using machines whereas women are more comfortable with the intimate, participants reported that men were often assigned tasks which required training and were seen as more skillful, such as using sit-on sweeping machines, whilst women were assigned tasks seen as elementary, dirty, and associated with the body. In addition, male cleaners are

[72] J.D., cleaner at the headquarters of a major British TV channel, translated from Spanish
[73] LaVoz, cleaner, translated from Spanish

more likely to be given supervisory roles: whilst 81% of elementary cleaning operatives are women, the percentage of women drops to 76% for cleaning supervisors (ONS, Labour Force Survey 2018). Gender inequalities are thus reproduced within cleaning companies, through a gendered division of tasks. Feminist authors have highlighted the role of traditional gendered ideologies in perpetuating inequalities in the world of work (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003, Wong 2012). As seen in Chapter Two, cleaners' race and gender identities intersect to further devalue their work (Davis 1981). Cleaning and other feminised, reproductive activities are undervalued because they are not considered to be 'productive' work: rather than difficult, 'skilled' work that requires training and deserves monetary reward, it is seen as the natural attribute of women, contributing to its low pay and invisibility (Wong 2012).

Rationing equipment, or not replacing old, defective items is also a key technique deployed by employers to save costs. For example, Chelita recalled being forced to re-use gloves when cleaning toilets:

> Before, the boss before wouldn't give us protection, she wouldn't give us gloves. I remember that at one point… we had really thin gloves, not the thick ones to clean toilets. But the thin ones. They would bring them to us, and we needed to make sure that they didn't break so that we could use them on the next day. Because they wouldn't bring us gloves! And we would be cleaning toilets![74]

The lack of adequate cleaning equipment has the effect of increasing the amount of time and work needed to clean a given area, turning a relatively easy task into an arduous, draining one, as illustrated by this testimony from an inquiry into the work of cleaners in a food factory:

> When the chiller is sanitized, we wipe the floor with rubber wipers to remove the water. This operation is quite tiring, especially when the chiller is big. But the trick is that some wipers are much better than the others. It really makes a huge difference: in one case, you break your back and sweat a lot without much result, in the other, it's just soft and easy work. But of course, most of the wipers are bad, you've got to watch out for the good ones…
> (Anon. 2018)

Cleaners are sometimes forced to source their own equipment to be able to do their job. This testimony of a cleaner at Saint Mary's Hospital provides an example:

> When I clean my ward in the morning, I am given so few rags that I have to use the same cloths for the toilets as the rooms. When patients are watching me clean with a dirty rag, I am embarrassed and I feel

[74] Chelita, cleaner at a large luxury store in Central London, translate from Spanish

> bad for them, sometimes I use face wipes to clean the surfaces in their rooms so they cannot see how dirty my rags are. (Cited in United Voices of the World 2020)

These examples illustrate how companies' efforts to reduce costs in practice transfer the cost of providing adequate equipment on to the cleaners themselves, who compensate for defective equipment by working harder or sourcing the material themselves. Where the material is purchased by the cleaners, this can be considered as equivalent to a deduction on their wages (Marotta 2018).

The notion of what constitutes an adequate workload is contested, with employers' abstract, technical measurements often clashing with workers' direct experience of the work. Cleaners' complaints of excessive workload are often dismissed by managers, who consider questions of workplace organisation as their exclusive prerogative. As I attended workplace grievance hearings as a UVW caseworker, cleaners' complaints of excessive workload were often responded to defensively by employers, who maintained that as professionals in management, they were better qualified than the cleaners to correctly evaluate what constituted an appropriate workload. Managers' distribution of tasks derives from strict calculations, which are often detached from the reality of the work that needs to be performed. Wolkowitz (2006) argues that embodied experiences are a key aspect of our working lives, which is often neglected in favour of more abstract and technical notions of work. During my experience as a caseworker, I noted that to a cleaner's complaint that it was impossible to carry out the tasks assigned in the time given without causing them considerable physical strain, a manager would typically respond by adducing what they claimed to be expert evidence of the adequacy of their chosen models. This is corroborated by this account from an inquiry into the work of cleaners in a food factory:

> The time given per worker to clean the machines is way too little. But when you tell them, they don't listen. I had a meeting with a manager once about this issue. He said there was plenty of time and showed me a colourful page with very detailed time studies of the job: every single operation had a time in minutes attached to it – which for him was proof that I should not have struggled to get everything done on time. There was no way to explain the truth at this point. But the truth is that reality is very different from the times studies.
> (Anon 2018 from 'Chillers, bullies and Fatsolve – Nightshift drift of a Bakkavor food factory cleaner', Inquiry with night shift cleaners in a food processing plant in North West London by the political collective Angry Workers of the World)

Appealing to the pseudo-scientific, objective nature of their measurements when defining workloads serves to undermine disagreement and dismiss cleaners' concerns about excessive workload as illegitimate.

Beyond practices that result in a quantifiable increase in cleaners' workload – for example, forcing them to clean more square meters of floorspace in a given time period – work intensification also has a significant subjective dimension. Not all forms of work intensification can be quantified (Hatzfeld 2004). Managers can introduce new workplace practices that in theory do not increase the workload, but that have the effect of putting additional pressure on workers in practice (Hatzfeld 2004). During my experience as a caseworker, I came across a group of cleaners complaining that their managers had imposed a change from a system where each cleaner was allocated one floor to clean on a daily basis to a rotative system. Although each floor had a similar surface area, forcing cleaners to clean a different space each day considerably accentuated their mental load, making it more difficult to develop a familiarity with the environment, the equipment, and the individuals who worked on that floor, all of which tend to alleviate the day-to-day strains of work. Similarly, whilst not formally adding extra tasks, changing shift times can be experienced as an intensification of work. Imposing cleaners an earlier start in their working day for example can involve a longer commute and less time to sleep. Thus, the experience of work intensity cannot be reduced to the quantity and level of difficulty of the tasks to be performed: it is the product of a combination of different factors, circumstances, and aspects of work.

5.3.6. An environment of fear

So far, this chapter examined how employers' efforts to minimise labour costs translate into a tendency to employ cleaners under minimal pay and terms and conditions, and to deploy methods to increase work intensity. But how can employers impose and maintain such high levels of exploitation? How are cleaners made to work so intensely, for such low pay? Cultivating an environment of fear is key to maintain work intensity, through managerial and disciplinary practices that instill a constant threat of dismissal.

Firstly, work intensity is maintained by creating a highly regimented work environment. This manifests in managers' tendency to pressure cleaners to work faster, seeking to minimise the time that is not spent cleaning. Yvan's comment shows that

intensifying managerial pressure is the primary tactic deployed to increase productivity: ‘How do we increase productivity: by finding ways to clean more efficiently with tools, mechanisation, better equipment – for example brooms with rotative handles – or simply by telling cleaners to work faster.’[75]

Participants whose shifts had scheduled breaks complained that those were frequently interrupted by managers giving work instructions. During interviews, several participants spontaneously compared themselves with robots when describing how they were expected to behave at work. This is, in fact, an apt comparison to draw as many had to repress their basic physical needs as human beings whilst at work, having no time to eat, drink or use the toilet and being forbidden from speaking with colleagues during shifts. For example, Valentina said:

> Many times, we couldn’t take the lunch break because the [boss] didn’t like that we spend time eating, and we couldn’t be… It was worse than the army. I think that we all have rights, a job is a job, but I talked with the woman and told her that I couldn’t continue working like that because firstly I am a person and I have the right to eat, the right to go to the toilet, the right to breathe and to see the daylight.[76]

Failure to keep up with the pace imposed often results in having to finish the work over unpaid overtime or being disciplined or dismissed for ‘incompetence’. Several participants reported being disciplined and deducted pay for arriving only a few minutes late to their shift, whilst being routinely expected to stay overtime to finish their work, without additional pay. For example, Naomi said:

> By the time we finished in the offices at 9 o’clock, to cross over the street, there’s no time for you to have a break. […] Because by the time you get to the residence to clock in, you’re already three minutes late, five minutes, seven minutes. Some of us couldn’t change quickly, in the changing room. So, we had to fight that thing! Because they were taking money for getting late for five minutes, but there are not going to give us extra because you clocked out after. Like you’re supposed to clock out at 3 and you clock out at 3:15 because you decided ‘Oh I have to finish this before I go!’[77]

An atmosphere of fear is also cultivated through intense scrutiny of cleaners’ work by supervisors and managers, constantly asserting their dominance over cleaners. As Antonio puts it: ‘[I don’t like] the fact that you’re always controlled, someone always comes to check

[75] Yvan, former CEO of a multination facilities management company
[76] Valentina, former cleaner at a hotel chain, translated from Spanish
[77] Naomi, former cleaner at a university in West London

every piece of your work: "this doesn't work, there is a bit of dust here". You are treated like a child. So, I thought: "No, I am doing my job well". "Now, faster, get back to work"' [78] Being constantly reprimanded for minor details was a common grievance in participants' accounts. Many deplored managers' lack of trust in their experience and ability to do the job, feeling that their work was never good enough. For example, Rosa said:

> But then when you are told: 'This wasn't done, you can't do this'. No! It feels unfair, because you give your best, and that was never good enough. Never. But this was because of the manager, those of [store name] always saying that the work hadn't been done. Because a tiny little flaw, they would tell you that you have done nothing all day.[79]

Accusations by managers of 'incompetence' or 'failure to meet company cleaning standards' quickly escalated into disciplinary procedures and dismissals. As a UVW caseworker it was not uncommon to represent cleaners who were being disciplined for such trivial matters as one hair being found on a sink they had cleaned, or for forgetting to place a rubbish bag inside a bin.

Throughout my fieldwork research and experience as a caseworker, I often came across cases of cleaners being falsely accused of theft. As Violeta said:

> Someone was disciplined and dismissed for taking fruit home that was meant to be thrown in the bin. It was like 1£ worth of fruit, and they were told to throw it away and instead of throwing it away they took it home. […] Being dismissed summarily, so, being accused of gross misconduct, getting into these things like "fraud", or "damaging company property", or 'theft", all these big words when actually, it's just taking a banana home that was going to be thrown in the bin. […] And yeah, so just really draconian disciplinary procedures that aren't based on anything.[80]

Why are cleaners so often accused of theft? Perhaps because of the need to preserve the company's reputation and commercial relationship with client organisations, employers will rarely question the client's accusations. Cleaners' position as outsiders in the spaces they clean, working alone late in the evening or early in the morning and contracted by an external company, also means that they can be easily scapegoated for missing items. Consistent with racialised criminalisation and racist representations of minority ethnic groups as deviant, law breaking and dangerous (Gilroy 2002), the cleaners' vulnerability to suspicion is compounded by the fact that most of them are of BME identity. Finally, accusing

[78] Antonio, former cleaner at a famous tourist venue in Central London, translated from Spanish
[79] Rosa, former cleaner at a luxury store, translated from Spanish
[80] Violeta, UVW organiser

cleaners of theft can have a disciplinary function. It can serve as a pretext for a swift dismissal of cleaners perceived as troublemakers, as it is difficult to disprove. It can also contribute to maintaining regimented work environment by severely punishing any behaviour that slightly deviates from exact instructions.

Beyond formal disciplinary procedures, bullying and favouritism on the part of managers also served to ensure compliance. As seen above, most cleaners work more hours than they are officially contracted for. This gives supervisors and managers the power to allocate hours and assign tasks, which they can exert to punish cleaners who resist their authority by increasing their workload or giving them less paid hours. Natalia shared her experience of being assigned more work by her supervisor after she protested when he called her and her colleagues 'donkeys':

> He would say when giving instructions 'donkey SB1, donkey SB2, donkey 1st floor' […] I was hallucinating, I couldn't believe it. So, the next time I said: 'donkey you, no me'. That's when he got really angry at me, as if I had said the greatest insult in his life. He transformed. What I understood and that he always repeated was 'Fuck you, shit' etc. He became a monster. He seemed like he was about to hit me and then he said: "Go to the toilet now!' Like this. Then he started punishing me, sending me to do difficult jobs […] he started giving me more work, and I couldn't put up with it because the chemicals were starting to hurt me, my eyes were red, and my back was hurting.[81]

Such a punitive workplace culture, cultivated through constant monitoring on the part of managers followed by draconian disciplinary procedures, serves to instill in cleaners a fear of dismissal. As seen in Chapter Two, job insecurity has a disciplinary function, forcing workers into the acceptance of high rates of exploitation (Bourdieu 1998). The disciplining effects of cleaners' sense of precarity are illustrated by Antonio's account: 'Because I was so exhausted, I felt like I could resign any time. I also knew that they could dismiss me anytime and replace me really easily […] that's why some people never complain, never say anything. They just look down and put up with everything. And they get taken advantage of.'[82] Here, the job precarity many cleaners experience is manifest in the constant fear of dismissal, as well as the sense that one might resign anytime, because the work has become so unsustainable.

Mistreatment on the part of supervisors and managers can take extreme forms, with some participants reporting cases of severe discrimination and sexual harassment at work.

[81] Natalia, UVW organiser and former cleaner in a large retail store, translated from Spanish
[82] Antonio, former cleaner in the warehouse of a multinational technology company, translated from Spanish

Whilst such practices do not directly serve to maintain work intensity, they favour compliance by creating a workplace culture of fear. Already we have seen how managerial practices that cultivate fear, combined with a draconian disciplinary regime have both an economic and political purpose (Marotta 2018): whilst maintaining work intensity and minimising labour costs, they reinforce employers' power over cleaners and deter resistance. The various ways in which cleaners resist exploitation will be explored in more in depth in Chapter Seven.

5.4 How cleaning companies handle complaints - Human Resources practices

Cleaning companies' business strategies and managerial techniques are bolstered by Human Resources (HR) processes. A close analysis of the way these processes work offer us a rare and additional insight into worker-employer relations and cleaning companies' management style. The function of HR departments is to manage workplace issues in a way that guarantees productivity and furthers companies' business goals (Kaufman 2001). In the cleaning industry, managerial techniques aimed at reducing costs and intensifying work generate dissatisfactions among cleaners and disputes with their employers. Companies' HR departments are dedicated to managing and responding to these complaints, whilst serving the company's commercial interests.

5.4.1 The genesis of HR management

HR management only recently became an important aspect of the world of work. The 1980s saw substantial changes in the labour market and industrial relations in the UK. The Thatcher government's implementation of anti-union legislation curbed trade unions' power to call strikes by restraining secondary picketing and imposing secret ballots. Combined with a de-regulation of the labour market and a mass privatisation of public assets, these reforms lead to a decline of the labour movement and a reinforcement of managerial power (Poole and Mansfield 1993). The retreat of trade union power – with trade union membership reaching its lowest point in 2017 in the UK (Topping 2017) – led to a shift of focus from the collective to the individual as the main subject when dealing with disputes between workers and employers (Kaufman 2001). The emergence of HR departments in companies reflect this

development. HR practices are adapted to managing an un-unionised workforce: rather than dealing with collective demands and actions, the emphasis in HR is to manage workplace issues individually (Guest 1987). Individual grievances to HR departments and Employment Tribunals claims thus progressively became the most common mechanisms for dispute resolution, replacing collecting forms of action such as strikes and collective bargaining (Poole and Mansfield 1993). This is manifest in the sharp increase in Employment Tribunal claims in that period: in the UK, the number of employment tribunal applications more than trebled between 1988 and 1996 (Walker and Hamilton 2011). The individual nature of workplace issues renders trade unions redundant, or so the narrative goes: HR departments, as neutral and independent arbitrators within companies, are better adapted to address workers' concerns (Guest 1987). By resolving conflicts individually and internally, HR management minimises the adversarial nature of the relationship between workers and employers, focusing instead on building a community of common interests within the company (Linhart 2015).

5.4.2 Systems and channels for complaint

In addition to simply raising concerns informally over a conversation with managers, one option for workers seeking redress is to file a formal grievance. Figure 3.5 below maps out the main steps involved in a grievance processes. Although procedures vary depending on the size and resources of companies, they typically involve inviting an employee who submitted a written complaint to a formal grievance hearing. Chaired by a HR manager who is in theory impartial to the case, this hearing is an opportunity for the employee to present their version of the story and adduce evidence. Following an investigation, the managers decide an outcome which is then communicated to the employee in writing. Where the employee is not satisfied with the outcome, they can appeal against the decision in writing. The appeal is then heard at another formal meeting, in principle chaired by another, more senior manager. An appeal outcome letter is sent to the employee, who can then initiate Employment Tribunal proceedings if the grievance has not been satisfactorily resolved. The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) Code of Practice sets outs standard grievance and disciplinary processes for employers.

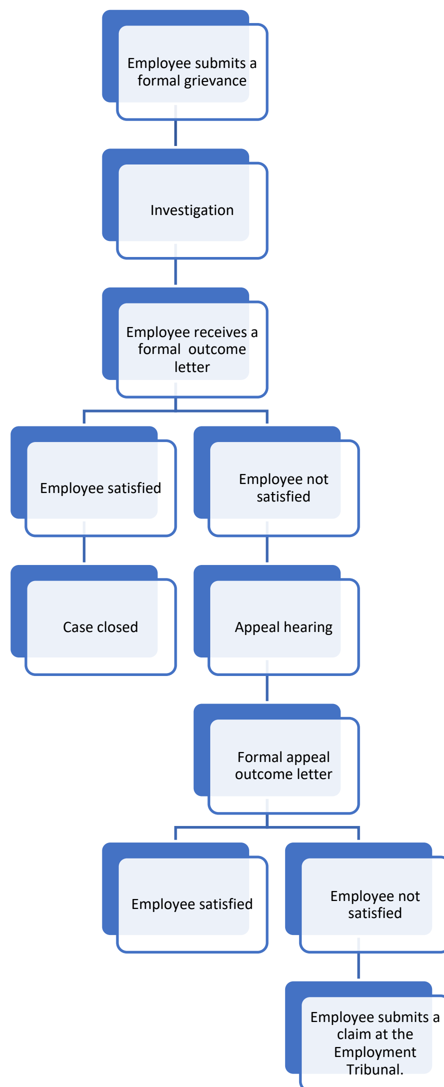

Figure 3.5: Main steps in a standard grievance process

5.4.3 Barriers to resolving problems through internal processes

There is limited scope for employees to resolve issues with their employer through internal routes. Several factors inhibit cleaners' access to internal procedures as well as their ability to build and defend a strong case. Many are simply not aware of the routes available to resolve issues (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2014) or have difficulty arguing their case in a written grievance letter due to language barriers and low literacy skills (Sykes et al 2014). Lack of IT skills are also a significant inhibiting factor. Whilst many struggle to use email and rely on more informal mediums such as Whatsapp to communicate with colleagues, managers and supervisors, it is common for companies to require all work-

related communication to be sent by letter or email and to disregard concerns sent over Whatsapp. Justine, a former a cleaner at a media company, mentioned in her interview being forbidden from using Whatsapp to communicate with her managers after she revealed evidence of illegal practices and abuse from her supervisor through photos and screenshots of WhatsApp conversations.[83] By rejecting complaints or messages sent via Whatsapp, employers take away a key medium many cleaners can use with ease, further inhibiting their ability to raise concerns and access redress.

Cleaners may also face difficulties when seeking to collect and present evidence to support their case. Cleaning being essentially manual work, most communication happens face to face, and there is limited opportunity to gather written evidence. Allegations of oral abuse can be simply disbelieved or denied. This is compounded by the fact that cleaners are often forbidden from using their phones whilst on shift. As investigations are carried out by the employer unilaterally, the thoroughness of the process depends on the employer's goodwill. There is nothing preventing employers from collecting evidence selectively. This is illustrated by Justine's account of her employer's failure to obtain CCTV footage of an assault she suffered on the part of her manager whilst on site: 'Then my manager physically assaulted me. […] I had notified HR about the physical assault immediately. But they waited and waited before doing anything, until it was too late and CCTV footage of the assault was no longer available.'[84]

When submitting a grievance, timing is of essence. Many grievances are dismissed as historical by employers, who can refuse to carry out investigations once a certain amount of time has passed after the event complained of. The time limit for submitting a claim to the Employment Tribunal is of three months from the date of the events. Throughout my experience working at UVW, it was common practice for employers to stretch grievance processes and delay confirming their final decision beyond this time limit, maintaining the employee's hope that the issue might be resolved whilst buying extra time to avoid legal proceedings. Thus, as well as being inaccessible to many cleaners, internal grievance procedures involve restrictions as to when and how concerns can be raised and the type of evidence that can be presented, limiting opportunities for redress.

[83] Justine, former cleaner at a media company, translated from Spanish
[84] Ibid

5.4.4 A skewed dispute resolution system

Beyond the power imbalances that limit cleaners' access to HR procedures and their ability to present their case, HR processes cannot be considered an appropriate channel for redress for the more fundamental reason that they cannot be impartial. Led and designed by management, their results favour employers (Walker and Hamilton 2011). The pro-employer orientation of HR processes was observed by Violeta throughout her experience representing UVW members at grievance hearings:

> I think they [HR] rarely give a shit. The first interest is always with the company. So, you know, if the grievance is against the company, then it's all about how you can pretend to engage in processes, hold a grievance hearing and then write an outcome that somehow explains why that grievance isn't upheld. Grievances are often a waste of time. […] It's all a bit of a show.[85]

Rather than solving employees' problems, HR practices focus on following correct company procedures whilst advancing the employer's interests. This is illustrated by the response of Georgia, HR Partner at a large multinational Facilities Management company, when asked how HR departments ensure that a fair outcome has been reached: 'Well, we've got policies, we've got procedures. So, [company name] is the company that I work for, it is an absolutely huge organisation with policies and everything. So, we obviously have to adhere to our policies and processes.'[86]

This response reveals the purely formulistic, procedural approach to grievance and disciplinary processes: accordingly, an outcome will be considered fair if the correct procedure was followed, fairness being defined by the methods applied rather than their concrete outcome. However, the skewed nature of procedures is evident in the fact that most grievances are defeated by management. This was acknowledged by Georgia when asked whether workers' grievances were ever upheld under her organisation's HR procedures: 'So, we would have it as each point of the grievance would either be upheld or partially upheld. There's never really any that are completely upheld if I'm going to be honest, normally it's more the individual needs to understand that the process that the manager followed actually was correct.'[87] This comment betrays the view that, if workers

[85] Violeta, former organiser and caseworker at UVW
[86] Georgia, HR Partner at a large Facilities Management company
[87] Ibid

raise concerns, it is because they have failed to understand the situation, and they ultimately need to accept that the manager's position is the correct one.

It is likely that the cleaners' race, class, and gender identities significantly shaped their experiences with HR. In their study of low paid migrant labour in the US, Waldinger and Richter (2003) argue that workers' race is crucial to the abuse they suffer on the part of employers, as it is psychologically easier for employers to ignore the concerns of an employee who physically does not resemble them. The influence of racist tropes was evident in a HR partner's response to a UVW member's complaint of sexual harassment during my experience as a caseworker. As the member, a Latin American female cleaner, raised concerns in relation to messages with sexual content she had received from her supervisor, this was dismissed as part of the culture of the cleaning team, in line with racist hypersexualised representations of Latin American women (Roman 2000). Such callous and condescending dismissals of cleaners' complaints by HR can thus be seen as a typical psycho-social response to individuals of a particular race, gender, or job title.

Thus, rather than seeking to establish the truth and reach a fair outcome by considering employees' concerns and criticisms, HR's departments' approach to workers' grievances is designed to re-affirm managerial power. Throughout my experience as a UVW caseworker, submitting a grievance rarely resulted in any action being taken to resolve the worker's issues. HR specialists would methodically look for the slightest flaw in cleaners' account and the procedure followed to justify rejecting their grievance. HR grievance processes thus appear to exist primarily to show that company guidelines have been correctly followed and enable employers to claim that workers' concerns have been carefully examined. Following procedure to the tee provides companies with an administrative record giving the appearance that workers' complaints have been investigated and can serve to protect the company against future litigation. By producing formal outcome letters and meeting records, HR grievance processes allow companies to develop an alternative, administrative narrative under which workers' concerns have been addressed, which usually has no practical reality. HR departments' management of workplace complaints thus seems to conform to David Graeber's description of 'box ticking jobs' - a type of what he calls 'bullshit jobs'- work which exists 'only or primarily to allow an organisation to be able to claim it is doing something that, in fact, it is not doing' (Graeber 2018: 92).

In some rare instances, grievances do result in the worker's concerns being heard and in some action being taken to resolve them. Violeta's account provides an example:

> The only time I've seen a manager genuinely affected by an issue that a member raised, was a sexual harassment case, when they themselves said: 'I understand because something similar happened to me'. And you could see that they were genuinely shaken. But I think that's the only example I have where I could see genuine empathy from the person. Otherwise, it's always the interest of the company that's the main incentive of what's going on.[88]

In that case, genuine attention was paid to the worker's concern because of a particular HR partner's unusual level of compassion triggered by personal lived experience, rather than because of the normal course of HR procedure. According to Violeta, specific individuals within an organisation can also sometimes adopt a more understanding approach:

> [Company name] for example, is like a small/medium company and they don't want problems with unions. They like to think that they're very family and people focused. And they've made a lot more effort in engaging in a positive way. Certain people from P. But then, they're higher up. The people who are lower down, who basically just have to follow the structure, have come in with the same kind of cold, callous approach when they're following the process.[89]

Thus, these cases are hardly representative of the functioning of HR processes. In both instances, the HR professionals in question detracted from normal, standard practice: either because of a strong emotional response to a specific case, or because of high a level of confidence and discretion within the company. Indifference, or denial that the events complained of happened, appears to be the default response. As Guillem puts it:

> You would present those cases to them, show them that your member is having tremendous mental health issues because they are trying to move them elsewhere, or change something, or not address a bullying issue. But they won't react to it. There is this situation in which you end up… It seems that the workers you represent will never be believed. The pain and violence that they've suffered will never be acknowledged. And this is always presented within the framework of the company procedures.[90]

5.4.5 Why HR procedures cannot be impartial

There are strong incentives for HR practitioners to decide in favour of the employer. According to a 2021 survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personal Development

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[88] Violeta, former organiser and caseworker at UVW
[89] Ibid
[90] Guillem, former UVW caseworker and IWGB organiser

(CIPD), the HR professional organisation in the UK and Ireland, around 40% of HR staff are likely to *'compromise their principles when they or the needs of the business are affected, or when under line manager and business leader pressure'* (CIPD 2021: 27). There is limited scope for HR staff to use their own professional judgement when taking decisions. Presented as independent, neutral dispute resolution mechanisms, HR departments are wholly internal to the company. HR staff are paid by and work on behalf of the company. It is not uncommon for HR directors to be dismissed for refusing to decide in the favour of the employer (Clegg 2019). Ultimately geared towards maximising business interests, HR practices seek to adapt employees' behaviour to the organisation's business objectives (Kaufman, 2001).

The illusion of impartiality is however carefully cultivated. Throughout my experience as a UVW caseworker, I noted that large Facilities Management companies in particular had a plethora of company rules usually contained in an 'Employee Handbook' or a 'Company Code of Practice' which, whilst often referred to and cited as authority by managers conducting grievance and disciplinary hearings, are purely internal regulations that do not have the status of legal obligations. When inviting employees to disciplinary or grievance hearings, managers would often encourage them to consult these rules, highlighting the transparency of the process. The illusion is soon dispelled when workers are communicated pre-determined, pro-employer outcomes.

Beyond the structurally biased nature of HR processes, the inherent imbalance of power between employers and individual employees also makes it impossible to introduce a fair mechanism for resolving conflicts within the company. HR processes constitute dispute resolution system where one of the parties, the employer, is in a much stronger position, with superior access to resources and information (Kaufman 2001). The unfavourable position of workers in HR disciplinary and grievance systems is well-illustrated by the events and processes that lead to Justine's dismissal from her job cleaning the offices of a large media company. A few weeks after having raised a grievance in relation to excessive workload and physical assault on the part of her manager–which was rejected by her employer's HR department– Justine was suddenly disciplined and dismissed. Her dismissal was founded allegations of 'disruptive and insubordinate behaviour, supported by statements by five supervisors and managers at the company, all concurring in that Justine had displayed 'aggressive behaviour' at work. Although these allegations were a mere

pretext to dismiss her as an employee management considered problematic because of the complaints she had filed, Justine felt powerless and unable to defend herself in the face of the level of organisation, staff time and resources invested towards her dismissal:

> You know that all of them were against me. I had to fight against the monster that [company name] is. They would all agree and concur on destroying one person. Who would have thought that people of that status, who have a high level of education, would dedicate their time to bullying a cleaner? With the studies they've had, the career they have and the languages they can speak, they could do more interesting things than organising bullshit meetings, making the company lose time, plotting a whole strategy to attack and dismiss a cleaner […] They got statements from each of the managers from the different departments. Each of them drafted a statement against me.[91]

The formality of HR procedures, bolstered by lengthy company codes of practice, therefore serve to maintain the illusion that the processes are fair, hiding the inherent imbalance of power between employers and employees. However, the superior position of employers in the power relation with workers contradicts any attempt to introduce democratic processes of workplace justice within companies (Linhart 2015).

5.5. Dignified work, undignified conditions: how cleaners felt about their job

When asked whether they liked their job, the cleaners I interviewed rarely simply responded by saying either 'yes' or 'no'. Their feelings towards their own occupation as cleaners were ambiguous, consisting of a sense of gratitude and pride enmeshed with frustration with the lack of social recognition, low pay, and bad treatment on the part of employers.

Whilst a minority reported finding their jobs uninteresting and repetitive, most participants respected and valued their own work as cleaners. Some felt they had developed knowledge of cleaning techniques and products and were glad to be skilled in cleaning. Others felt useful as cleaners and expressed pride of doing work that is essential for other activities to take place. As LaVoz put it:

> A person who works as a cleaner shouldn't be ashamed of what they do. They should be proud, because thanks to their honest work, thanks to their efforts… when you go through the places that you clean, knowing that there is a very important company and that you are there, cleaning. You're play a fundamental part for this building. If we weren't cleaning up this shit, if we weren't cleaning the desks, the carpets, the windows, this company wouldn't be as it says it is.[92]

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[91] Justine, former cleaner at a media company, translated from Spanish

[92] LaVoz, cleaner at office buildings in Central London, translated from Spanish

Independently from the nature of cleaning work itself, many participants simply felt grateful to have a job and to be able to make a living. For example, Celia said: 'So, the cleaning jobs were… I loved my jobs… As a cleaner, I really liked it. I liked cleaning. I was a in a state of gratitude, you know. Very grateful that I could earn that money, very grateful that I could send money home.'[93] Some enjoyed the flexibility of their job and the possibility of working on their own: 'I like the fact that I am earning money, as depending on whether I do more or less hours, I can get more or less money, and this is good. And I like the flexibility I have in my work, because in my jobs I have my own key to the site and can go in at any time between 7pm and 7am. I like this flexibility.'[94]

Overall, participants did not dislike cleaning work in itself, which they felt was purposeful and important, but felt demoralised by the treatment they received at work. Rosa was angered to be paid low wages and receive little recognition for a job that was so demanding:

> I like all jobs in themselves, as long as you are treated well. This is the most important thing. You could do the worst job ever, taking out rubbish, but if people on the street treat you well, I would do it with pleasure. What is bad is when you work at a place where you don't feel good, and where on top of that, they don't pay well. This is the worst. I liked going to [workplace name] to work. But then when you are told: "this wasn't done, you can't do this". No! It feels unfair, because you give your best, and it was never good enough. […] They don't care whether we eat or not. The work has to be perfectly done, but they pay poverty wages. This is what frustrates me. When at work they pay you badly and they treat you badly. But the work in itself… I like any kind of work.[95]

Low pay, as well as having to constantly fight for their wages to be paid correctly, was particularly denigrating for participants. Beyond the financial hardship they suffered, being paid such low wages had a strong symbolic meaning for participants, signifying that their work had no value. In resonance with Bourdieu's (1993: 14) concept of 'positional suffering', whereby distress is experienced relative to one's position in a social space, the lack of consideration was experienced all the more painfully by cleaners who workers in organisations that displayed prestige and opulence. Rosa, who worked as a cleaner in a famous luxury store, said:

> And when you get to the end of the month, the salary is just the worst. You realise that they make a lot of money, because in the shop nothing costs less than £100. Whether it is a pair of earrings or something else, nothing costs less than £100. It's very expensive. There are bags that cost £700, £800,

[93] Celia, former cleaner and UVW activist
[94] La Piti, cleaner at a cosmetics store, translated from Spanish
[95] Rosa, former cleaner at a large luxury store, translated from Spanish

> clothes for £5,000, £10,000. When they sell one of those dresses, they've paid all our wages already! I don't understand why our wages are so low […] You feel bad for that reason. You see that there is a huge difference.[96]

Other participants deplored the social stigma attached to cleaning and the contempt people have for cleaners generally. For example, Blackberry said:

> To be honest, I do like my job. I like it like any other professional job because I also have trained to do the cleaning, with British Institute of Cleaning Science. So, I take my job seriously, and I like my job like any other professional job. The downside, what I don't like about my job is that everyone looks down on you. As if you are doing a dirty job, and you look like you are the dirt you are cleaning. This is the only thing I dislike about it. But if you look at other things, it can be any other job. And I love that job so, so much. Because it gives me satisfaction, it pays my mortgage, pays my bills, and going for holidays to see my family back home. So, it is like any other work! The only thing I dislike is when the management or the people working for them don't see you as a professional person. They just see you like a very low person.[97]

Many cleaners lamented feeling invisible at work. With most cleaning shifts scheduled outside standard working hours and individual cleaners often being allocated an entire floor of a building to clean, many worked on their own and had little human contact at their workplace. This limits the satisfaction cleaners can derive from their work, as they are simply unaware of whether their efforts are being appreciated. In the words of Rosa: "In an office it is a lot colder [than cleaning a home], you clean, and you don't see anyone, you don't chat with anyone. No one tells you: "thank you, you've been working well!"[98]. Discretion is seen by employers as a quality for cleaners, who are expected to make themselves invisible. Interactions with individuals who work in the spaces they clean are often discouraged or even prohibited. In the words of Florence Aubenas (2010: 137): "My work relationships essentially consist in making myself forgotten, whilst knowing how to distinguish situations that require being totally forgotten from those that only require being slightly forgotten"[99]. A small minority reported forming amicable relationships with some of the users of the spaces they clean. This included cleaners at universities who had taken part in a campaign that some students and academics had shown support for, as well as Mariola, a former cleaner at the offices of a media company:

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[96] Ibid

[97] Blackberry, cleaner at a prestigious university in Central London

[98] Rosa, former cleaner at a luxury store, translated from Spanish

[99] Translated from French

> With me the client was extremely generous, extremely generous, because they knew that I was not only the cleaner, but also the person they lived with on the day to day. [Cleaning company name} were the ones who considered me as the cleaner or the housekeeper. But they [the client] considered me the friend, the person who gave support, even emotional support, to the people in the office. I started teaching Spanish there in the office. […] So, they helped me with English and I with Spanish. And I always received invitations to the events they held, dinners, tributes, ceremonies. I was never left out.[100]

However, the majority reported rarely ever interacting with anyone at work. The psychological impact of the invisibility and social contempt experienced by cleaners is explored in more detail in the following chapter.

Some participants described their workplace culture as toxic. Many gave accounts of individualistic behaviour on the part of their colleagues, who saw each other as competitors for more desirable jobs and overtime work. Favouritism and bullying were reported as widespread, with different clans forming in workplaces along national and ethnic lines, as well as loyalties for particular managers. However, others reported developing strong bonds with their colleagues, through a sense of camaraderie as individuals experiencing similar difficulties. For example, Clara said:

> I like when there is a team… I liked it when I started working at [workplace name] because the one who got there first would prepare coffee for everyone, would help. There was this feeling that we were all migrants, all from different countries, we were in the same situation. We all needed a job, so we all had to understand each other's situation. Some would tell you about their lives, you would listen to them, sometimes the person needs to let off steam. There was this harmony, this camaraderie.[101]

Naomi also felt a strong sense of solidarity and mutual support in her cleaning team:

> I think the thing that kept me really enjoy my job then was… I had good relationship with my colleagues. You know there is this good relationship that cleaners have, I'm telling you, it's a very, very fantastic relationship […] Even if you are sick, you know that two people can say: 'Don't worry, we will be here to do your floor, it's okay.' [102]

Overall, participants deplored the structural circumstances of their work rather than cleaning work in itself. Whilst many saw their work as necessary and valuable, the treatment they received was not conducive to a dignifying work experience. We therefore see how through low pay, minimal terms and conditions and a harsh workplace discipline, which

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[100] Mariola, former cleaner at a media company, translated from Spanish
[101] Clara, former cleaner at a luxury store, translated from Spanish
[102] Naomi, former cleaner at a university in West London

combine to reinforce the social stigma attached to cleaning, business models seeking to minimise labour costs transform an activity that is in itself purposeful into undignified work.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter analysed migrant cleaners' workplace experiences and the structural causes of the high rate of exploitation in the cleaning sector. Building on existing literature that reveals the role of outsourcing in shaping cleaners' working conditions, this chapter constitutes a deep dive into the sector, vividly showing how those dynamics manifest at the micro level, from cleaners' perspective, and their impact on their subjectivity. Neoliberal policies led to an increasing trend towards the outsourcing of cleaning services, with the justification that it reduces costs and maximises efficiency. Client demand for low prices and the labour-intensive nature of the industry incentivise cleaning contractors to reduce labour costs. Business models founded on minimising labour costs shape managerial and HR practices, and ultimately cleaners' working conditions. We have seen that at the managerial level, this is manifested by various methods of exploitation (unlawfully deducting of wages, offering mostly part-time jobs under minimal terms and conditions, rationing equipment) and of intensification of cleaners' work (increasing workloads, reducing shift lengths, imposing faster paces of work). Employers maintain intense work rhythms by cultivating an environment of fear, instilling a constant threat of dismissal which serves to deter resistance. This workplace culture is bolstered by a harsh disciplinary and HR practices which, whilst giving the illusion that workers' concerns are being considered and independently investigated, seek to align workers' behaviour with commercial aims by de-legitimising complaints. Such workplace experiences shaped participants' own attitude towards their occupation as cleaners, transforming their perception of an activity that is purposeful in itself into undignified work.

Overall, cleaners' gender, race and migrant status shaped their experiences as workers and reinforced their vulnerability to abuse. Participants' positionality was critical to their recruitment, as they were actively sought after by employers who perceived them to be more exploitable, to a workplace culture of impunity, due to employers' confidence that they would not be able to report illegal practices, to the invisibility and mistrust they

experienced at work, as well as to employers' callous dismissal of their concerns. Moving beyond the workplace, the following chapter examines cleaners' wider well-being.

6 CHAPTER SIX: CLEANERS' WIDER WELL-BEING

6.1 Introduction

Cleaners' narratives demonstrate that experiences of precarity do not stop at the workplace but permeate many aspects of life, shaping one's health, sense of self, housing, and family situation. Many studies of low paid migrant workers have examined precarity in the spheres of work and migration without exploring its repercussions on their wider well-being and personal lives. Thus, this chapter asks: How do low paid migrant cleaners experience precarity in more intimate spheres of life? In so doing, the chapter adopts a holistic, multidimensional notion of precarity, as introduced in Chapter Two. It uses the concept of structural violence to highlight how structures of inequality and oppression negatively impact the lives and well-being of certain social groups. Social reproduction theory is also a useful framework to analyse the ways that precarity undermines cleaners' ability to sustain themselves and care for their loved ones.

The chapter begins with an analysis of the effects of work on cleaners' physical and mental health - whilst inevitably interrelated, the effects of precarity on cleaners' body and mind are considered separately for greater clarity. It then explores cleaners' ability to perform social reproductive activities, their family life, and social connections. It considers participants' housing situation, and the unaffordability of housing in London as a key driver of precarity. Lastly, the interconnectedness and cumulative effect of different forms of precarity, as well as the factors of improvement in quality of life are discussed. It is argued that the different social mechanisms that produce precarity aggravate each other, cumulatively pushing individuals into a downward spiral and undermining possibilities of extrication.

6.2 Work and the body

The cleaners at the heart of this study do not only experience precarity as migrant workers, but also in a more holistic sense, as human beings exposed to the risk of death. Authors have shown that in a structural context of inequality, poverty, racism and discrimination, the risks of illness and death are unequally distributed across society (Butler 2004, Singer and Rylko-

Bauer 2021). Butler's (2004) idea of bodily precarity, used to capture how bodies are made vulnerable to destruction by socio-economic structures, is helpful to understand cleaners' particular exposure to risks of illness and premature death. This section explores the connections between cleaners' bodies and their experiences of work.

6.2.1 Work-related health problems

Work involves considerable bodily effort and shapes our experiences of embodiment (Wolkowitz 2006). Conversely, individuals' health shapes their experiences of work. This body/work nexus was central to the cleaners' narrative. Nearly all participants reported suffering from health problems due to their work or knew colleagues who did. Work-related health problems were also a common issue reported by trade union members throughout my experience at UVW. In the words of Guillem:

> Physically, cleaning is damaging for the body. You see a lot of members, most of them who are above 50, most of them have some kind of physical issue due to many years of cleaning. There's always something. And I think that it is quite common for caseworkers to see a lot of people with a long-term health condition.[103]

The health problems mentioned by respondents included neck, knee and back pain, inflamed ligaments or cartilage, fatigue, fibromyalgia (a long-term condition that causes pain all over the body), arthritis, plantafacetis (foot and heel pain caused by heavy lifting), headaches, allergic reactions, burnt skin and respiratory problems. Five respondents reported having taken long term sick leave due to work related health problems at some point during their experience working as cleaners. Three experienced workplace accidents leading to a permanent disability: Jorge developed a hip condition after falling down a staircase at work[104], Antonio permanently damaged his leg after attempting to stop a floor sweeper machine from crashing into the wall[105] and Justine sustained a severe back injury from lifting a 52kg rubbish bag.[106] However, the majority of respondents developed health conditions over time, as a result of many years of cleaning work, which involved repeated

[103] Guillem, former trade union organiser at IWGB
[104] Jorge, former cleaner at a famous newspaper's offices
[105] Antonio, former cleaner at a warehouse
[106] Justine, former cleaner at an advertising company

straining tasks such as bending down, lifting heavy weights, prolonged standing, exposure to toxic chemicals, as well as general work-related stress and long working hours. For example, Antonio suffered from plantafacetis as a result of carrying excessive weight at work, as he would routinely carry a hoover on his back whilst cleaning the stairs. The incremental, long-term effects of excessive workloads, straining movements and long working hours on cleaners' bodies can be illustrated by Charlie's account:

> If you work for a long time in this industry, your body, through the years, leaves you with traces of pain, you know. I have this in my back for instance because of the jobs I used to do. You know, waking up early in the morning, and getting home at night because I used to have a job from 6pm until 9pm as well. I had three jobs: from 5 until 7am, then 8 until 3pm, then 6 until 9. It was all the long hours of work, the hard job you have doing cleaning, moving stuff. We used to move furniture around the building. [...] Sometimes you do lift heavy stuff but only realised later that that's going to be a problem for you. Because you don't know that there is protection, that you have to use certain equipment in order to lift heavy stuff. You just do the job. And then later it becomes a problem, and later once you start having problems with your back, and pain in your shoulder and stuff.[107]

The health problems caused by cleaning work were compounded by the effects of working nightshift. Most participants - 24 out of the 34 cleaners interviewed - worked outside standard daytime working hours, either on nightshifts or early morning and late evening shifts. The long-term health hazards related to night working are well established. Research has shown that night working is more damaging to health than smoking 20 cigarettes a day (Edemariam 2005). The potential effects of nightwork on health include cardiovascular problems, gastrointestinal problems, stomach ulcers, psychiatric illness as well as increased risk of breast cancer and reproductive problems amongst women (Health and Safety Executive 2006). Nightwork can also cause chronic fatigue, resulting in memory loss, disorientation, and general decline in mental and physical performance (Ibid). The mental effects of night working, and in particular the permanent state of disorientation experienced by some, are well illustrated by this account from an inquiry into the work of cleaners in a food processing factory:

> It's hard for your body and for your mind to work nights. Even when sleeping enough during the afternoon (eight to nine hours), I always wake up very anxious. The feeling is the same as when you have to wake up without having slept enough. I have had plenty of sleep, but somehow it does not seem right. The night is falling, I have to eat dinner quickly and take the bus at 10:15pm to go to the factory. Even at the weekend, when I can catch up again with a normal

[107] Charlie, former cleaner and organiser at the IWGB

> sleeping pattern, I have a constant feeling of unreality. It is exactly the jetlag feeling – except it is permanent.
> (Anon 2018 from 'Chillers, bullies and Fatsolve – Nightshift drift of a Bakkavor food factory cleaner', Inquiry with night shift cleaners in a food processing plant in North West London by the political collective Angry Workers of the World)

According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), there is a consensus among scientists that night workers are more at risk of ill-health, because of the disruption caused to their internal body clock. (HSE 2006). Night working and irregular working hours forces individuals to override their diurnal body cycles, disrupting the normal course of bodily functions. This is corroborated by my research, as many participants deplored suffering from digestive problems and sleeping difficulties. For example, Clara told me:

> I'm telling you about before, when I had to get up very early and my hours were a bit strange. You don't sleep much, and you get a bit… How can I say it… Sometimes I would get home and I struggled to sleep. And then I would get on the bus and fall asleep again. What was happening? […] And this is how I started having stomach problems. Because with those working hours you cannot eat at the hours when you are supposed to eat. Sometimes people just eat and then go to sleep. Most people have that type of problem. Being overweight, many people are overweight because bad circulation, you end up having digestive problems.[108]

To a significant extent, the prevalence of work-related health issues among cleaners is an effect of constant efforts to reduce costs at the heart of cleaning contractors' business strategy. As seen in Chapter Five, employers use abstract calculations to define workloads and distribute tasks, in a way that is detached from the reality of the work and the impact it has on cleaners' bodies. Working long hours, long journeys to work, fatigue, stress, and pressure to work fast all increase the risk of mistakes and workplace accidents (Wolkowitz 2006). Employers' efforts to save equipment costs also results in cleaners suffering injuries. Chelita reported that her employer's regular practice of rationing gloves caused his colleague to suffer severe burns on his hands and lose some mobility.[109] This practice remained prevalent even during the Covid-19 pandemic, as many deplored not being provided with gloves or being told to reuse old, torn up gloves despite the risk of contracting the virus.

[108] Clara, former cleaner at a large luxury store, translated from Spanish
[109] Chelita, cleaner at a large luxury store

Employers saving costs on safety training is another risk factor. Many participants lamented the lack of adequate training or risk assessments when being assigned a new job. As explained by Mariola:

> Because for example, when you start a new job, they never tell you what the occupational risks are, what your posture should be. I mean, they give you a document in English, on how you have to carry things, lift the machines, how to use the products and things like that. And people, when they start work, well they haven't been trained on how to prevent occupational risks, what are the correct postures and all of that.[110]

The rushed manner in which health and safety trainings are often carried out is further illustrated by a testimony from an inquiry into the work of cleaners in a food factory:

> I remember on the first day, before going to the shop floor, I had to watch a power-point presentation called: 'Cleaning safely with detergents and disinfectants' from Sealed Air […] The presentation lasts for about half-an-hour. After that, the manager asked me a couple of questions. He gave me a brief overview of the procedure for cleaning surfaces downstairs, distinguishing the procedure for cleaning the floor and the procedure for cleaning the tables and other pieces of transportable equipment. But when I went to the shop floor, I had a hard time connecting what he had said to what we were actually doing. Nobody explained anything to me down there, and I had to try and figure out everything by myself.
> (Anon 2018 from 'Chillers, bullies and Fatsolve – Nightshift drift of a Bakkavor food factory cleaner' Inquiry)

Rather than ensuring that cleaners genuinely understood how to protect themselves and minimise risks, such procedures are often used by employers to produce written evidence that some training had been provided as a way of protecting themselves against potential litigation on the part of employees in the case of workplace injuries. This is illustrated by the experience of Justine, whose complaint that she had been made to lift a 52 kg rubbish bag full of newspapers, causing her back injury, was rejected by her manager on the basis that she had signed a form confirming that she had been trained not to attempt lifting weights that appeared too heavy.[111] In some instances, employers do away with providing training entirely. Natalia recalled being asked by a manager to make the cleaners in her team sign a form stating that they had received training on how to safely use cleaning chemicals, when they had in fact not been trained and the form had not been translated to them.[112]

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[110] Mariola, former cleaner at an advertising company, translated from Spanish
[111] Justine, former cleaner at an advertising company
[112] Natalia, former cleaner and UVW activist

6.2.2 Invisibility of the health risks associated with cleaning

In the previous chapter it was observed that the work that cleaners do is characterised by invisibility. This is also relevant to understanding the health issues that arise from cleaning. As seen above, rather than one-off, dramatic accidents, participants mostly developed health problems over time, with the accumulation of repetitive, straining tasks. A similar pattern can be observed in other sectors where women are disproportionately represented, such as care work, hospitality, and retail (Wolkowitz 2006). Yet Occupational Health and Safety research has traditionally been more concerned with sudden, visible workplace accidents that workers experience in sectors where men predominate, such as construction and factory work for example (Messing et al 1993, Andrzejewski 2017). Effects of work on health are measured using criteria that are suited to conventionally male jobs, such as lifting heavy weights, exposure to noise, high temperatures and mechanical vibrations. Risk factors which are typical of predominantly female work, like cleaning, such as low intensity but repetitive gestures, prolonged static postures, and fast work rhythms, are often not taken into account in our understanding of occupational health and safety (Ibid). As a result, little data on the risks that characterise female work is being produced, and the strains and dangers associated with traditionally female work have long gone unrecognised (Andrezejewski 2017). In outsourced cleaning in particular, the prevalence of part-time contracts and the fragmentation of work across different jobs and sites further invisibilise the health problems cleaners develop over time. LaVoz was frustrated with the tendency to underestimate the musculo-skeletal disorders and other health problems caused by cleaning work:

> In the cleaning sphere, we've got very little health support, the chemicals are toxic, some people develop cancer with time. Our vertebrae are giving away. There should be laws that recognise when we've got a certain type of illness which for them isn't important. A condition affecting your neck or vertebrae is very important because it gives you very strong pain. Only those who have experienced it know that. They can't put themselves in our place. When you've got a neck problem you get headaches, throw up, you feel discomfort, you feel pain in your body… You end up very limited, you know. But we've got to go to work like that, to be able to earn money.[113]

The misunderstanding of the health hazards involved in cleaning work can be considered as in part a result of gendered conceptions of 'work' and 'workers' (Wolkowitz 2006). Cleaning is constructed as women's work and therefore not 'real work'. As a traditionally domestic

[113] LaVoz, office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish

activity that is seen as the natural attribute of women, cleaning is assumed to be necessarily easy and 'safe' (Williams 1999, Andrzejewski 2017).

6.2.3 *(Lack of) rest, recovery and redress*

Many significant health conditions and injuries could be easily prevented with rest and recovery. However, we have seen how intense work rhythms and the need to work long hours to make ends meet on low pay, impede cleaners having adequate rest. Additionally, many have difficulties taking sick leave. As seen in the previous, when off sick, most cleaners only receive Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), the legal minimum amounting to £96 per week, after four consecutive days of illness. Many do not meet to minimum threshold of contracted hours to qualify for SSP, as cumulated hours across different jobs are not taken into account. Participants who had to take periods of sick leave during which they relied on SSP reported experiencing severe financial precarity, struggling to cover basic costs of living. For example, Speranza said:

> I mean, I was off a couple of years back with… I had my appendice out and I was out for about three months! And I was on statutory pay and I struggled on statutory pay because obviously you're not getting what you're supposed to be getting and at the end of the day, with that little money you don't know what to pay first! You don't know whether to pay rent, whether to pay the bills, whether to pay food, or whatever…[114]

Thus, many participants reported avoiding taking time off work when sick or injured, as they could not afford to lose pay or feared being dismissed. Lack of rest can result in further deterioration of health conditions. In the words of Guillem: "A lot of [cleaners] have health conditions, but they are not allowed to recover, because they don't want to lose wages. This means that an injury that demands rest never gets healed. They then develop some kind of chronic injury."[115]

Avenues of redress for harm at work are also limited. Employees have no right of civil action against employers for breach of statutory duties in relation to health and safety legislation: the responsibility for enforcing health and safety laws lies with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). However, decades of funding cuts have significantly undermined the

[114] Speranza, cleaner at the Royal Parks
[115] Guillem, former trade union organiser at IWGB

HSE's capacity to ensure workers are adequately protected: between 2010 and 2019, there was a 38% decline in the number of workplace inspections and a 73% decline in the number of prosecutions (James 2021). As employees cannot enforce health safety laws themselves, they can only sue their employer for compensation for an injury that has already taken place. Yet free legal representation for a personal injury case is difficult to obtain: it an area of law that is not covered by Legal Aid and on which most trade unions do not have the resources or expertise to advise or represent. Additionally, compensation in personal injury litigation is more likely to be awarded in cases of sudden, one-off accidents rather than diseases that develop over time (Wolkowitz 2006). This is evident in the high standard of proof, as well as the requirement, under English tort law, that an employee proves that the employer's negligence and breach of health and safety legislation *caused* the work-related injury (Bell 2013). Yet causation is difficult to establish where the condition has evolved over time and is the effect of various interrelated factors (Messing et al 1993, Wolkowitz 2006).

6.2.4 *Precarity kills: cleaners' exposure to Covid-19*

Precarity can be a matter of life or death. In 2009, the World Health Organisation published a report revealing that the difference in life expectancy between Glasgow's wealthiest and most deprived inhabitants was of 28 years (Brygo 2010). Certain populations' disproportionate exposure to risks of illness and premature death became evident during the covid-19 pandemic. Early on, it was revealed that poor, ethnic minority workers were more likely to contract coronavirus. In April 2020, more than one third of critically ill patients in hospitals were from a minority ethnic background, when they constituted only 14% of the population of England and Wales (Croxford 2020). More likely to be employed in low paid, 'essential' jobs – such as transport staff, health care assistants, hospital cleaners, supermarket cashiers – they were disproportionately exposed to the virus.

Cleaners were exposed to significant risks during the pandemic, being sent to the frontline without sufficient equipment or training. This is illustrated by the treatment of SOAS cleaning staff on the part of university management. Prior to the closure of the campus, reports from SOAS cleaners and other university staff revealed that some of the cleaners had been sent to clean rooms potentially contaminated by Covid-19 without being warned of the risk or being issued adequate PPE, before being given 14 days' leave (Anon

2020, Unison 2020). The failure to forewarn the cleaners of the risk of contamination appears discriminatory, as reports indicate that this was known to the school and students who had attended class in that room had been warned. Such negligent treatment of cleaners by employers during the pandemic had tragic outcomes, as shown by the death of Emmanuel Gomes, a night cleaner at the Ministry of Justice (Shenker 2020, Busby 2020). After lockdown measures were first announced on 25 March 2020, Emanuel was instructed to attend work as normal, and continued to board the tube every day to the Ministry of Justice to clean empty offices and unused toilets, as the civil servants usually working the building were sheltering at home. He soon developed Covid-19 symptoms but forced himself to continue going to work, as he was only entitled to SSP and could not afford to take time off. He passed away on the evening of 23 April, having gone to work every day throughout his illness. Emmanuel and his colleagues had previously asked their employer for occupational sick pay and complained about the lack of appropriate PPE and social distancing measures, but were rejected (Ibid). Whilst the fatal implications of precarity are generally deferred and imperceptible as a result of the long-term, cumulative effect of various forms of hardship, Emmanuel's story is a striking example of precarity directly killing, clearly linking the cause to its effect.

As the coronavirus crisis hit, many cleaners faced either of two very insecure situations: losing their job and struggling to pay rent and support their family or being forced to go to work every day and risk contracting the virus. With the closure of office buildings during lockdown, there was reduced demand for cleaning. Whilst some cleaners were furloughed under the government's Job Retention Scheme, many employers chose to make their cleaners redundant instead of waiting to receive government furlough payments (Clarke 2020, Andersson 2020). Cleaners whose workplaces remained open reported facing unnecessary risks, commuting every day to clean empty offices, being forced to change in small, crowded rooms and lacking appropriate PPE. Interviews with participants revealed that at both UCL and LSE, the cleaners were the last among university staff to be told they could stay at home. For over a week after lockdown measures were announced and the campuses were closed to students, the cleaners had to commute every day to clean empty buildings without being issued guidelines. Marga, a cleaner at a primary school in South London, told me:

> All the 27 cleaners would go to work whilst the school was closed. You know that only 3 or 5 pupils would come, there were only three classrooms to clean and they would make us all go for nothing. We had really bad face masks, we didn't have any gloves, so there wasn't sufficient protection. […] And they did a rota so that we didn't all have to go for nothing because each time someone left their house they would be exposing themselves to get the virus. Leaving home, going to work to do nothing, just because they obliged you to do it otherwise you wouldn't get paid.[116]

For many cleaners, the risks and extreme precarity endured during the pandemic, as well as the greater public awareness of the importance of their work, were a motivation to mobilise to demand occupational sick pay and improved terms and conditions. The cleaners' narratives show that experiencing staff cuts, reduced hours, and threats of redundancy because of changes in demand for cleaning services incited many to resist and organise against those restructuring measures. Perhaps the fact that their classification as 'essential workers' (Stevano et al 2020) mostly failed to translate into increased wages also generated anger and prompted many cleaners to realise that they would not simply be rewarded for their good work but needed to organise collectively. Cleaners' experiences of collective mobilisation will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

6.3 Precarity and mental health

6.3.1 Work-related anxiety

A workshop I attended at UVW's offices in November 2019 revealed the psychological challenges many cleaners experience. 'Anxiety works in cycles. Some events or thoughts will trigger anxious predictions, and we imagine the worst-case scenario' said the therapist running the workshops. She asked the group to share recurrent triggers for feelings of anxiety. 'Receiving WhatsApp messages from my supervisor', 'Criticisms for not speaking English' 'The thought of having to get up and go to work the next day', 'The fear of not being able to pay rent', were among the triggers mentioned by participants.

Early on during my experience at UVW, I noted the prevalence of mental distress among the people I worked with. Work, specifically, was a significant source of anxiety for many participants. Never-ending demands and criticism on the part of managers, encroachment of working hours on private life, well as apprehension for the coming day

[116] Translated from Spanish

were common stress factors. Many mentioned feeling that they had to defend themselves against constant accusations of incompetence and criticisms for their low level of English, attacking their sense of capability. For example, Justine said:

> Since I left [company name], I am a lot more relaxed. The most important thing was to be able to sleep and to look after my body. Health is very important. Because with everything going on [excessive workloads, abusive managers, disciplinary meetings], I was not able to sleep. Only about 2 or 3 hours. And throughout the rest of the night, I would be thinking and thinking… "What is going to happen tomorrow? What will they accuse me of? How can I defend myself? Why did she say this?" It was a psychological challenge. […] There was a time when the night supervisor, who finished her shift at 11pm, would always call me at 11pm to tell me that on the next day I would have to do something because she did not have the time to do it. There was always a list of tasks to do.[117]

It was not uncommon for members to take prolonged periods of sick leave due to work-related stress. Some experienced incapacitating levels of anxiety, preventing them from attending workplace meetings, answering phone calls, or leaving their home. A few also confessed having suicidal thoughts - in those situations, it was common practice for caseworkers to refer members to an organisation that provided free psychological support to Spanish speakers.

6.3.2 Status discord, low self-esteem and psychological challenges associated with being a racialised migrant

Experiences at work also shaped participants' self-concept. Work permeates our subjectivity, defines our identity, and shapes our sense of our own worth (Gabriel 2005). At the workshop, when the therapist asked participants to express their feelings and beliefs about themselves, adjectives such as *stagnant*, *stuck,* and *useless* were uttered across the room. Many shared experiences of what the therapist called 'existential anxiety': feelings of angst about the future, life's meaning and one's own purpose in life. This was bolstered by a sense of frustration at being unable to make plans, fulfil aspirations, progress, and find a place in society. This was especially the case for participants who had a preconception of London as a city that offered many opportunities for upward social mobility, and whose hope that cleaning would be a mere steppingstone towards more lucrative and socially valued work was crushed. 'Before coming to London, I thought that there would be more opportunities

[117] Justine, former cleaner at a large media company, translated from Spanish

for Spanish speakers' said one woman attending the workshop. 'But the only job we can do here is cleaning. There is no other profession available for us'. Standing's notion of 'status discord', the sentiment experienced by individuals with a high level of education who are forced to work in jobs that do not correspond to their qualifications (Standing 2011: 11), also resonates strongly with participants' experiences. Some felt that being a cleaner conflicted with their sense of identity or were angered to see that their identity was being reduced to their job title. For example, Katitus said: "One day someone told me: 'you are cleaner'. I said: 'No, I am [Katitus]. "Cleaner" is the job I do. Because what I do is not who I am. I am [Katitus]'".[118]

Work-related anxiety and status discord were compounded with the psychological challenges associated with being a migrant. Participants who had been undocumented in the past reported that deportability had been a significant source of mental distress. For example, JD was forced to work illegally and recounted living in fear of being reported to the Home Office: 'Up until we obtained political asylum, we had to work clandestinely. This was very difficult […] We had to work with that fear. So, we were working, but always alert in case they came to look for us.'[119] Similarly, fear of deportation and its wider implications for her son prevented Celia from reporting her landlord's sexually predatory behaviour: 'But I wouldn't make a big fuss because I was scared of the police. I was really scared that they would deport me and then the future of my son would be done, you know? Because my son wouldn't have gone to uni in Bolivia if I had stayed there. There was no way.'[120] As discussed in Chapter Four, some participants also suffered from the psychological effects of deportability despite being legally resident, as the experience of social exclusion produced a general sense of disenfranchisement and of constantly being on the verge of illegality.

Many felt frustrated at not being able to express themselves in English with ease, undermining their ability to defend themselves when they felt wronged or disrespected. Some regretted having kept quiet in situations where they would normally have stood up for themselves. Chelita, who identified as a fierce and assertive person, recalled feeling sad and angry when she was unable to defend her son who was being discriminated against by

[118] Katitus, former cleaner at government buildings, translated from Spanish
[119] JD, cleaner in the offices of a TV channel in Central London, translated from Spanish
[120] Celia, former cleaner and UVW activist

teachers at school.[121] We therefore see how the vulnerabilities experienced as a migrant can generate a sentiment of dissonance with one's sense of identity.

Participants also suffered psychologically from the pressures of migrant life and the imperative to earn money. Their own sense of success or failure in relation to their migration project was central to their well-being and satisfaction with their lives. For many, their experiences in London failed to live up to their initial hopes for a lucrative, exciting life, and the sentiment that their migration goals were unfulfilled caused significant suffering. This gave rise to profound disappointment and nostalgia for the life they once had in their previous country of residence. This is illustrated by Johnny's account:

> [In London] We earn more money, but it's relative because life is very expensive here. To give you an example, in Barcelona we paid £500 a month to rent an apartment. Here we are paying £1,500. It's a big difference, for a flat that is a lot smaller. Flats here are very small. And on top of that you have to pay for everything, even to have a TV you need to pay. It's not like that in Spain, you just set up your TV and that's it. Here you earn more money but everything you earn gets spent.[122]

The family and emotional costs of migration were another source of distress for participants who felt that their migration project had failed. For some, the financial benefits derived from living in London did not outweigh the costs of prolonged separation from their loved ones. After living in the UK for over 12 years, Antonio planned to return to Ecuador. He regretted losing the opportunity to have a closer relationship with his children and grandchildren in Ecuador, feeling that the years spent in London were a loss personally:

> My three daughters, but one got married. And she just had a baby, a little girl. So, I want to go and meet her. I need to be close to my family. On 23 November she will turn 2 months old. And her mother will become a sociologist. My other daughter is a teacher in English and French. And the other one is a missionary and will become a social worker, helping children, the elderly. […] I lost the chance to see them grow up, I lost a lot of things. I helped them financially in their studies, I helped my mother as well, but she died and now I am by myself. […] Now I have nothing but at least I am not staying here.[123]

6.3.3 Social isolation and stigma

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[121] Chelita, cleaner at a large luxury store in Central London, translated from Spanish
[122] Johnny, cleaner at a pharmacy chain in Central London, translated from Spanish
[123] Antonio, former cleaner at a warehouse

The social isolation and stigma experienced as cleaners was central to participants' accounts. In her study of domestic work, Anderson (2000) highlighted that cleaning has long been constructed as degrading, 'dirty work'. Migrant workers have actively been recruited for jobs that are considered too dirty and humiliating for locals. Cleaners, most of whom are BME workers with a migrant background, carry that stigma and are kept hidden from the view of the users of the spaces they clean. The construction of cleaning as nightwork, mostly carried out outside standard daytime working hours, highlights this stigmatisation of cleaning as dirty work, which should not be visible to daytime visitors. This stigma also manifests in managers' instructions aimed at minimising cleaners' visibility and limiting their use of common areas. Three BME cleaners at the LSE denounced instructions to rapidly leave the campus at the end of their shift and to avoid standing in the university's main entrance. In contrast, students, professors, and visitors routinely spend time in the main hall for as long as they wish. One of the cleaners said:

> We could not even go to some of the levels. It was very bad, they would tell you "Don't sit there, you can't sit there because you are a contractor" […] We were branded as the cleaners, we were so "filthy" so we couldn't sit in certain areas, we couldn't stand in certain areas and speak because they did not want to see us in those areas.[124]

LSE cleaners were also banned from eating lunch at the same canteen as students and other staff members unless they took off their uniforms and changed, as shown in a video shot by the UVW General Secretary and shared on social media.[125] This suggests that the sight of cleaners - most of whom are black, of Afro-Caribbean origin – spending time in the canteen or entrance hall in their uniforms conflicted with the image of a clean, modern and dynamic institution that the LSE seeks to project.

Cleaners are requested to be invisible and minimise their social interactions at their workplaces. Crossing those boundaries and becoming visible can be severely penalised. Throughout my experience working at UVW, it was not uncommon to see members being disciplined for having conversations with the white-collar workers in the offices they cleaned. Such restrictions generate an ingrained sense of not belonging in their workplaces, resonating with Florence Aubenas' account:

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[124] Anonymised interviewee

[125] https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=1182001361868101&external_log_id=20898e13-18b3-4ed1-a2e5-22f3a621148d&q=UVW%20discrimination%20LSE

> On the sites where I had worked, I had never seen any of us buy sweets or drinks from the vending machine. It is not forbidden to do so. It is unthinkable. […] We never buy anything. Without it being said, we know that the vending machine is not for us, it belongs to a world of work to which we do not have access, where one can pick up the phone when it is ringing and where one does not need to calculate the time needed to go to the toilet.
> (Aubenas 2010: 203, *Le Quai de Ouisterham*, translated from French)

The alienation experienced by some participants also derived from a sense of being at the lowest position within their workplace. Experiences of precarity can have a relative dimension, derived from the position occupied in a particular social space. As seen in Chapter Five, Bourdieu's (1993: 4) notion of 'positional suffering' denotes the specific distress experienced when one occupies the lowest position in a prestigious setting. Despite being directly employed by the university, under relatively good terms and conditions following the successful 2017 campaign against outsourcing (Chakrabortty 2017), the alienating feeling of being second class employees was particularly acute among the cleaners at the LSE, an elitist, top university with a multi-million-pound budget (Jones 2017). Justine's account of her employer organisation's Christmas party also provides an illuminating example of this sense of alienation:

> At Christmas time we got a letter informing us that there would be a reunion. As they always told us that we were all part of the same [company name] family, I thought that we would be invited to the Christmas party as usual. But actually, the cleaners were only going to celebrate among themselves in a meeting room. I thought: "they are dreaming!! I will never go to this party. They are suggesting that after going to parties our former employer organised, you are going to put me in a meeting room. And as I am cleaner, if a toilet gets blocked, I will have to leave my food and go and unblock it. No, I am not going". […] How could I accept this? At this party, those working in catering had to serve the food. The cleaners had to clean up after the party. The security had to help arrange the tables. This was not a party for us! So, I didn't go.

Cleaners' sense of stigma was also informed by experiences of racism. Participants had varied experiences of prejudice, demonstrating the divisions within the migrant cleaning sector. Nida, a white hospital cleaner from Lithuania, related her experiences of being looked down on at work to her uniform, which revealed that she was employed by a cleaning contractor rather than the NHS, and therefore not a 'proper' healthcare worker. Her uniform was an indicator of her status at the bottom of the economic and social hierarchy within the hospital – the disrespect it generated therefore appears to stem from a form of class contempt. In contrast, Latin Americans cleaners mostly related the various

forms of disrespect and hostility they experienced to their poor English language skills and limited knowledge of existing systems, laws, and regulations in the UK, as well as associated perceptions of them as uneducated, unintelligent, or lacking in will power. Black, Afro-Caribbean cleaners were those for whom issues of racism were the most prominent, and who named them as such in their interviews. Four of them reported being looked at as if they were the 'dirt [they] clean' and feeling that they should remain hidden from the view of the (mostly white) users of the spaces where they worked. In so doing, they made clear references to the colour of their skin, and the racist notion that they look dirty. Thus, it was mostly black participants who explicitly connected experiences of stigma and disrespect to their race. This is unsurprising given the UK's colonial past: one of the legacies of the quasi-absolute colonisation of Africa and the Caribbean and the extensive enslavement of black people has been an entrenched racialisation and pervasive racist cultural representations of black people in former colonial powers (Gilroy 2002).

6.3.4 Coping mechanisms

Despite their anxiety-inducing lives, participants displayed a range of strategies to psychologically navigate difficulties, including resilience, community building, and conscientisation. Used by Cindi Katz (2001) to denote strategies of endurance adopted to facilitate everyday life without changing the circumstances that make it difficult, the concept of resilience captures the ways participants psychologically adapted to challenging situations. Many accepted the hardship they endured as a normal and inevitable part of life. For example, Rodrigo's resigned outlook when asked about his work, evident in comments such as 'one has to work' and 'it is what it is'[126], illustrates how participants often settled themselves with difficult experiences. Another strategy displayed by participants involved simply *seguir adelante* (moving on), and not allowing themselves to dwell on their misfortunes. For example, Chelita told me:

> I am a single mum, I can't give myself the luxury of feeling down. I've got a young child. So, the older one who is 16 years old, he's fine, he grown up and everything. But the little one depends on me, so I have felt vulnerable [during the Covid-19 lockdowns], I have felt quite stressed despite being at home, for me it was terrible. Not being able to leave the house, the children feeling anxious, with me at

[126] Rodrigo, cleaner at a school in South London, translated from Spanish

> home all day, it was terrible! But I repeat: I didn't have the luxury of feeling down. They totally depend on me and I've got to cope with everything: economically, at home, with the food and everything.[127]

Building social connections and engaging with the community were key to manage hardship. Some participants reported feeling enriched by the individuals they met and the friendships they formed, despite their experience in London failing to live up to their expectations of accumulating financial capital. For example, Antonio told me: 'What I gained is friendships, experiences, a bit of knowledge. And this is enriching. And other people: You, [Violeta, Natalia…] With all of you I could open up, and exchange. Other people have helped me'.[128] Others described joining a trade union and taking part in workplace campaigns as positive, enlightening experiences that amounted to a turning point in their personal development. Many felt that they had developed friendships, learnt about themselves and the world and made a meaningful contribution to society through trade union activism. For example, Rosa expressed her joy and pride for having built friendships and obtained a pay rise after a successful trade union campaign at her former workplace: 'Each time I go [to the union's offices] I… I just got a text from [Violeta] asking how I was, and you know, I feel like people miss me and care about me. I feel that my experience here has not been totally unsuccessful. I've achieved something with the union.' [129]

Being part of a community also enabled participants to build a sense of pride in relation to their work and their identity as migrant cleaners. For example, in relation to Latin Americans living in London, LaVoz said:

> We are very intelligent, very hard working, and very capable people […] they should give us the place we deserve. Latin America has given a lot, Colombians here, they are very hard-working people, they are employers paying contributions. Do you understand? There are Venezuelans who are employers, they are paying contributions. And I think that we deserve not to be invisible but to be visible![130]

Fighting common conceptions of cleaning as low value and low skilled work, they felt proud of doing work that required expertise and was essential for other activities to take place. Katitus told me:

> At the moment I am doing cleaning. With pride because it is dignified work. I don't feel offended. I feel proud to do dignified work that many idiots cannot do, because my work is very good. People think

[127] Chelita, cleaner at a large luxury store, translated from Spanish
[128] Antonio, former cleaner at a warehouse and a famous tourist attraction in London, translated from Spanish
[129] Rosa, former cleaner at a large luxury store, translated from Spanish
[130] Mercy, former cleaner in offices in Central London, translated from Spanish

> that cleaning work is not very difficult, but it's not true. If you are not organised, if you don't think about how to do it well, you can't do it properly.[131]

Conscientisation also allowed many to free themselves from a sense of personal responsibility for the hardship they experienced. Participants at the mental health workshop were told that a way to fight feelings of anxiety was to transform their self-concept by attributing social causes, rather than their own individual failures, to their unhappiness. Indeed, feelings of failure and low self-esteem are in part constituted by the belief that one is personally responsible for one's misery (Fisher 2014). As Freire (1970) argued, the self-image of the oppressed is shaped by internalised structures of domination. Thus, emancipation necessitates an analysis of the causes of situations of oppression. As Bourdieu (1993: 639) put it:

> Producing awareness of these mechanisms that make life painful, even unliveable, does not neutralise them; bringing contradictions to light does not resolve them. But […] one has to acknowledge the effect it can have in allowing those who suffer to find out that their suffering can be imputed to social causes and thus to feel exonerated'.

In that process, one names the responsible for their misfortune, experiences are given political meaning and suffering is transformed into anger, which then carries potential for action and change. This can be illustrated by the words of LaVoz, blaming employers and 'the system' for the situation of migrant cleaners, making a case for social change:

> This system is badly made. It's taking away opportunities for people to grow, to gain knowledge, to adapt themselves to the good things that this country can give them. This is where violence, death comes from. This is why there is radicalism, protests, xenophobia. Exactly because of this! Because they treat us like animals with leprosy! […] Employment law should be reformed. Because employment law is very limited, there are very few employment protections. Employers are very abusive, they do whatever they want with all employees, not only with migrants. They do it with cleaners who are from London as well. We need to be aware of the fact that all those who work as cleaners, yes, the majority is from abroad, but there are also English cleaners. So, I think it would be fair if Labour reforms were more in favour of employees and vulnerable people, because we are very vulnerable. We have very few opportunities, and the government should focus more on this type of situation. [132]

The transformative power of community and union organising and the importance of conscientisation for resistance to materialise will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

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[131] Katitus, former cleaner at government buildings, translated from Spanish

[132] LaVoz, office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish

Others felt settled and content with their lives in London. Being able to live off their own work and cover expenses with their salary generated a sense of pride. Some felt happy to have achieved a sufficient level of material comfort, despite being aware that their quality of life remained low relative to British standards. This can be illustrated by the account Marga, who is originally from Cuba:

> I manage with the money I earn. Of course, I am not by myself, I've got my partner, and as he is working 9.5 hours, he works more and he earns more. And with our two salaries, and my son who lives here as well helps with house expenses. So, we are fine. We've got a good enough quality of life. Maybe someone who was born here, who grew up here, of course if I told them what I earn, they would think it's nothing. But for us, who come from a country where we didn't have anything, I do feel rich in this country to be honest. With what we earn, I feel wealthy. If I've got a pair of shoes worn down, I can buy myself another pair. Of course, it won't be a £100 pair. It the TV breaks down; I can buy myself a TV. I am relaxed in that respect. What I need is to be healthy and to keep working.[133]

As noted in Chapter Four, migration to London was driven in part by concerns and ambitions for/of participants' children. Some participants' sense of success and ambition was fulfilled vicariously, through their children's achievements. Marga explained that she did not feel frustrated about her loss of social status since she left Cuba, where she worked as a nurse. She had no desire to study or to move to a job other than cleaning. Her sense of pride derived from her sons' achievements in their studies and in their carriers:

> I've become lazy. I've got used to it. I am happy to see my sons, they're professionals, they're moving forward. […] I've been very happy. Very happy to live here, and to have managed that my sons go to university. With the situation now with jobs. My younger son graduated in June last year, and in September he already had a job. This is a success, because how many people have lost their jobs right now? So, I am very happy with this. I feel very secure.[134]

Lucia also said: "There is another thing I am very proud of: the way my children developed in this country. […] How they found their path. They adapted."[135] For those participants, the migration project thus amounted to a intergenerational sacrifice that bore fruit.

Finally, some participants coped with the hardship they experienced in London by making plans to return to their country of origin, where they hoped to enjoy a better quality of life. Some were in the process of building a house in their home country and looked

[133] M. cleaner at a South London primary school, translated from Spanish
[134] Ibid
[135] Lucia, former cleaner in an office building in London, translated from Spanish

forward to living a relaxing life, enjoying a level of material comfort they did not have in London. For example, Woman for Truth said:

> Well, yes Jamaica. Going back home would be my real goal. You know, I would like to put myself in the sun, I would like to plant a few peppers… You know, something I can do around my house, I think that would be a plus for me. It would make me more happy, and then I can relax […] Because I have been building a house over the years.[136]

Returning with improved resources, having supported family members, involved regaining status and being compensated for many years of hard work.

However, for some participants, returning home was more of an emergency response to the difficulties experienced in London rather than the fruit of a long-term project. Some were forced to return to their home countries due to sudden changes in their housing or employment situation. For example, Antonio decided to return to Ecuador because of the extreme precarity after he suffered an accident at work, lost his job and income and became homeless as a result. He abandoned his migration plans, and told me he felt he had wasted his time in London, working too many hours whilst failing to build up savings:

> I have to leave. I can't be a slave to the system. To achieve what? When I die, I won't take anything with me. But well, as I have to live, I need money. And money is necessary and very important. But not the most important. […] I am leaving this place on Thursday. I feel tired, I feel bad. Since August, for the past four months, I've been with crutches, without money, spending on food, on bus pass, on medicine. No one paid for my medicine.[137]

Researchers have highlighted the stigma and sense of failure experienced by migrants who return empty handed to their home country against their will. Schuster and Majidi (2015) revealed how, in migrant sending countries particularly, returning without improved resources challenges expectations of migration projects as opportunities for progress and prosperity, which can lead to rejection from family and communities. In these circumstances, returnees may suffer from a particular sense of failure and shame as a result of the discrepancy between social expectations and the reality of their migration experience.

[136] Woman for Truth, former cleaner at a university in Central London
[137] Antonio, former cleaner at a warehouse and a famous tourist attraction in London, translated from Spanish

6.4 Precarity and social reproduction

Precarity has significant repercussions on participants' personal and family life. Social reproduction theory highlights how reduced wages forces many to work more hours to be able to support themselves, squeezing the time available for looking after themselves and their loved ones (Fraser 2017). This is evident in participants' accounts: as their lives were taken over by work, they had limited capacity to carry out essential activities such as housework and childcare. For example, Justine said:

> I had to get up at 5am or 4:40am and take several buses to get to work. Then, leaving work and commuting back home at 5pm is awful. There is very little time left for buying food, taking children to school, looking after them well. And when I did have time to do other things, I wasn't really present, I was more like a zombie. I was always tired.[138]

For many, carrying out reproductive work required strict organisation, optimising the time needed for each activity. This is illustrated by Blackberry's account of how he planned his housework on his days off, preparing food for the coming week in advance:

> There is no free time, my friend. No free time at all. You are working from 6 to 6, Monday to Friday. Monday to Friday from 6 to 6 I am at the [university]. I spend more time at [the university] than I spend in my home. Because I am only there on Saturdays and Sundays. Saturday is to do my cleaning, to clean my uniform and to do my groceries. On Sunday it is to cook my lunch and my dinner for 6 days, from Monday to Friday. That's it![139]

For some, subjection to work was so grinding that it prevented them from meeting basic physical needs such as eating or sleeping. This is illustrated by Rosa's account, where she reports having to eat on the bus between her shifts on her workdays: 'Why work so many hours, spend all day on the street, not eating properly, not resting well? […] There is no time. You have to eat something on the bus very quickly, on your way to your other job.'[140]

As noted earlier, sleep deprivation was a recurrent grievance among participants. Chelita's account illustrates how sleep can become an obsession, leading some to meticulously calculate, on a daily basis, how many hours of sleep can be carved out of work and other daily obligations, and jump on the slightest opportunity to catch up on sleep:

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[138] Justine, former cleaner at a large media company, translated from Spanish
[139] Blackberry, cleaner at a university in Central London
[140] Rosa, cleaner at a luxury store, translated from Spanish

> But when I got home, I would find the two children awake. The older one hadn't eaten and the little one either. At 11pm, after giving them something to eat, putting them to bed, sometimes it would be 1am! And then at 3:30am I had to be awake! When I was lucky, I slept three hours. If not, two hours and a half. Same thing on the next day, and the day after, a routine and then I got to a point where I couldn't anymore. Because sometimes the little one wouldn't sleep! He slept… sometimes one hour. I would take advantage of that because I could sleep with him…[141]

Because lack of time for rest, some participants recounted being on some occasions stretched to a breaking point, being unable to function. Chelita reported once falling asleep on the toilet at work as well as part of her body being paralysed due to stress and exhaustion, having to take time off work as a result.[142] Sabine also reported once losing memory and getting lost on her way home due to sleep deprivation:

> Because from working so much and sleeping so little, I got ill. But in a radical way! I lost memory […]. I got lost in London for 2 full days. I didn't know what my name was, where I lived, I didn't know anything […] I just lost memory! I was going to work, but I didn't make it to my other job because I had forgotten that I needed to go and work there. I hadn't only forgotten that I had to go to work, I'd forgotten where I lived. I went I don't know where, outside London. I took a random bus, I got shouted at because I hadn't validated my card. I walked and walked, kilometres and kilometres. […] So, the doctor told me: "You disconnected. You brain disconnected because you are not sleeping. You need to sleep! Be careful because you know the people you see on the street who look mad. They are people who have worked too much, and who lost memory. Those mad people on the street: that's you! It could be whoever, whoever's worked too much and had a burn out! You've worked too much; you haven't had time to rest and your brain disconnected."[143]

We therefore see the contradiction inherent in extreme forms of capitalist exploitation: by exhausting workers' capacity to sustain themselves and be rested and ready for another day at work, it threatens a very pre-condition for capitalist production (Fraser 2017).

Time poverty had significant consequences on participants' family relationships and social connections. Many struggled to see their family or partners on the day-to-day and rarely spent quality time or had meaningful interactions with them. This was exacerbated by working anti-social hours. For example, when asked about whether she had time to see her son and partner, Tamara said:

> Well, during the week I don't see them. I arrive after 12am and he's [my son] already sleeping. So yes, I see him asleep on the mattress. But nothing more. And in the morning when I leave, because I leave early, I see him asleep on the mattress. […] So, obviously, I've got very little time for him. So, I

[141] Chelita, cleaner at a luxury store, translated from Spanish
[142] Ibid
[143] Sabine, cleaner at a recording studio, translated from French

> practically don't see him. And same with my partner. We see each other at night when I arrive. Most of the time he is asleep. And in the morning, he leaves before me because he leaves at 3:30am. So, we see each other on Saturdays and Sundays. When we are at home, either I cook or he does, we try to coordinate to have lunch together, and the rest of the time we are lying in bed watching TV, or sleeping, and that's it.[144]

Time poverty and the squeezing of the capacity for social reproductive activities also affected parenting. Seven participants were single mothers with young children when they arrived in London. All struggled to balance working long, anti-social hours with child-care responsibilities. Some reported being forced to bring their children to work, or to leave them alone at home several hours every day. As a result, some reported feeling guilty for being 'a bad mother', failing to provide their children with the right kind of upbringing. For example, Sabine said:

> We lived in a very small flat, and we were never there. Because when we started working, we weren't just working 2, or 3 or 5 hours, but a lot of hours! 15 hours, 17 hours a day. [My son] was having a very hard time, poor boy […] Now [my son] does everything by himself. Sometimes I take a look [at his homework], but now he does everything himself. He learnt! Here he became responsible. He is not waiting for his mother to do things for him. He became responsible for going to school by himself, getting up in the morning, taking a shower, making breakfast – he does everything by himself. It's too early for him. But it was unavoidable. But if people here had found out that [my son] was by himself before he turned 11, I would be in prison and he would be in a special home […] You are not allowed to leave a child by himself. Not before a certain age. What I've done when he was 8 up to when he was 11, I've done it all wrong. People would have called the social services. But I couldn't do it any other way.[145]

Some respondents described how these various forms of pressure could generate tension in their relationship with their children. For example, Chelita related how lack of time, exhaustion and stress caused her to lose patience and suddenly explode with unwarranted anger:

> I would arrive home around 10am feeling very sleepy. I got to a point where I would get annoyed at everything. I would spring. Of course, because I almost didn't sleep at all! I would flip out, for whatever reasons, sparks were coming out. I would get annoyed at my son. One day my son told me: 'But what did I do to you? Why are you angry?'. This was when I reacted and thought: 'this can't go on'.[146]

The strain on the participants' relationship with their children could have disastrous consequences. For example, LaVoz told me that her daughter was taken into care after she was reported to the social services for having punished her physically at a time when she

[144] Tamara office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish
[145] Sabine, cleaner at a recording studio, translated from French
[146] Chelita, cleaner at a large luxury store, translated from Spanish

was experiencing significant stress because of her work and living situation. We thus see the far-reaching repercussions of precarity and the destructive impact it can have on families.

General time poverty, as well unsocial working hours, meant that participants felt socially isolated. Many felt out of step with the rest of the world, being unable to engage in social activities or initiate projects outside work. Some wished to learn English but could only find evening classes, which clashed with their evening shifts, or were too exhausted to properly engage during classes. The unavailability of certain services, which are designed to cater for individuals who work standard daytime hours, was another problem mentioned. For example, Chelita complained of the lack of evening nurseries at her child's school:

> It's difficult, I don't know how other people do it! No one thinks about those who work early in the morning. Or the people who work in the evening. There are no nurseries at these hours! [...] In the evening. There are no nurseries! And what about the mothers who work at those hours? What do we do? You've got to pay someone![147]

Loneliness was a prevalent grievance in participants' accounts. Time poverty prevented participants from forming social bonds and building families in London, with many reporting having few or no friends at all due to working long, anti-social hours, or being too exhausted to go out during their free time. Lack of social connection was in turn a driver of precarity: as many were not able to build social capital, they had no supportive relationships to draw on in times of need. Throughout my fieldwork research, accounts of the most extreme experiences of precarity were given by individuals who lacked a support network in London at the time. For example, Antonio, who did not have the opportunity to develop meaningful friendships during his stay in London, was forced to sleep in UVW's offices for several weeks when he was injured, lost his income and became homeless.[148] Loneliness may also have been a factor in the death of Emmanuel Gomes', who lived apart from his family and had no one to support him and take him to the hospital when he contracted covid-19 and became seriously ill (Shenker 2020).

Unsurprisingly, time poverty also significantly undermined participants' ability to make plans. During interviews, participants shared their projects for the future. These included studying, building a house in their country of origin, learning English, starting a business, or learning a new job. However, many deplored lacking time, energy, and

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[147] Ibid

[148] Antonio, former cleaner at a famous tourist attraction in London, translated from Spanish.

headspace to embark on new projects, which did not materialise and often remained a distant dream. In the words of Katitus:

> Many times, people say: 'you should arrive and study'. You can study when you've got someone to support you! But when you've got to earn your life as you can and you run from one place to another stressed, bored and depressed […], I don't think you are in a good place to learn a language […] It's not that people are lazy, it's difficult work. It's a hard job. And people don't just work, they have their own responsibilities, towards their family. And they don't have any time left to study […] And it is a country where one can learn a lot but unfortunately you start working you don't have many opportunities anymore. Because many people say: 'you should study something, get interested in something else'. But people don't understand, the work we do, it's not like you can go out and have energy to do anything else. Because you're crushed. […] There are days when, my God, I never stop. And when you get home and the only thing you want to do is to relax, eat something and go to bed. You don't have any energy to say: 'I will do this or that'. No. Because your feet are hurting, they are killing you. And that's it. It's not the kind of work that you spend sitting down, that makes you want to walk around or go to the gym. No.[149]

Participants' limited ability to build social relations due to low pay and long working hours undermined their ability to integrate in the social fabric of the city, entrenching their dependency on and identification with migrant networks. As seen in the previous Chapter, employers in the cleaning sector actively select migrants during recruitment, leading to the formation of 'niche migrant labour markets' (Hickman et al 2012: 66), where the workforce is composed predominantly of migrants of the same national origin. The fact that participants spent most of their time at work, where they interacted almost exclusively with colleagues and managers who spoke their mother tongue, meant that they had little need or opportunity to improve their English language skills. Their limited command of English in turn undermined their knowledge of existing laws, rules, and regulations, and reinforced their dependency on migrant networks to access information or support.

6.5 Precarity and housing

Potts (2020) has shown how in cities across the world, the mismatch between incomes and housing costs, with private sector rent rising faster than incomes, has led to a situation in which poorer households are unable to afford basic housing. In 2017, average rent for a bedroom in a shared house was £607, over 50% of the net minimum pay income (Potts 2020). Difficulties securing decent housing in London was central to participants'

[149] Katitus, cleaner at government offices

experiences of precarity. Almost all lived in privately rented accommodation. Due to their low salaries and the high cost of rent in London, the majority could not afford to live alone. Among the 34 cleaners interviewed, 26 were renting an individual room in shared accommodation, or had done so at some point since they moved to London. A common living arrangement many participants had was to rent a room in an apartment shared with other migrant workers, as illustrated by Antonio's account:

> A: I was also in Lindon Grove, between Peckham and Lewisham. There I was sharing with people from many different countries, from Latin America, Africa, Algeria. Some were working as cleaners, kitchen porters, in construction.
> C: What was it like?
> A: It was a house I found through someone who had told me about it. Another thing: here people take advantage, everything is very expensive. Sometimes there are up to 20 people in one house. I never lived like this, but in this last place there were 10 people.[150]

The participants who had lived in such arrangements often recounted that the atmosphere in their accommodation was cold and anonymous, with limited interactions amongst occupants. Antonio for example told me he did not have time to socialise with his nine housemates, who were busy working long hours on different schedules, and remained complete strangers to him.[151]

A common response to the unaffordability of housing is to squeeze the space (Potts 2020). Many participants reported living in over-crowded conditions, lacking privacy and space. It was not uncommon for whole families to live in a single room in a shared house. This is illustrated by LaVoz' account:

> It was a Bolivian person who was renting a flat, I don't know if he was getting benefits or anything. He lived in the living room with his two sons and his wife. He [was subletting] the master bedroom to two Dominican girls. A girl and her partner lived is one small or mid-size room. And [my children and I] lived in the other room.[152]

Some had to divide up rooms or relabel spaces in their apartments. For example, Chelita turned the living room in her former flat into an additional bedroom in order to sublet a room and save on rent:

[150] Antonio, former cleaner in a famous tourist venue in London, translated from Spanish
[151] Ibid
[152] LaVoz, office cleaner in Central London, translated from Spanish

> I didn't have enough because at that time I wasn't getting benefits yet. So, I had to sublet… That flat had a kitchen, a living room and one bedroom. I had to accommodate the living room into a bedroom, I put up a curtain, it was very cheeky let's say, and I got bunk beds – my son was above, and I would sleep at the bottom -, and I had to let the room.[153]

Similarly, Sabine and Naty recounted putting up a screen to split a studio flat into two rooms and give Sabine's son more privacy:

> S: Our flat was so small. We were renting a cupboard. The 3 of us lived in a cupboard.
> C: There was only one room?
> S: Yes, a small studio. A studio with 2 beds. One for us, and one for [my son]. We set it up as if he had his own room, using you know that thing from Ikea, that you can pull down. When we got up we would turn the light on and the light would go directly in [my son's] eyes, so we set this thing up.
> C: Because you worked in the night?
> N: We were starting work at 5am.[154]

Lack of privacy meant many did not get enough sleep and were unable to keep the spaces clean. Some reported frequently having to queue to use the kitchen, bathroom or washing machine on the weekends. Isabella even recounted often not being able to use the shower for several consecutive days due to lack of time and over-crowding:

> It was very difficult, I felt very exhausted, sometimes there were days where I couldn't even shower, because I was away working all day, and when I got back, sometimes around 9pm, the bathroom was busy. So, when someone got out, I only had time to get in and pee and I couldn't shower because someone was already waiting to use the shower, so sometimes I wouldn't be able to shower for 3 or 4 days. For me this was difficult! Because in my culture we shower every day. I was thinking: 'seriously? I don't have time to shower?' I could only go to the toilet quickly. And this impacted me a lot. It was very difficult.[155]

Because of limited space, participants lived in uncomfortable arrangements whereby they were forced to eat, sleep, and relax in one single room or sofa. For example, Rosa said:

> It's a lot of money […] My daughter's bedroom is very small, and my partner and I use the living room as a bedroom. But we don't have anywhere to relax together the three of us. When we watch TV, we have to sit on the bed. Why don't we have a living room? Here people don't have living rooms, most houses don't have living rooms. They forgot this part of the house![156]

[153] Chelita, cleaner at a luxury store in Central London, translated from Spanish
[154] Sabine and Naty, former cleaners at a recording studio in West London
[155] Isabella, former cleaner, translated from Spanish
[156] Rosa, former cleaner at a large luxury store in London, translated from Spanish

Potts (2020) has shown that the unaffordability of basic formal sector housing for low-income groups has led to the emergence of an informal rental sector. We also saw in Chapter Four that the administrative constraints – such as lack of references and employment contract, difficulties opening a bank account - faced by many early arrivals prevented them from accessing the formal housing market. The research shows that many also struggle to find housing they can afford in the formal market long after their arrival and have no option but to rely on informal markets. Indeed, most of the cleaners interviewed rented a room under an informal, precarious arrangement. This often took the form of a sublet, or of an informal rental agreement whereby the landlord required payments in cash. This is illustrated by Isabella's account:

> It was one of those houses where one person is renting the house and migrants were living in it. So, we had to pay this lady. But it was a house with only one bathroom for 10 people. […] you would just arrive a pay one or two weeks' deposit – I think it was just one week - one week's deposit and one week's rent, and that was it. And if you wanted to leave, you would just day it and that was it.[157]

Informally rented housing does not conform with existing regulations and often falls short of basic legal standards of space, privacy, and health (Potts 2020). This is illustrated by Sabine's description of her flat: 'The windows need to be changed. At the moment, it's cold and at ours it is very cold. We have to cover up the windows because wind is coming in. It's small, unhealthy, humid. […] In the bedroom the bed is as big as the room itself.'[158] Similarly, Tamara said of the rooms she visited in London: 'With this type of abuse, there are many rooms rented in horrible condition. Mattresses full of bugs that cover your body with bites, rats everywhere, old bathtubs. You have to fight to get the heating working, I see commentaries on Facebook that for example that they keep your deposit when you are moving.'[159]

Participants also reported extortionate renting practices on the part of landlords. Chelita for example was charged by her landlord a £400 fee for 'paperwork,' and was obliged to pay rent three months in advance. Renting informally also put participants at significant risk of homelessness or abuse. Celia reported once renting a room from a landlord who retained a key to each individual room in the flat and pressured tenants for transactional

[157] Isabella, former cleaner, translated from Spanish
[158] Sabine, cleaner at a recording studio, translated from French
[159] Tamara, office cleaner in Central London

sex.[160] Valentina related informally subletting a room from an acquaintance, who suddenly decided to throw her out on to the street after an argument. Three participants experienced homelessness at some point during their time in London.

The unaffordability of London housing had a significant impact on their quality of life. Most reported spending over 40% of their wages on rent. For many, paying rent was a constant source of stress, forcing them to work long hours. Sabine was compelled to work over 17 hours a day during the months that followed her arrival, with rent taking up over three quarters of her wages.[161] Some participants reported that unaffordable rent forced them to sacrifice other necessary expenditures, such as food, clothes, transport, or utility bills. For example, Isabella said:

> My son was 13 years old. So, I had to pay rent. It was weekly, and we lived in a small room when we came to live in London because before that we lived in the suburbs. So, when we came to live in London it was a very difficult change because we had to work hard to pay for a room and sometimes, I didn't have enough to eat. Before there was always someone who would give us food for free, or if I didn't enough to buy a pair of shoes, we would borrow a pair of shoes so that he could go to school, I would put on the shoes, and we would exchange them […] We got very cold because we couldn't have the heating on in that house. And we had to buy something to warm us up. [162]

The impact of housing costs on family life are widely established (Potts 2020). Many participants had first migrated to London alone, leaving behind their partners and children as they sought work and housing. Inability to find adequate housing delayed family reunification and prolonged the pain of separation.

A remedy to the mismatch between incomes and housing costs has been the provision by governments of social housing for affordable rent. Taking account of typical wages paid for low-income work, rents are set at prices that the poorer income groups can afford (Potts 2020). Indeed, rent for publicly-provided housing is considerably below the market rate – around 40% lower on average (Battiston et al 2014). Living in social housing significantly improved participants' quality of life, allowing them to work less hours and giving them a chance to pay for other essentials. Marga, who lives in social housing with her partner and children, said:

[160] Celia, former cleaner and trade union activist
[161] Sabine, cleaner at a recording studio, translated from French
[162] Isabella, former cleaner, translated from Spanish

> It's a council house. We're very lucky. Because when you've got a council house, rent is always much cheaper than with private landlords. So, we're got a quality of life that - well I see my colleagues who've got to pay expensive rent and everything. Well, it's a lot better with a council house and cheaper rent. Because we don't get benefits. We can afford to pay rent because it is cheaper.[163]

Alternatively, the payment of state benefits also enables poorer households to afford market prices for renting. Participants who received benefits reported that this additional income transformed their housing situation. Sabine for example was relieved from the fear of not being able to pay her bills: "Because I was anxious thinking that I might not be able to pay my bills. […] There were benefits? Ok, I went claim benefits. I prepared the documents for the application. […] When I applied and received benefits and saw how much I got, I thought: "Wow! Yes, that's help!". It basically pays rent. It helps."[164] When she received benefits, Chelita was able to recover some of the space she had squeezed on by subletting a room:

> Yes, 6 or 8 months later, in the end I applied for benefits, and then I could live alone with my son. I thought I could more or less move forward with the benefits we were receiving, and I told the two girls who lived with us, I told them that I wasn't going to [sublet] the room anymore, and then we managed to live the two of us together.

6.6 Life trajectories and the interconnectedness of different forms of precarity

The discussion throughout this chapter demonstrates that different forms of precarity are not self-contained, but inter-connect and accumulate. Classical sociology has shown the different social mechanisms that reproduce poverty through generations, creating situations of chronic poverty from which it is extremely difficult to escape (Bourdieu 1979). This section explores how experiences in different spheres of life can over time cumulatively feed into a downward spiral of precarity, as well as the factors that enable upward social mobility.

As seen above, many participants suffered from the effects of cleaning work on their health, generating chronic conditions that permanently affected their quality of life. Such illnesses can in turn affect individuals' employment situation and aggravate their livelihood precarity. Justine's story is emblematic in that regard. After sustaining a back injury at work, she suffered from chronic back pain and was forced to take long periods of sick leave. When

[163] Marga, cleaner at a primary school in South London, translated from Spanish
[164] Sabine, cleaner at a recording studio, translated from French

she returned to work, her hours were reduced as she was no longer able to perform certain tasks such as mopping or lifting heavy objects. Justine's symptoms fluctuated, and she occasionally woke up in acute pain and was forced to take time off work. This led to constant attacks of her professionalism on the part of her managers. She was frequently invited to workplace meetings to discuss her behaviour and re-negotiate her job description. She was eventually dismissed on the basis of false accusations of misconduct.[165]

Dismissals related to long-term health issues and sickness absences were common cases at UVW. This usually happened through a succession of 'welfare meetings', in which the cleaner's fitness to work, as well as possible adjustments to work patterns and job specifications were being considered. The outcome of those meetings was often to conclude that such adjustments would be too onerous, or that the company could not offer positions that involved less physically straining tasks, leading to the termination of the contract of employment. Such dismissals could also happen in the absence of any formal procedure. Indeed, some participants reported that their employers attempted to summarily dismiss them after they disclosed their health problems. The response of Chelita's employer when she was forced to take sick leave due to complications in her pregnancy is an illuminating example:

> Because when I got pregnant with my younger son, I had a high-risk pregnancy. I had placenta previa, in the 5th and 6th months of pregnancy I would go to hospital, I would come and go, come and go, because I had bleedings, abundant bleedings. It was very horrible. Of course, at the 6th month of pregnancy, when I could go on leave for maternity, I went, I used my right and went on maternity leave. As I told you I had to go 4 or 5 times to hospital. […] For [company name] it's not convenient to have a woman on leave in that way. They want a machine. And if the machine doesn't work what do they do? They try to get rid of it! So when they found out that I had health problems they sent me… because I was on sick leave, before going on maternity I was on sick leave for 2 months. So, when I returned from that, [my manager], who at the time was in HR, [my manager] told me: 'You're not coming back to work'.[166]

Ill-health, often the effect of many years of cleaning work, threatens job stability and income, and complicates future employment prospects. 'Trapped' in the cleaning sector because of language barriers, many participants with chronic illnesses struggled to find cleaning jobs they could physically do - it was often said that when looking for work, the only jobs available involved cleaning toilets, a physically straining task that individuals with

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[165] Justice, former cleaner at a media company, translated from Spanish
[166] Chelita, cleaner at a famous luxury store, translated from Spanish

musculo-skeletal diseases struggle to do. We can therefore see the interconnections and mutually reinforcing effects of labour conditions, health, and livelihood precarity.

The intersecting, cumulative effects of different experiences of precarity is also illustrated by the story of LaVoz.[167] With the start of the pandemic and the closure of office buildings during lockdown, LaVoz was made redundant from one of her cleaning jobs and lost her main source of income. As mentioned above, when undergoing significant stress and poor mental health, she physically punished her daughter who was then taken into care by the social services. Around that time, she was served with an eviction notice by her landlord, giving her two months to leave her property. She could not find alternative housing in the private sector, as landlords were reluctant to let properties to her because she could not provide evidence of a stable income. At the time of the interview, she was on the waiting lists for social housing and regularly visited her daughter at the children's home. However, the lack of stable housing and employment in turn undermined her prospects of recovering the custody of her child. LaVoz' experiences thus reveal the nexus between livelihood precarity, poor mental health and insecure housing, with tragic repercussions on family life.

Despite the mutually reinforcing effects of different forms of precarity, pushing many into a downward spiral, participants also reported gradual improvements in their well-being and quality of life. As seen in Chapter Four, many participants experienced extreme precarity right after their arrival, which progressively diminished. For some, the situation continued to improve over time. Three prevalent factors seemed particularly conducive to such positive developments: better job opportunities, the support of a partner or other family member, and the receipt of public funds.

Whilst most participants reported that their initial experiences working in the cleaning sector were particularly difficult, with time, social connections, and better knowledge of the sector, some were gradually able to secure jobs offering higher pay, more hours, and involving less unpleasant tasks. For example, Sabine said:

> Now it's better because with time you get to find places where work is bearable. I've always started cleaning toilets. That's the only job they recruit cleaners for because no one wants to clean toilets. You have to start cleaning toilets, and then later… Now I'm cleaning offices, dusting, cleaning tables, hoovering. It's a bit less difficult. I mean, personally cleaning toilets depresses me. The unpleasant smell, the chemicals. So yes, the beginning was very tough.[168]

[167] LaVoz, office cleaner in Central London
[168] Sabine, cleaner at a recording studio, translated from French

Others were able to find desirable jobs relative to average terms and conditions in the cleaning sector. As will be seen in more detail in Chapter Seven, successful workplace campaigns for improved terms and conditions are instrumental in that regard. Although he was eventually dismissed from his job, Peter said that obtaining a full-time cleaning job at King's College London, where cleaners are directly employed since their successful campaign against outsourcing in September 2018, had significantly improved his quality of life:

> But the thing is, with the time […] You know, in the last seven, eight years, the quality of life is being much better than before. You know, I found a better job, the time was better than before, I was full time. So, when I used to work in King's I used to have the whole afternoon for myself. But before I was working early morning, then going home, sleep, eat something, and then go back in the evening, finish 10, 11, you get home and then you don't have much you know, quality of life. It's just work, work, work. Obviously now, compared with before, it's much better.[169]

Despite many ultimately succeeded in finding more desirable, better paid jobs within the cleaning sector, few could progress to positions other than cleaning. Limited opportunities to improve their English language skills were identified as the key impediment in this respect. Indeed, the few participants who had over time moved ahead to other jobs, including a care worker, a postman and a cleaning supervisor, were all individuals who had been able to achieve a significant degree of fluency in English. It is important to note the differences among participants' ability to learn English and progress to a different job were likely shaped to a significant extent shaped by their class and level of education prior to coming to the UK.

For some, moving in with a partner was instrumental to achieve a more stable and comfortable living situation. Meeting her partner enabled Isabella to move into a flat with him and establish a home, when she previously had to share accommodation with strangers:

> No, with time… I met someone, and I got married, so we managed to live in a flat. But it is only for that reason. I don't think I could have done it by myself. Because I couldn't receive benefits or anything like it. So, it was because I had a partner who helped me, and between the two of us, we managed to get a better quality of life.[170]

Obtaining social benefits also significantly improved participants' material security. Among the 34 cleaners interviewed, six reported receiving state benefits. All except one

[169] Peter, former cleaner at King's College London
[170] Isabella, former cleaner, translated from Spanish

were single mothers. As seen above, the receipt of benefits transformed participants' living situation, allowing them to afford more space and relieving them of the anxiety of not being able to pay rent and bills. It also enabled participants to work less hours, freeing up time for their family and social lives. For Sabine, receiving benefits allowed her to work less, have more time to rest and recover her mental health:

> When you get benefits you can't work more than a certain number of hours each week. There is a limit. This means that you won't accept all the work that's offered. […] Now my rent is paid. With what I get… I mean universal credit and what I earn working is equivalent to I what I earned working 17 hours a day. And now I'm only working 5 hours a day.

However, non-citizen's access to state benefits and social housing is limited: only migrants with indefinite leave to remain, settled or refugee status are eligible to claim public funds (Battiston 2014). Justine and Isabella are both single mothers who were excluded from the benefits system, as their right of residence derived from their children's British or EU citizenship. Both reported having difficulties raising children on low pay, without any state support. This is illustrated by Isabella's account:

> This is something that was so disappointing for me, in such a wealthy country and with everything so clear. I explained it to the government, I said: 'but I am the mum', everything is legal because I've never done fraud. I showed everything, I showed our Colombian documents translated, the claims for abandonment. A British citizen abandoned this child! I've got to bring him up here! And they said no. The rules in I don't know what article said that I couldn't get them. The only thing they gave me was a work permit. But the government never gave anything to help me bring up this child. And for me this was illogical. I am a single mum, the dad is British and they didn't care. So, after that I decided not to ask anymore because the result was always the same. I double-checked many times, and went to see many organisations, and they all said that I couldn't receive benefits because I was Colombian. The visa and the permit I had was because my son was British and I was his mum, this is why they gave me a work permit.[171]

Similarly, Justine said:

> I've had to live in the UK with my two daughters, without receiving any benefits from the government. As I had to pay rent, bills and everything, I could not make ends meet working only 7 hours a day, paid at the national minimum wage. It is just not possible to live comfortably in this way. […] I am not eligible to receive benefits, as I am Venezuelan, I am not a European citizen. So, I don't qualify for any kind of help. And I am my daughter's guardian, I get my rights of residence from them, because they are European citizens. I went to the council to get information about all of this, but they just told me that it would not be possible.[172]

[171] Isabella, former cleaner and care worker, translated from Spanish
[172] Justine, former cleaner in a media company, translated from Spanish

Some participants' access to state benefits was delayed or prevented by language barriers. Chelita, who does not speak English, was only able to apply benefits after she received the support of a migrant organisation. She said:

> Look, if I had spoken English, the path would have been more straightforward. Do you understand? I would have been told: 'Go there, do this, apply for that,' and that's it. Because it's like that everywhere, you ask for your documents, you work, you apply for this and that and that's it! Even if you need help, you continue and you look for it! But not knowing English, it's terrible.[173]

The conditionality of the receipt of benefits also limited its potential to further improve participants' quality of life. Entitlement to universal credit is conditional on participants' circumstances, such as their weekly earnings, and their employment and family situation (Shutes 2016). Positive changes in a claimant's circumstances that bring more security to their life – such as moving in with a partner, getting a pay rise or taking up a full-time job for example - can entail a reduction in the benefits received (Standing 2011). This can be illustrated by the story of Naty and Sabine, two friends both working as cleaners at a recording studio. Around the end of 2019, Naty was dismissed by her employer and lost her main source of income. As she could no longer afford to pay rent, Sabine offered her to stay with her and her son. Shortly afterwards, Sabine received letters from the Department for Work and Pensions warning her that could see the support she was receiving as a single parent withdrawn because another adult had moved in with her. We therefore see how the conditionality of the benefits system can disincentivise mutual aid and decisions that could bring about greater material security to individuals, reinforcing their precarity.

Despite notable improvements in their situation over time and their acquisition of formal citizenship or EU settled status, most of my participants remained migrants, understood as low paid foreign-born individuals. As seen above, high levels of exploitation in the cleaning sector limited their opportunities to improve their English language skills and progress to a different job. Many therefore remained dependent on migrant enclave environments, both in terms of their employment as well as their social relations. Their limited social ties, combined with their various, interrelated experiences of precarity and oppression, also shaped their life projects and expectations in relation to their life in London. Indeed, few saw London as their future home, and despite being long term residents, most planned to eventually return to their home country, where they expected to have a better

[173] Chelita, cleaner in a luxury store in Central London, translated from Spanish

quality of life to due to improved possibilities for social relations and lower cost of living. Projects to retire, start a business or build a home in their home countries motivated many participants to work long hours and save as much as possible whilst in the UK. We can therefore see the long-term effects of migrants' dual frame of reference, as participants' awareness of the cost of life and labour in their home countries continued to inform their projects and life choices.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter explored migrant cleaners' wider well-being and experiences of precarity beyond the workplace. The research shows the prevalence of work-related health conditions among cleaners, often the long-term consequence of intensified workloads and employers' cost saving measures. Participants' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic confirmed their disproportionate exposure to risks of illness and death in a structural context of inequality (Butler 2004, Singer and Rylko-Bauer 2021). The research also reveals widespread mental distress among participants. Abusive employers and harsh working conditions were significant producers of anxiety. Experiences at work also shaped participants' sense of identity and self-esteem. Bourdieu's (1993) notion of positional suffering is particularly useful to understand the stigma and invisibility many cleaners experienced at their workplace. Participants felt a sense of social discord (Standing 2011), as they were unable to find better paid and socially valued work. This was compounded by the psychological challenges associated with being a migrant, the family and emotional costs of migration and the sense of failure of the migration project. The chapter then explored the repercussions of precarity on cleaners' personal and family life. It showed that low pay forced many to work long hours, undermining their capacity for essential reproductive activities such as resting, cooking, caring for themselves and their loved ones. This could have disastrous consequences on their health and family life. Housing was another significant aspect of cleaners' experiences of precarity. The unaffordability of London housing meant that many had to squeeze on space or resort to informal, insecure arrangements, often living in substandard conditions. This living situation undermined participants' quality of life and ability to pay for other essential expenses.

This chapter has sought to highlight the interconnections between experiences of precarity, stressing their mutually reinforcing effects. The research has shown that experiences of precarity in different aspects of life can accumulate, aggravate each other, and push individuals into a downward spiral. Factors that allowed participants to escape such spiral and improve their quality of life overtime included securing more desirable cleaning jobs, the support of partners and family members, and the receipt of public funds.

Moving from the individual to the collective level, the following chapter explores cleaners' resistance at work. As experiences of precarity are not limited to the workplace and affect other spheres of life, people resist precarity in multiples ways and mobilise around issues beyond work. Recent notable examples include acts of resistance against deportation flights (Taylor 2021), campaign initiatives around housing, education and migrant rights led by Citizens UK, a grassroots alliance of local communities. The reason for my choice to focus on workplace resistance is twofold. First, my intention was always to examine cleaners' experiences as workers, and therefore focus on a sector, rather than a community or neighbourhood. Yet mobilisations around non-work issues rally a diversity of workers employed in a range of sectors: engaging with the latter would have blurred the connection between the specificities of cleaning work and the forms of resistance that emerge among cleaners. Second, I commenced my fieldwork research at a time when trade union engagement with workers in the cleaning sector was particularly salient, undertaking a series of campaigns against outsourcing and low pay, with a holistic approach to organising, offering assistance with issues beyond the workplace. Trade unions were thus key vectors of mobilisation against precarity among cleaners, and the latter's different forms of workplace resistance deserved to be analysed in depth.

7 CHAPTER SEVEN: EXPERIENCES OF RESISTANCE AT WORK

7.1 Introduction

This chapter examines migrant cleaners' experiences of resistance. It draws from participant observation and interviews carried out with cleaners to better understand their personal experiences engaging in different tactics, the strategic choices that were made and the lessons that can be learnt from those experiences. The aim of this chapter is to explore different forms of resistance from the cleaners' own perspective and evaluate the successes and limitations of those experiences. In so doing, this chapter uses conceptual literature on collective mobilisation. Beginning from the Marxist premise that, although there is an inherent conflict of interests between the ruling and subordinate working classes, this does not automatically give rise to resistance, this body of literature seeks to identify the power resources and type of consciousness required for collective action to materialise. Specifically, it uses Kelly's (1998) and Atzeni's (2009) contributions to these theorical debates to understand how resistance emerges among cleaners, and Wright's (2000: 962) useful distinction between 'structural power' and 'associational power' to illuminate the sources of cleaners' bargaining power and how they mobilise them. The chapter also adopts Bassel's (2013) distinction between the instrumentalist and expressivist qualities of social movements to analyse the successes and limitations of different resistance tactics.

The research identified four main forms of workplace resistance that involve a range of different actors at different levels: individual acts, legal action, communicative strategies, and trade union organising, in particular with new independent unions. It is argued that rather than seeing a single form of resistance as a panacea, a coordinated, strategic use of a range of different methods is needed when seeking to resist precarity. This chapter builds on previous writings that outlined new independent unions' pioneering victories and analysed their organising practices (Però 2020, Hardy 2021, Holgate 2021) by exploring the challenges encountered by these organisations beyond their initial stages and as their membership grows. In so doing, it contributes to wider debates on trade union renewal. The chapter is structured around the four different forms of resistance named above, whilst also highlighting important intersections between them.

7.2 Conscientisation and individual acts of resistance

As established in Chapter Six, freeing themselves of a sense of personal responsibility for the hardship they experienced through conscientisation was key for participants to psychologically cope with workplace difficulties. It is also a pre-requisite for resistance to take place. The framing of an issue as an injustice is a crucial process in this respect, whereby individuals' understanding of their own misfortune shifts from the mere expression of suffering to the analysis of its causes (Kelly 1998). Amelia Horgan (2021: 137) calls such motion a 'snap': 'a moment, in short, in which the connections between our individual experience and underlying structures, the power relations of society, become obvious and clear'. This can involve a 'moral shock', whereby one is suddenly exposed to a distressing and unfair reality (Goodwin and Jasper 2015). Natalia thus recalled her first experience working in London as a hotel cleaner:

> This was the first time I had a bad experience in relation to managers, because I had always worked hard and I had always been respected at work. So, I had never had an experience as ugly as my experience at the hotel. For me this was a shock. I thought: 'WOW, where did I land?' This was like what I had seen in films in the age of slavery. I thought: 'God, where am I?'[174]

As seen in Chapter Two, such a snap can also be triggered by *changes* in the labour process, as exploitation oversteps a limit beyond which workers are no longer willing to tolerate the imposition of work (Atzeni 2009). For example, Justine's decision to submit a grievance against her employer and to refuse to continue enduring the bullying prevalent at her workplace was prompted by a sudden increase in workload as a result of a new policy requiring cleaners to cover for their colleagues on annual leave without additional pay or hours.[175]

Such realisations can propel one into questioning the mainstream understanding of the employment relationship - founded on a voluntary, mutually beneficial agreement between employers and employees as equals - as the power imbalance and conflict of interests with one's employer suddenly becomes clear. Natalia recalled realising that her bosses wanted to use her time to the maximum effect, seeking to get her to do as much work as possible, with little benefit to her: 'So, this was when I realised how they tried to

[174] Natalia, former cleaner and UVW organiser, translated from Spanish
[175] Justine, former cleaner at a media company in Central London

manipulate people in subtle manner, and tried to get the most out of you, because they know people need money, they want a stable, fixed position and they don't want to get in trouble'[176]

For some, this takes place over the course of a disciplinary or grievance process, where they are surprised to see the level of confrontation shown by their employers. For example, Lucia was outraged and confused by her employer's behaviour as they failed to take action after she reported being a victim of sexual harassment at work. She was shocked by their lack of care and compassion: 'What is happening at work at the moment makes me very sad, it changed my way of being. I still don't feel like… I feel very sad because I am wondering how people can be so mean and so selfish. And the fact your bosses were aware of it and didn't do anything.' [177]

Such processes can be emotionally painful, even experienced as a sudden loss of innocence. Indeed, one can have a strong emotional connection to a job, which is often tied up to one's sense of identity (Horgan 2021). Our job is where we spend much of our time, invest considerable energy, as well as what enables us to pay rent and daily expenses. For example, Blackberry said: 'I love that job so, so much. Because it gives me satisfaction, it pays my mortgage, pays my bills, and going for holidays to see my family back home.'[178] Likewise, doing her job well gave Lucia a sense of pride and fulfilment: 'I like the feeling you get when you've done a good job. I like honesty. I don't like using people, I identify as a very supportive person. I like helping my colleagues. […] I had worked in that company and in that building for 7 years, and I've been an excellent supervisor. When I have a job, I do it well.'[179] The sense of self-esteem and identity that is often tied to one's job is precisely what makes acquiring consciousness of the conflictual nature of the employment relation a psychologically difficult process.

One's consciousness that the situation experienced is unjust or unacceptable can lead one to take action. Although they may or may not erupt into full-fledged collective mobilisation, covert, individual acts are an important and the most common form of worker resistance (Scott 1985). Indeed, cleaners resist management at the micro level on a daily

[176] Natalia, former cleaner and UVW organiser, translated from Spanish
[177] Lucia, former office cleaner, translated from Spanish
[178] Blackberry, cleaner at a university in Central London
[179] Lucia, former office cleaner, translated from Spanish

basis. Pushing back against management instructions is one clear example. As a cleaning supervisor, Mariola would deliberately omit to record teammates' sickness absences so that they could be paid their full wage for the day.[180] Some participants who had 'jobs with keys', where they had been given their own key to their workplace and enjoyed some flexibility in terms of working hours, told me that they would sometimes slack off work. For some, the pandemic seemed to provide new opportunities to slack off: as cleaners were required to clean already immaculate, empty offices, they could more easily stop doing their work without being noticed.

Speaking up or standing up against managers' abusive behaviour constitute another set of everyday resistance tactics. Natalia recalled her experience responding to verbal abuse on the part of her supervisor:

> The supervisor would call us "donkey". Yes, he would say when giving instructions "donkey SB1, donkey SB2, donkey 1st floor'" […] I couldn't believe it. I sought help and asked someone: 'excuse me, can you please tell me what donkey means?' My head could not register the fact that they were calling us donkeys. […] I was hallucinating, I couldn't believe it. So the next time I said: "Donkey you, no me"[…] and that's when he got really angry at me, as if I had said the greatest insult in his life. He transformed. What I understood and that he always repeated was: "Fuck you, shit", etc… He became like a monster. He seemed like he was about to hit me and then he said: "GO TO THE TOILET NOW!' Like this. Then he started punishing me, sending me to do difficult jobs.[181]

Other resistance strategies involve seeking to push back against managerial demands through negotiation, sending written messages or more formal complaint letters. As seen in Chapter Five, formal grievance procedures rarely result in any substantial improvement of cleaners' situation. However, as a UVW caseworker I noted the cathartic value of sending grievance letters and attending grievance hearings. They were a rare opportunity for cleaners to voice their concerns and frustrations, directly confronting managers. For example, Justine recalled the time she exposed her manager's hypocrisy as he refused to admit that requiring cleaners to cover for their absent colleagues with no additional time amounted to an increase in their workload:

> Ah! Their reaction was always very negative. First, they told me that I was always complaining, that I was a troublemaker. All my colleagues agreed [with me], but as I was the only one who had the courage to speak up, all the backlash was against me. And at the grievance hearing, the manager […] said that he did not understand why I was saying that covering for my colleagues amounted to additional work. How could he not understand? I said: "this is easy to explain, do you understand the

[180] Mariola, former cleaner at an advertising agency

[181] Natalia, former cleaner and UVW organiser, translated from Spanish

> difference between cleaning 4 toilets and cleaning 8 toilets?" From the look on his face, I don't think it came down very well… [laughs…] I could have made a drawing to explain it to them. I think that they will hate me for the rest of their lives, but oh well…[182]

Individual acts of resistance are short lived strategies that are unlikely to lead to significant improvements in workplace experiences (Horgan 2021). Indeed, they carry a strong risk of repression by management, through disciplinary measures or dismissal. For having sent a series of complaints to HR, Justine was seen as a 'trouble-maker' by her managers and was eventually dismissed on the basis of false accusations. Natalia's account above also shows that defending oneself verbally can lead to further bullying and harassment on the part of managers seeking to crush resistance. Such retaliation can be violent and traumatic, and, as in the case of Natalia, can leave one feeling distressed and isolated for weeks, grinding one down. Thus, individual everyday practices of resistance alone are insufficient to fundamentally transform the workplace. As such, they resonate strongly with Cindi Katz' (2004) concept of resilience, which refers to people's endurance and ability to deploy daily tactics to better cope with their situation, albeit in the context of relations of domination. Indeed, individual acts of resistance do not in themselves challenge power relations but can re-affirm agency, giving one a sense of pride and satisfaction. As a rejection of the absurdity and injustice of the workplace, they can be a tool for preserving one's self-esteem, clawing back time or asserting one's autonomy (Horgan 2021). Such strategies can also be a significant coping mechanism that can act as a pressure valve, allowing cleaners to vent frustrations and get through the workday. This may then contribute towards building a collective awareness amongst workers. It might be that individual initiatives of resistance give others courage and validation, inspiring a shared sense of grievance, as well as giving glimpses of power at work and of the possibility of pushing back the frontier of control. Throughout my research, I saw that cleaners' experiences of resistance often started from such individual acts, progressively developing into more organised and formal responses. However, for many, this was lonely journey. In interviews participants talked more about feeling alone when confronting managers and being frustrated at their colleagues' failure to stand up for themselves.

[182] Justine, former cleaner at a media company, translated from Spanish

7.3 Fighting through the courts

During my research I also encountered many people who were working in cleaning who chose to seek more formal redress through the courts for the wrongs they identified at work. As seen in Chapter Five, the last 40 years have seen a shift in the UK from a system of collective labour dispute resolution to a regime of individual legal claims, with the decline in trade union power and the introduction of restrictive strike laws, alongside the extension of individual employment rights and a dramatic increase in individual claims to the Employment Tribunal (Bano 2022). In this context, the Employment Tribunal has become the central arena for employment disputes and the enforcement of employment protections.

7.3.1 The role of the Employment Tribunal and its limits

Although there are no formal barriers to submitting an Employment Tribunal claim without having first negotiated with one's employer, it is common practice to first seek redress by initially raising matters internally, for example by submitting a grievance or appealing against a dismissal. This is because, relative to Employment Tribunal processes, internal procedures are less damaging to the employment relationship and could in theory lead to a quicker solution for the worker. Engaging with internal procedures can also provide an opportunity to gather documents and correspondence that might be useful evidence when preparing a claim at the Employment Tribunal processes.

It is not a requirement to be represented by a professional legal practitioner in order to submit a claim to the Employment Tribunal. However, because of the complex nature of the process and the level of resources necessary to prepare a robust case, individuals with no prior legal knowledge or experience have few chances of succeeding without expert legal advice (McDermont 2013). As seen in Chapter One, Legal Aid reform through the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) 2012 removed all employment law matters from the scope of Legal Aid, except for employment-related discrimination, taking away low-paid workers' practical ability to take legal action against their employer by instructing a solicitor or a barrister (Renton 2022). This left organisations such as trade unions, the Citizens Advice Bureau and certain law centres funded by local councils as the few remaining alternative sources of free legal advice on employment matters. An advisor

will then assess the merits of the case – determined by factors such as the level of evidence available or the strength of the potential legal arguments – and advise on whether to take action. Once a claim in submitted to the Employment Tribunal, a date is then set for a hearing, where both parties can present the case to a judge.

Submitting claims to the Employment Tribunal can lead to meaningful gains for individual workers, with significant material as well as emotional rewards. For example, UVW has an impressive record of victories at the Employment Tribunal, obtaining for members considerable sums of compensation, whilst burdening employers with the cost of those payments as well as the cost of legal representation. During my experience as a UVW caseworker, the legal team frequently recovered members' lost wages as a result of unfair dismissals or unlawful deductions from employers and won a range of different employment law cases, including discrimination and trade union victimisation claims. This includes the case of Javier Sanchez, who was employed by Mitie Limited to clean the offices of the Daily Mail, where a UVW campaign to be paid the London Living Wage was taking place. Javier was dismissed by Mitie in December 2018 after he sustained an injury falling down the stairs, under the pretext that he had staged his fall. In January 2022, the Employment Tribunal found that he had been unfairly dismissed, and that his involvement in trade union activities had been the real reason for his dismissal. He was awarded a compensation of over £37,000.[183]

Beyond the financial compensation obtained, winning a case at the Employment Tribunal also brings emotional rewards. Research participants who had had successful claims at the Employment Tribunal expressed a sense of satisfaction that justice had been done, seeing their former employer humiliated in court as their illegal practices were publicly exposed. Confirmation through the judgment that they had done no wrong as employees, or that their grievances had been legitimate, also gave them a strong sense of relief. In her interview, Peruana was proud to tell me that 'the judge proved me right'.[184] Public vindication of their grievance as well as financial compensation were clear benefits for participants who had won a case at the Employment Tribunal.

However, there are severe limitations to legal avenues for workers' resistance. Firstly, the sporadic nature of employment law protections in Britain mean that legal redress

[183] *Mr J. Sanchez Ortiz v Mitie Ltd* 2301303/2019
[184] Peruana, cleaner at a private gym in Kensington

is simply not an option for many workers seeking justice. One example is the very limited protection against unfair dismissal under the Employment Rights Act 1996, which was further eroded in 2013 as the coalition government extended the qualification period to acquire the right to claim unfair dismissal from one to two years of continuous service (Renton 2022). In effect, this is equivalent to a two-year long trial period, whereby employers can fire employees at will without giving reasons. In the context of a high rate of labour turn-over in the cleaning sector, estimated between 50% and 100% (Wills 2008, Grimshaw et al 2014), cleaners rarely remain in employment with one company for longer than two years and few benefit from legal protection against unfair dismissal in practice. Similarly, successive governments have sought to constrain the effect of EU employment protections, for example by negotiating an opt out from EU directives limiting the length of the maximum working week to 48 hours (Wintour 2015). Thus, whilst a 48-hour working time limit remains the default rule under the Working Time Regulations 1998, workers can sign an agreement to opt out. Although the decision to waive working time protections is in principle voluntary, many low-paid workers are in practice often compelled to do so (MacKenzie and Forde 2009). This was the experience of many of the cleaners I interacted with throughout my fieldwork. On salaries close to the minimum wage, working excessive hours across multiple employers was for them the only to make ends meet and support relatives in their home country. Thus, the modest level of rights enshrined in minimum legal standards mean that in many cases, workers have no legal categories they can mobilise in their defense.

Secondly, there are practical barriers that limit cleaners' access to tribunal procedures. Successive governments have attacked the mechanisms available to enforce employment rights. As mentioned above, the Legal Aid cuts in 2012 took away low wage workers' practical ability to take legal action against their employer (Renton 2022). Even where workers have established employment rights, the qualifications attached to those rights make it difficult to enforce them. One example is the requirement, under section 111 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, that employees seeking redress submit their claim to the Employment Tribunal within three months of the event complained of: the tribunal will not consider a claim submitted after this time period. Whilst the official rationale for such a short time limit is that the Employment Tribunal should function as a speedy and informal forum for the arbitration of employment disputes and that evidence should be recorded as

early as possible whilst the matters are still fresh in the witnesses' minds, this requirement also serves to contain the volume of claims and ease the burden on the system, which has been an overarching concern of the Tribunal (Law Commission 2020). As a result of this restriction, vast numbers of claims are never heard by the tribunal: research suggests that only 15-25% of potential cases are pursued formally (Colling 2006). Presenting a claim is a complex and stressful process: once claimants have processed the situation and realised that they have been wronged by their employer, they have to consider the options available, seek legal advice and assess the costs and benefits of taking legal action. Workers seeking to take their employer to court are strongly encouraged to first try and resolve issues internally through the grievance process, which employers can use to further delay the claim. Many claims with strong legal merits are never adjudicated as claimants do not receive adequate support in time for submission to the tribunal. This was Natalia's experience:

> I was looking for help anywhere, at the church, the community… […] and the clock was ticking. The GP had given me a letter for my work, and they ignored it, another time, the GP advisor wrote again and I didn't received any reply. The GP told me that I needed a lawyer or could get advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau. By the time I got an appointment, found a translator etc… the 3 months deadline to submit whatever type of claim to the Tribunal had already passed. When I finally got an appointment with a lawyer he said: 'I'm sorry, you don't have a case anymore because the 3 months deadline has already passed'.[185]

Finally, the significant waiting times for claims to proceed to a hearing constitute additional discouragement for workers seeking redress through the courts. Indeed, a steady increase in caseload and delays in hearing claims have been a primary concern for the Tribunal (Senior President of Tribunals' Annual Report 2022). Throughout my experience as a UVW caseworker, members rarely obtained an outcome to their Tribunal case within a year of presenting their claim. It was not uncommon for them to feel demoralised and lose trust in both the tribunal system and the efficacy of our representation. Employment tribunal delays were exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic, as a record increase in redundancies led to a surge in the number of claimants and a backlogged system. Thus, in 2020, the tribunal delivered outcomes to cases in an average time of 68 weeks (McClosekey and Senegri 2020). At UVW, many of the members with ongoing cases at the Employment Tribunal experienced a period of prolonged uncertainty. Whilst some remained working for their employer during

[185] Natalia, former cleaner and UVW organiser

the tribunal process, most had been dismissed or forced to resign (which was the object of the dispute). The latter were mostly able to find another job whilst awaiting an outcome to their claim and had some sort of income, although often for fewer hours, on inferior terms and conditions, in addition to having lost the benefits associated with length of service. Others, in particular members with claims related to workplace injury, harassment or discrimination, were deeply traumatised by the experience, often suffering from depression and unable to work. The length and uncertainty of the tribunal process were particularly distressing for those members, who faced severe financial precarity and often relied on the compensation they expected to receive following a hearing. The amount of case preparation time required and the emotional burden of having to scrutinise difficult experiences make it difficult for individuals to move forward in their lives when embarking on an Employment Tribunal claim.

Even where cases do proceed, the terrain of the law is often inadequate to advance workers' interests. A survey I conducted of 30 Employment Tribunal decisions on claims brought against cleaning companies over the period between June 2019 and May 2023 showed that 11 of these claims were struck out by a judge and eight were withdrawn by the Claimant. The rest, which mainly involved unlaw deduction of wages and unfair dismissal claims, were successful and resulted in the award of relatively small compensation sums (with a median award of £506).[186] A reason for the high proportion of claims that are dismissed by a judge is the hostility of Employment Tribunal procedures for low paid migrant workers. Legal theory presupposes that individuals are free and equal before the law, abstracting them from the unequal power relations that exist in capitalist society (Adams 2023). Yet parties are not on an equal footing in respect to the tribunal system. The process involves formalised, codified procedures that can be intimidating and discourage participation of individuals who do not possess legal knowledge (Busby and McDermont 2012). Correspondence with the tribunal and the employer's representative is often complex and legalistic. Parties have unequal resources when preparing cases: whilst employers can instruct expensive, high-profile barristers, trade unions often face heavy caseloads and staff shortages (Renton 2022). Indeed, the main reason for striking out cited in the decisions

[186] The survey involved a search through Employment Tribunal decisions on the UK government information website: https://www.gov.uk/employment-tribunal-decisions. Decisions involving cleaning companies were identified by using key search words, such as "cleaning" or "cleaner".

examined in the survey was the claimants' failure to actively pursue their claim and comply with case management orders, undoubtedly an indication of difficulties accessing adequate representation and preparing the case. Additionally, employers have easier access to evidence, which they can use to support their case. During my experience as a UVW representative, collecting evidence when preparing cases was particularly challenging: employers controlled access to relevant paperwork as well CCTV footage of the workplace, which they could choose whether or not to disclose, and would often forbid employees from using their mobile phones, which was the only medium they could use to record evidence of unlawful practice.

In most cases, the compensation obtained through Employment Tribunal proceedings is modest and inadequate. Cases are often settled before they reach the tribunal hearing stage, limiting the wider collective benefits of individual claims. Indeed, the eight withdrawals among the claims surveyed were most likely the result of a settlement agreement with the respondent. The managerial rationality that permeates the tribunal system, seeking to reduce costs and minimise the number of formal hearings, leads to pressures on both parties to settle the case (Busby an McDermont 2012). During my experience working in UVW's legal team, the pressure to settle was evident in judges' warnings, throughout the process, that the procedures would be long and uncertain and their exhortation to be 'reasonable' and 'compromise' to reach an agreement. The length of the process and the stress it involves were incentives to negotiate an agreement, which would lead to a more immediate result as well as provide a guarantee of obtaining some compensation, although inferior to what they could expect to receive following a tribunal decision in most cases. The majority of settlement agreements contain privacy clauses, binding the Claimant to keep the fact and contents of the agreement strictly confidential. For example, JD told me that his employer had agreed to settle a claim he had brought against them and give him nearly £10,000, on the condition that he signed a non-disclosure agreement. According to him, settling the claim enabled the company to avoid incurring even more losses by having to pay for legal costs. [187]

The privacy clauses attached to settlement agreements limit the wider impact of legal action where, particularly in relation to discrimination, whistleblowing or trade union

[187] JD, cleaner in an office building in Central London

victimisation claims, the circumstances of the case and the identity of the employer are matters of wider public concern. Unlike tribunal decisions, settlement agreements do not vindicate rights: they merely specify that the employer agrees to pay the claimant a given sum of money without admitting liability for unlawful practice. The lack of recognition that employment rights have been breached leads to a de-politicisation of the employment dispute, which is reduced to the single issue of negotiating financial compensation (Busby and McDermont 2012). In addition, those agreements do not set a precedent and therefore cannot be used to diffuse good practice, limiting their benefits to the individual claimant. In short, settlement through negotiation, the most common outcome to Employment Tribunal proceedings and often the preferred approach of risk-averse lawyers (Bano 2022), is equivalent to selling off one's right to sue one's employer: it does not involve a public recognition that rights have been breached and results in a lesser compensation for the claimant, under the condition that the facts of the case are kept confidential. Those elements combine to undermine the potential for achieving collective benefits through the courts.

In practice, the Employment Tribunal awards financial compensation to employees rather than remedy and dissuade unlawful practice on the part of employers (Colling 2006). Unlike criminal courts, Employment Tribunal decisions do not have a retributive function, nor do they express reprobation. The compensation ordered by the Employment Tribunal is primarily financial: in 2016-2017, only three in a thousand unfair dismissal claims resulted in an order to the employer for reinstatement (Sefton 2019). In 2021-2022, the median award for unfair dismissal claims was £7,650 (Employment Tribunals and EAT Statistics, 2021-2022) – and, as my survey indicates, is likely to be much lower for cleaners and other low-paid workers. During my experience as UVW caseworker, it was not uncommon for members whose claim had been successful at the tribunal to be disappointed with the award won. Particularly in the case of unfair dismissal claims, many had expected to get their job back as well as receiving a financial compensation. Many felt that redress was only partial, especially as embarking on tribunal procedures often entailed permanently breaking the relationship with their employer, precluding future employment with that company.

From the employer's perspective, the financial compensation ordered by the tribunal is better conceived as a penalty rather than a punishment for illegal conduct, as employers can in practice purchase the right to breach employment law. In this sense, unlawful

behaviour on the part of employers is generally discouraged rather than strictly prohibited: an employer who desires strongly enough to illegally dismiss an employee they consider to be a troublemaker can do so provided they are willing to pay compensation. As a caseworker, I sometimes noted employers' awareness of the illegality of their own conduct and their acceptance of the compensation ordered by the tribunal, which was evident in their minimal attempt to defend their case and, on some occasions, their failure to even attend final hearings.

Additionally, Employment Tribunal judgments involve limited reputational damage and rarely make the front page in the media (Busby and McDermont 2012). Whilst in some circumstances, employers can be prosecuted for mistreatment of their employees, as for example for failure to comply with their obligations to protect workers from harm under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, criminal sanctions are rarely imposed in practice (James 2021). As seen in the previous chapter, the HSE has no practical ability to enforce health and safety regulations as a result of successive funding and staff cuts: in the period between 1 April and 30 September 2020, in the midst of a major global pandemic, there were no prosecutions of employers following HSE inspections in Britain (James 2021). This is against the backdrop of widespread evidence of cleaners and other "key workers'" high exposure to covid-19 during the pandemic (Grant 2020, Office for National Statistics 2020). Thus, the Employment Tribunal's focus on financial compensation rather than punishment for employer wrongdoing undermines judgments' potential to diffuse general lessons and good practice.

7.3.2 Strategic litigation and its potential to bring about social change

Arguably, through the doctrine of precedent, legal victories can change the law in a way that is beneficial for workers, improving their legal protections in the long term. Such cases become legal authorities, binding future decisions on similar issues. This is the purpose of strategic litigation: identifying gaps in the law, innovative legal arguments are made in order to bring about broader legal developments and social change. One example is the

IWGB's successful health and safety judicial review.[188] Arguing that the UK government had failed to properly transpose EU health and safety directives into UK domestic law, the IWGB challenged the statutory restriction of fundamental health and safety rights to the narrow category of 'employees', forcing the government to extend those protections to the broader category of 'workers' (Bogg 2022). The judgment can now be used in legal action, widening the scope for enforcing health and safety protections.

However, progressive legal developments have a limited practical impact on the lives of workers in the absence of an effective enforcement mechanism. As seen above, a properly funded enforcement body is lacking in the realm of health and safety protections. Without effective enforcement, companies can evade successful judgements (Marshall and Woodcock 2022). Workers then need to further litigate for the law to be applied and enforced, with the financial and emotional costs the process involves. In addition, there are limitations to legal reform through ligation. Legal change necessarily proceeds incrementally, developing as cases are brought to the Tribunal and adequate legal arguments are made. An isolated legal dispute, with its own facts and issues, can only represent a limited range of interests, and its effects are often narrowly confined (Bogg 2022). Despite successfully establishing that Uber drivers qualified for worker status, allowing them to benefit from a range of employment rights, the Uber litigation[189] did not extend to other sectors of the gig economy (Adams 2023). The Court of Appeal later held that Deliveroo riders had no collective bargaining rights on the grounds that there were not 'workers', as they failed to meet the requirement that their work be provided personally.[190] Judges' ability to develop the law is also constrained by binding precedent. Because of the judicial duty to develop the law in a way that is coherent with established legal doctrines and existing statutes, progressive judgements can only lead to marginal improvements, filling gaps in the scope and enforcement of the law, rather than bringing about systemic change (Bogg 2022).

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[188] *R (on the application of The Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain v The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions & Ors* [2020] EWHC 3050

[189] *Uber BV v Aslam* [2021] UKSC 5

[190] *Deliveroo* [2021] EWCA Civ 952

7.3.3 The law and collective consciousness

Independently from the outcome of a particular case, relying on legal action and discourse risks undermining the formation of a collective identity, because of the significant costs and the potentially pacifying effect of legal procedures. For Violeta, focusing trade union activities on individual legal claims is counterproductive, as it individualises issues and drains resources away from organising strategies:

> Casework, which is minor part and shouldn't be the priority, but ends up being the centre and the focus. And so, you end up perpetuating people's expectations even though that's at the detriment of the union, of the community and of the membership and of everything. Because you're taking away resources, time and attention from what actually needs to be done to combat what the problem is. You can't fix the problem with employment law, because employment law is shit. And even if you could, with cases and employment law, there are millions of people in London. So, if you're meant to do one case at a time until the next problem comes up. It's not what gets big wins, and it's not feasible or practical, or scalable.[191]

Due to the prevalent and recurrent nature of work-related grievances in the cleaning sector in particular, the demand for individual legal services in trade unions can be intense and difficult to cater for. Throughout my experience working at UVW, the scale of the demand for individual representation contrasted with the union's small team and scarce resources, with the backlog of cases often causing tension with the membership. Individual casework required considerable time and resources, and the broader organisational benefits of taking on cases was often difficult to identify. Even where union representation was effective, it often did not contribute towards developing a sense of collective identity. Indeed, it was not uncommon for union members to cancel their membership and stop paying their subscription after obtaining a successful outcome to their individual case (See also: Colling 2006).

In addition, the legal expertise required for tribunal work counteracts one of the central objectives of trade unionism: empowering workers to organise and defend themselves collectively (Colling 2006). Relying on courts to resolve a workplace issue disempowers workers by relocating their power in the hands of lawyers and judges (Renton 2022). For this reason, legal strategies for resistance are not transformative and do little to challenge existing power relations (Bassel 2013). By providing workers with a partial sense of

[191] Violeta, former UVW organiser

redress, relying on the law can have a pacifying effect, channelling their anger through individualised routes. Thus, Grietje Baars (2020: 370) deplores the 'cause lawyering' that affects social movements where winning victories through the law becomes their main objective: "Although these attempts do amount to resistance, they are not emancipatory, and their (unintended) effect is rather, on the one hand, to domesticate class struggle, and, on the other, to actualise, legitimate, and strengthen the existing structures of power, and thus value extraction."

However, despite these limits, legal action has the potential to bring about broader, extra-legal benefits and contribute to facilitating workers' collective struggles in the long term. Trevor Colling (2006) used the notion of 'legal mobilisation' to refer to the ways in which unions use the law strategically to support broader organisational interests. Successful tribunal outcomes can demonstrate the efficacy of trade union representation, building trust and contributing to members' more active engagement in the union (Colling 2006). Members who obtain financial compensation are expected to pay a portion of the money received (15% in the case of UVW) to the union that represented them. This constitutes a considerable income for the union, which can serve to develop the organisation and fund other activities. In addition, some individual claims can have a wider collective dimension. At UVW, trade union victimisation cases were given particular attention, as defending members' trade union rights was considered key to protect the continued existence of the organisation and of the wider trade union movement.

The use of the law can also have an 'inspirational effect', developing a shared sense of grievance (O'Sullivan et al 2015). Unions can test the boundaries of the law, pursuing particularly bold legal claims expecting them to fail for the purpose of highlighting an injustice and mobilising workers. For example, UVW used the law proactively in its unprecedented challenge against St George's University: by arguing that the sub-contracting of BME workers employed under terms and conditions inferior to those enjoyed by largely white in-house staff constituted unlawful indirect race discrimination[192], it fundamentally delegitimised the logic of the outsourcing regime, a routine feature of today's world of work. Whilst it was dismissed by the Employment Tribunal - partly on the grounds that St George's University allegedly had not set the terms under which the outsourced workers were

[192] *Mr L.D. Ncube and others v St Georges, University of London: 2302864/*2020 and Others

employed and that its decision to outsource some functions to providers was not in itself discriminatory – UVW's legal challenge made visible the pay gap between white and BME employees and the racism latent in the outsourcing regime. Despite failing on the legal front, it constituted a fundamental political achievement, as it allowed radical arguments to enter the public realm, "presenting questions which are not allowed" (Bassel 2013). Such uses of the law can therefore be said to enhance workers' struggles, in that they carry a wider critique and highlight the necessity of furthering these attempts to structurally transform work relations (Adams 2023).

7.4 Communicative strategies

I chose to borrow the term 'communicative strategies', used by Peró (2022) in his analysis of campaigns led by indie unions, to denote the various ways in which discursive power can be deployed to improve cleaners' conditions. Broader than the notion of advocacy, it refers generally to the use of words and the framing of messages by different actors to bring issues to the attention of the wider public in order to win the support of potential allies, as well as to put pressure on employers to obtain concessions. This can take the form of raising awareness through social media, engaging with journalists, public speaking, as well as publishing research.

7.4.1 The benefits and limitations of communicative strategies

Communicative strategies can enhance cleaners' negotiating power in multiple ways. First, they can be used to increase the visibility of their conditions. Engaging with mainstream journalists and media is key in this regard, as it can amplify a message, allowing an issue to reach the wider public sphere (Peró 2022). Research has identified the effects of media coverage on setting the political agenda, increasing the likelihood that an issue will be considered important by the public (Moy and Bosch 2013). Second, media campaigns can help recruit supporters for industrial action, allowing organisations to build a network and reputation, and facilitating alliances in the future. Rallying that support is, according to Sam, a decisive factor in workers' mobilisation: 'I would say that […] having the support of other organisations is really key, having the support of student community, activists, academics

and all those helping workers. Politicians as well. Also, the media helps a lot.'[193] The support from prominent journalists and politicians increases publicity and enhances workers' negotiation power. According to one of the LSE cleaners, the support of students and political celebrities was key to the success of their campaign:

> And you know, we had Owen Jones. He was going to come and give a lecture, but he decided that he was not going to lecture for them while LSE was cheating us so bad. He did come, stand by the building and speak highly towards us as the cleaners to get treated fairly, and against LSE. So that one, that really crossed LSE also. And we had one minister from the Green Party that came there. A lot of people gave us support.[194]

Finally, communicative strategies can force employers to make concessions by inflicting reputational damage. For example, Katitus reported that media attention put pressure on her employer to pay cleaners full pay when they were obliged to self-isolate during the covid-19 pandemic:

> When covid happened in March, they made us work like usual. Without any protection or anything like it, we were just doing our usual job. Until a friend of mine who works for the Latin American community […] told me: 'look Katy there is a journalist investigating what's happening with the coronavirus, whether people will get paid, would you like to be interviewed?'. And I said yes. […] So, when the journalist interviewed me I said: 'For us it is the same as usual, they don't want to pay us, if they close and we have to do a quarantine, they won't pay us, we don't have any document', and I sent her copies of the letters the manager had sent him. So, I told her: 'we are the ones fighting the virus, and no one worries about us. And they won't pay us anything.' So, the journalist called [my workplace and my employer]. And when she called, they immediately said: 'no, of course we will pay them' and she said: 'Please could you give us a document confirming that your workers will be covered and paid?'. Of course, two hours later we received the documents saying that they would pay us. Without the great help of this journalist, they wouldn't have paid us, or they would only have paid us sick pay.[195]

Cleaners' moral leverage is particularly strong when they target high profile employer organisations that have a reputation to lose (Però 2022). Universities in particular seek to cultivate a public image as institutions that value principles of social justice. That brand then becomes their vulnerable point, as it can be used against them when they refuse to concede to workers' demands. This was notable when Owen Jones refused to cross the cleaners' picket line at the LSE in 2017 and endorsed the strike in The Guardian, highlighting the

[193] Sam, former cleaner and IWGB organiser
[194] Anonymised employee
[195] Katitus, cleaner at a government department

contradictions between the institution's founding principle and the way it treated its cleaners (Jones 2017).

However, there are limitations to strategies that seek to induce change by raising awareness. The publicity of a given issue depends on actors' ability to attract media attention (Goodwin and Jasper 2015). News organisations are subject to various pressures that shape the rules that are applied by journalists when selecting what makes a 'story' (Gans 1979). Workplace grievances are rarely, in themselves, considered newsworthy (Hardy 2021). Rather, it is action and instances of collective resistance that attract media coverage. Communicative strategies are therefore more likely to succeed when integrated within collective resistance initiatives.

Publicity is, in itself, insufficient to bring about change. Information campaigns rely on the assumption that once an issue reaches the wider public sphere, people will be persuaded and become supporters. Yet public attitudes and the readiness to support a cause are informed by more than awareness of relevant facts (Dempster and Hargrave 2017). Attitudes are also shaped by one's personal experiences, individual values, and economic interests: some individuals might never be persuaded to support a given campaign if doing so would contradict their own values or go against their own economic interests.

Similarly, 'name and shame' campaigns depend on employers' capacity for shame and on how key an organisation's reputation is to its functioning and profit making. Unscrupulous employers will not make concessions if publicity does not affect the organisation's public image, or if the reputational damage fails to affect profits. UVW campaigns with cleaners and security guards at the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and the Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) for improved terms and conditions are illuminating examples in that regard. Despite numerous strike days and pickets, communication campaigns and legal actions spanning over years (UVW 2020, 2022) employers remained intransigent in both sites. Interestingly, both the MoJ and GOSH are organisations that are relatively immune from reputational damage. The MoJ, as a government department, does not have a reputation to protect: it is not subject to commercial competition and its overall agenda ordinarily comes under public scrutiny from different political angles, drowning out criticisms about its cleaners' working conditions. GOSH, a charity and children's hospital, has a strong public image that is difficult to attack. Conversely, the cleaners' campaign at the LSE caused significant reputational damage to the university, potentially undermining student

recruitment and directly affecting its activities, as when Owen Jones refused to give an invited lecture (Acciari and Però 2017). Thus, change often only occurs once support is translated into a disruption of business activities, and where the costs of reputational damage outweigh the costs of making those concessions (Però 2022). In the words of Hughes and Woodcock (2023: 63): "At the heart of it, organising and winning is a simple game of maths. Can you apply enough pressure that maintaining the current arrangements is more costly to the employer (whether directly affecting finances, or more indirectly by affecting its reputation), than making the change that you want?"

7.4.2 Persuading employers: the example of the Living Wage Foundation

There are various campaigning organisations whose main strategy revolves around using discursive power to persuade key actors. This section focuses on the Living Wage Foundation (LWF), a particularly prominent organisation in relation to cleaners and the issue of low pay, and evaluates its strategy. The LWF aims to persuade employers to voluntarily pay the living wage to their direct employees as well as workers in their supply chain, awarding an accreditation to employers who agree to do so (Jensen and Wills 2013). Calculated on the basis of the local cost of living, the living wage is intended to cover basic living costs allowing workers not just to survive, but to have a decent quality of life. Unlike the National Minimum Wage (NMW), the living wage is voluntary and has no legal status. The implementation of the living wage has tangible benefits for workers: as a result of raised wage levels, considerable amounts of money are being re-distributed to low-paid workers (Jensen and Wills 2013). However, the implementation of the living wage through accreditation with the LWF often does not involve fundamental changes in working conditions.

The Employers' decision to accredit is commercially driven and will only be adopted where it does not affect the organisation's profits. Indeed, companies have strong business incentives for paying their employees the living wage. As explained by S., the LWF advances not only ethical but also commercial arguments when seeking to convince employers to accredit:

> So, obviously there is the moral side, and then there's also the business sense. Because as much as we recognise that, when an organisation is large, it will cost them potentially a lot of money to go from Minimum Wage for 2,000 to the Living Wage, it can cost a lot. But we do say that there are some business benefits, in terms of retention of staff, and more productivity, this sort of thing, […] for organisations that are sort of already engaged, there are lot of reasons why they want to do it. From

> the sort of more commercial view, where they might be the first organisation in their regional sector to accredit, so it's about getting promotional opportunities.[196]

Potential economic gains for the company include increased productivity, the ability to attract and retain a motivated workforce and reduced training costs associated with a high turn-over (Wills et al 2009). Employers may also choose to implement the living wage for corporate social responsibility motives, as part of a business strategy to polish their reputation. Thus, the ability to display the 'Living Wage Employer' logo allows them to look generous and receive good press (Freyssinet 2019).

Additionally, the implementation of the living wage might have negative ramifications on other working conditions. Higher payroll costs associated with the living wage may be absorbed by companies by reducing other labour costs, such as reducing staff numbers, hours, cutting equipment expenses or increasing the workload. In their study of the impact of the implementation of the living wage, Wills and Linneker (2012) revealed that in most cases, companies' transition to the living wage was managed through a fixed price outsourcing contract and was associated with an increase in labour costs of only 0.2%. For many workers, the introduction of the living wage led to staff cuts and reduced overtime work, and did not significantly increase their income (Ibid). The implementation of the living wage does not amount to a commitment to fundamentally change the company's business model which, as seen in Chapter Five, is primarily founded on minimising labour costs in the cleaning sector. As shown by S.'s account, the LWF has no capacity to ensure that the transition to the living wage will not negatively affect other aspects of employees' working conditions:

> S: Yeah, I mean this does come up as an issue that we always try and avoid. […] So, if it's got to the point where they actually agree and they come to us and say 'we've done the calculation again and actually we might have to cut hours or we might have to' you know, whatever it might be, we usually say to them that we don't think it's appropriate for us to accredit. Our first approach would be to say: 'are you sure you won't pay it, is there no way around this?' But our view is that we never want the accreditation to make people worse off. So we would only let organisations accredit if we think it's going to benefit employees. If there's any way that it comes out that actually it would not benefit, we would be against this.
> C: And do you always get access to that information?
> S: I mean this is the thing, I guess we can only make decisions on information we have access to.[197]

[196] S., Programme Manager at the Living Wage Foundation
[197] S., Programme Manager at the Living Wage Foundation SHOULD BE THIS IBID

Whilst employers may decide to pay their workers the living wage, labour remains a cost to be minimised. A living wage policy within a company is not incompatible with an intense work rhythm, harsh workplace discipline and bullying practices. This is illustrated by Katitus's experience working for a cleaning company that is an accredited Living Wage Employer:

> I've never had such a bad relationship with my managers and my colleagues because I'd never seen a company as bold and as shameless as [employer name]. It is the worst cleaning company I've seen in my whole life and where I've ever worked. And it is not only me saying this, many of my colleagues also complain. […] Firstly, the language they use is intimidation. Since they arrived at [workplace name] they arrived intimidating. Breeding fear. […] Because they breed fear, dismissing people, moving people over. 'Here we are the masters and you are the slaves, you will be quiet and not say anything, we don't let you say anything'. They have this mentality.[198]

The implementation of the living wage can entail non-quantified costs for workers, as companies may compensate for the added wage costs by making workers pay in other ways. It therefore allows companies to benefit from an enhanced reputation as responsible employers whilst incurring no significant additional costs (Freyssinet 2019). Thus, as other corporate social responsibility initiatives, the living wage accreditation system facilitates rather than restrains a company's continued ability to extract value by enhancing its legitimacy (Baars 2020).

Another issue related to advocating for employers to pay the living wage is that it artificially sets a limit to the scope of workers' demands when fighting against low pay. Advocating for the living wage relies on a moral rather than an economic argument, as it frames the issue of low pay in terms of poverty rather than in relation to unequal rewards in the labour market or the under-valuation of certain forms of work (Bennet and Lister 2010). Despite the strong emotive power of the notion of 'poverty pay', seeing low pay through this lens limits our understanding of a decent wage to what would provide for workers' mere subsistence needs, delegitimising more ambitious demands.

In addition, by seeking to persuade employers to voluntarily implement the living wage, the LWF adopts a 'top-down' approach that fails to empower workers. Because of its transformative potential, the *process* of campaigning is as important as its immediate outcome (Bassel 2013, Hughes and Woodcock 2023). Yet workers have no input in the LWF's advocacy work. Rather than negotiated locally with workers directly affected by low pay, the

[198] Katitus, cleaner at a property management company

calculation of the London living wage is carried out each year by the Greater London Authority Economics, constituted by a team of economic analysts who are external to the workforce (Bennet and Lister 2010). Employers' decision to transition to the living wage remains entirely voluntary and as such reinforces rather than challenges existing power relations. Performing this 'concession' allows employers to appear generous, reinforcing the narrative that they exercise legitimate authority over employees (Baars 2020). From the point of view of workers, being granted the living wage takes away an opportunity to take action, strengthen their bargaining capacity and negotiate wages in relation to what can be afforded, on the basis of company accounts and their role in production. As a form of collective action, negotiation would be a more empowering experience for workers.

7.5 Strikes and trade union organising

Going on strike and organising through trade union campaigns is a crucial form of workplace resistance. After outlining the challenges in organising migrant cleaners and how new grassroots trade unions have, to an extent, successfully overcome those obstacles and won significant campaigns, this section analyses the benefits as well as exposes the limitations in participants' experiences organising with trade unions.

7.5.1 Organising the so-called 'unorganisable'

Cleaners have often been considered 'difficult to organise' by mainstream unions. In fact, the absence of mobilisation remains the norm in the cleaning industry, which remains largely un-unionised (Holgate 2021). Outsourcing and high levels of precarity in the sector reinforce time poverty, high turn-over rates and atomised workplaces, all of which combine to limit the bonding amongst fellow workers that is required for successful collective mobilisation. Violeta's experience provides an illuminating account of the range of difficulties encountered when seeking to organise with groups of cleaners:

> I think divides in workplaces, overcoming like… racial divides; different contracts, so people who have different entitlements which creates resentment between them; languages, organising with multiple languages, people who don't speak English or don't have a shared common language between them. That's difficult. Shift patterns. So, for example for security, it's 24 hours. So, you're never going to be able to get all workers from that workplace at the same time because there is always going to be people on shift. And people who work multiple jobs, to try and find a time when they're all available is

> really difficult. And often the conversations take a lot of time, to properly debate and agree things. Meeting space, location. So, having access to workplaces. We don't have recognition deals, we don't have access to the workplace, so you have to meet in the park or meet somewhere. So that's really difficult.[199]

Diverse national and cultural origins at the workplace can be divisive, undermining the potential for successful collective mobilisation. A cleaner's account shows how managers provoked racial tensions through favouritism, which posed a particular challenge when organising with cleaners at the LSE:

> But you know at LSE, because of the mixed culture there are some people, they look up to their managers because they are their native people. […] So, we get a few more of the other nationalities, like the Congolese who were joining more than the Nigerian colleagues, because the managers were Nigerians. So, the Nigerians were thinking that it would look bad to the managers. But the Congolese – they supported, they became members. […] Some Nigerian managers would speak to their people in their language and say 'don't join, don't join the union. Don't listen to [interviewee name], blablabla'. […] But it was a really hard sight because the managers, having their friends, you know they would tell them not to strike because they would get promoted, they would get into management, they would get a full-time job.[200]

Outsourced cleaners' weak structural power, due to the ease with which they can be replaced, limits the impact of strikes (Holgate 2021). As seen in Chapter Two, there is a large available supply of migrant labour for low-paid jobs as a result of global inequalities and migrants' dual frame of reference. The ease with which migrant cleaners can be recruited limits their bargaining power when they engage in industrial action. This is compounded by the possibility of hiring agency staff to break strikes. This was a common phenomenon even before government reforms made it legal for businesses to hire agency staff to break strikes, as a response to the railway workers' industrial action in July 2022 (Pickard 2022). Indeed, as outsourced cleaners' employment contracts often include mobility clauses, it is possible for large facilities management companies to bring in employees from other sites to cover for workers on strike. I observed this strike breaking tactic being used by companies in several instances throughout my experience as a UVW caseworker. As the outsourced workers at St Mary's Hospital went on strike in November 2019, it soon became clear that Sodexo, their employer at the time, had brought in a coachload of cleaners from one of their sites in Manchester to cover for the striking workers (See also: Hughes and Woodcock 2023). During

[199] Violeta, former UVW organiser
[200] Anonymised interviewee

the cleaners' strike at the Ministry of Justice in January 2019, there were also strong suspicions that agency staff had been hired illegally to cover and minimise the impact of the strike. Although such practice was illegal at the time, it was difficult to prove and challenge in court. In workplaces with a small cleaning workforce – according to Violeta, the Ministry of Justice only had 16 cleaners working on site at the time – companies can easily covertly recruit agency staff, or require their non-cleaning staff to cover the striking cleaners' work. Whilst such practices are not without financial costs for employers, who need to cover the additional costs of transporting and training staff who are unfamiliar with the working environment, they do minimise the disruptive impact of strikes and undermine workers' leverage.

The lack of a trade union culture, or a mistrust of unions, is another obstacle to collective mobilisation. Some participants recalled experiencing difficulties convincing their colleagues to unionise due to lack of awareness of what unions were or negative past experiences. In particular, some came from countries where the trade union movement was violently repressed, or where trade unions were not independent from the government or employers. According to Blackberry, his colleagues' political culture and the lack of civil rights in their country of origin were significant factors undermining unionisation:

> To be honest, organising the cleaners was very, very difficult. Because the majority of us, we come from countries where people don't have proper human rights, where a lot of people live in fear because of authoritarian governments. You know when the government is very authoritarian, very powerful, were everybody is fearful to talk to people who are above them. Talking to the manager, you don't want to do that. So, it was very difficult.[201]

Finally, there are psychological barriers against collective mobilisation. As seen in the previous chapter, many participants experienced poor well-being as a result of accrued experiences of precarity. This can put some in a position where they do not have the sense of self-worth or hope that is necessary to take action. Violeta provided an interesting account of the psychological reasons for some cleaners' reluctance to mobilise:

> I think that fear is the number one thing. Because it's like if you weren't scared of taking strike action, of the consequences and the risk of losing your job, the risk of facing reprisals, the financial constraints, the fear of how it will affect rent. If you didn't have fear, then you might as well just strike and go for it, right? So I think fear is one of the biggest obstacles. Hopelessness. And it's very easy to be hopeless I think. The feeling that it's not possible. This is a weird one. Maybe it's true, maybe it's

[201] Blackberry, cleaner at a university in Central London

> not, but self-worth […] To ask for more you have to think that you're worth more. And I think it's so psychologically abusive, a lot of these workplaces, and the structures in place, that you're kind of taught to think and feel that that's all there is and that's what you're worth and that's your place in society.[202]

Thus, the adverse effects of outsourcing and poor working conditions on workplace solidarity, weak bargaining power, racial divides, the lack of a union culture and a sense of hopelessness among some all conspire against the kind of workplace solidarity that is necessary for successful collective mobilisation.

7.5.2 The success of new independent unions

Despite these challenges, new independent grassroots unions co-led by precarious migrant workers have undertaken successful organising initiatives. Those unions – including United Voices of the World (UVW), the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and the Cleaners and Allied Workers Union (CAIWU) – emerged from the inability of mainstream, larger unions to address the needs of precarious migrant workers. Indeed, the genesis of grassroots cleaners' unions can be traced back to the breakdown of the partnership between the Latin American Workers Association (LAWAS) and Unite. In April 2004, as Unite agreed to provide LAWAS with an office in its premises in North London, nearly 1000 Latin American workers, predominantly in contract cleaning, became Unite members (Lagnado 2016). The purpose of LAWAS was to represent the interests and address the specific needs of London's Latin American cleaners, whilst integrating them within the wider British trade union movement. However, because of the fragmented nature of contract cleaning, whereby workers are scattered across various, small workplaces, most cleaners did not fit within Unite's organising model, focused on large workplaces with high union density. LAWAS therefore did not have the status of a formal union branch, and as a result lacked access to organising support, facilities, and democratic decision-making mechanisms within Unite. Forced to operate outside formal union structures, LAWAS developed its own tactics and agenda, increasingly resorting to noisy pickets and protests, and expressing solidarity with undocumented migrant workers. The increased discrepancy with Unite's organising doctrine and agenda led to disagreements with the union leadership. The latter increasingly withdrew its support until LAWAS split from Unite to create a cleaners' branch within the smaller,

[202] Violeta, former UVW organiser

direct action-oriented union the Independent Workers of the World and eventually formed a union of its own, the IWGB (Lagnado 2016).

Building what Però (2019) calls 'communities of struggle', encouraging mutual support in different aspects of life in addition to organising in the workplace, is at the centre of the appeal of new independent unions to migrant workers. As seen in the previous chapter, low-paid migrant workers experience intersecting and cumulated social disadvantages and thus have complex, inter-related needs that cannot be addressed independently (Holgate 2009). Beyond providing support and representation in work-related issues, those unions offer a range of services and activities particularly adapted to members' needs as migrants, such as English language classes, assistance and workshops on housing, benefits, and migration issues, as well as signposting members to relevant organisations. According to Sam, IWGB's ability to respond to the broader concerns of its predominantly migrant membership and offer varied forms of support is at the heart of its appeal:

> So, as part of our organising, especially at the IWGB, we are a union that represents a lot of migrant workers. […] We try to engage as much as possible, and most of the time as part of our engagement with members we find out about a lot of the things they're going through. Issues with housing, or issues with the language barriers, issues not knowing how the system works. So, most of the time we find out a lot of things, like they're having issues with their immigration status. All sorts of issues that they have and as a union, and as an organiser, I always try and provide them with tools that they can use in order to overcome those barriers.[203]

Sensitivity to the needs and lived experiences of members, not just as low-paid workers, but also as migrants and members in wider society, is therefore one of the key reasons why members join.

A multicultural approach also enables members to develop strong social bonds, favouring trade union engagement. Indeed, the predominance of a common cultural identity at both IWGB and UVW – with Latin Americans constituting over 60% of UVW's membership – has built a strong sense of community. Members' shared language, religion, food, and festive culture allows bonds to develop spontaneously, with union meetings at UVW's office often transforming into impromptu Latin American parties. Whilst both unions were born from London's Latin American community, they became increasingly diverse as they grew and workers from different cultural origins joined. This was reflected by efforts to draw on other musical and food traditions at parties and in protest actions, organising events in a

[203] Sam, organiser at the IWGB

way that is inclusive and representative of the cultural diversity of the membership. For many, the union represents a safe space where they could receive comfort and meet people they could trust and identify with. Strong community bonds also favour the recruitment of new members. Indeed, this applies particularly to cleaners whose workday is fragmented in both time and space, split over different jobs scattered across London. Since the latter have limited opportunities to meet and socialise with colleagues at work, union recruitment would often take place through the community.

Indie unions begin from below, adopting a participatory organising approach. Participants' engagement and strong sense of ownership was also connected to their negative experiences with mainstream unions. Nadiuska deplored Unison's top-down organising approach, its lack of representation and its reluctance to involve workers in strategic decision-making or recognise the significant part played by student activists throughout the campaign against outsourcing at King's College London:

> But as I said to you it was a little bit complicated with Unison, the union that was in charge, so it was a little bit complicated. With the people who is in charge of the Unison. […] The fact that they don't want to share information, they don't want to explain what they do […] They didn't recognise that the students had been there for us and King's staff, and they don't want to share information, everything has to be secret, using the staff because...[204]

She contrasted this with her experience at UVW, where she felt she could have a say in meetings and participate in building the organisation. She appreciated the transparent, democratic decision-making processes and structures at UVW:

> I like the fact that every time we had like… they used to do like a kind of meeting, you can give your opinion, every time they have like, they always call all the members like: 'we are going to have a meeting for the beginning of the year, we are going to talk about the new things, do you want to be part of…' […] So everyone, every member is given an opportunity to be part of that. That's something nice, you understand, they explain you… They send you [invitations to meetings, email updates…] every month, every week, the beginning of the year they've been sending this to you, explaining what they're going to do, what they'll be talking about. Everyone is free to join that, if you want to be part of the General Assembly you can come, you understand? For me it's a bit more like, it's all very open, it's not behind closed doors.[205]

[204] Nadiuska, cleaner at King's College London
[205] Nadiuska, cleaner at King's College London SHOULD THIS BE IBID

Indeed, mainstream unions mediate between workers and their employer, on behalf of rather than with the cleaners, with the negotiation table as their preferred arena. In contrast, indie unions prioritise action that secures the direct involvement of its members.

The IWGB and UVW's use of bold, innovative tactics directly led by members has been key to successfully mobilise migrant cleaners. Their lack of recognition agreements – which, if they were to pursue as a strategy, would rapidly be nullified because of the frequent change of contracts in the cleaning sector - and the limited operational impact of outsourced cleaners' strikes has forced indie unions to operate outside institutional frameworks and to deploy a wider range of tactics, cultivating a culture of confrontation and direct action (Adams 2023). Cleaners have undertaken actions that take employers by surprise and disrupt the normal running of events. These include loud protests during the exam period at the LSE in May 2017 (Hayns 2017). The tactic of occupation, taking over the space of client organisations, was also used by UVW members at St Mary's Hospital in November 2019 as well as by cleaners at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in August 2018, who entered a council meeting and forced council representatives to agree to negotiate (Shenker 2019). The strong performative element of cleaners' industrial action, through loud, festive pickets and protests, compensates for its otherwise limited disruptive impact. Indie unions have also deployed communicative tactics focused on shaming the client and causing reputational damage, mobilising additional support from activists and the community. As seen above, Owen Jones's public support of the LSE cleaners' strike and refusal to give an invited lecture boosted the publicity of the campaign and gave a major blow to the university's public image. This was in the context of a strong student-led Justice for Cleaners campaign, which effectively built alliances and a 'community of struggle' on campus, in part through the set-up of weekly breakfasts for cleaners, where the latter shared their experiences, and students and staff showed their solidarity (Acciari and Però 2017).

Through an organising approach that is member-led, multicultural and sensitive to the needs of migrant workers, and by deploying a wide range of tactics that place workers at the centre of the action, indie unions have managed to overcome barriers to organising in the cleaning sector. They thus secured an impressive record of successful campaigns, bringing about considerable improvements to cleaners' workplaces and personal lives.

7.5.3 Benefits of strikes and trade union organising for cleaners

Participants who had taken part in trade union campaigns reported considerable material benefits, such as increased salaries and improved terms and conditions. Referring to the cleaners' victory against outsourcing at King's College London in September 2018, Peter said:

> And with King's, we gained so much. We gained pension, which was really good compared with the contractor before, we had better terms and conditions, like more days on annual leave, pension, as I said. The money, compared with the old salary, was much better. It was good, you know. It was better we had before with the other… With those contractors.[206]

For Blackberry, increased wages meant being able to work shorter hours, have more free time and a better quality of life: 'If they increased the money we could work less hours. This is why we are fighting. And why we came in house. We didn't come in-house to continue working as contractor. We moved in-house to get the privilege of working less hours and have a normal life.'[207] Similarly, many of the participants who had obtained full sick pay following a successful campaign told me that this had significantly improved their well-being and peace of mind. For example, Marga said:

> I am extremely happy, because for example at the end of December and in January I had covid. And I didn't go to work for two weeks and they didn't pay me because they don't pay Sick Pay. I am a healthy person, I am 50 years old, and I rarely ever get sick. But, if at some point I get a problem or my partner does – he was in the hospital for two weeks - , and they didn't pay him, they didn't even give him the certificate. […] They didn't pay him, so I would be scared of getting ill. If we get ill and can't go to work, what are we going to live on? […] So, now I am relaxed, because if I ever get sick, I know that they will pay me.[208]

The promotion of those gains then favoured further union recruitment, as they constitute 'good reasons' to unionise and build trust. The succession of UVW victories allowed the union to constitute a collective memory of past struggles. Indeed, union meetings often began with a round of introductions, with veterans of previous campaigns sharing the story of their victory, inspiring prospective strikers.

As well as obtaining improved pay and conditions, participants also derived emotional rewards from their involvement with a union. Firstly, for many, joining a union

[206] Peter, former cleaner at King's College London
[207] Blackberry, cleaner at a university in Central London
[208] Maria, cleaner at a school in South West London

was critical to the process of conscientisation discussed above. Indeed, organisations can play a key role in helping individuals make sense of their experiences, frame an issue as an injustice, attribute blame and identify potential courses of action (Goodwin and Jasper 2015). Thus, Natalia recalled her first encounter with a UVW organiser, where she was told for the first time that something could be done about the abuse she had suffered at work:

> So, I thought 'finally someone is saying something positive!' It was a hope, a light in my life, to have someone telling me that I could do something. That I wasn't a thing. I felt like a machine that had to be ready and you could press the button at 6am to start work, without eyes, mouth, nothing. Feeling that I was not a thing but a person, because for me it's very important to express my opinions and how I feel. […] Finally, someone understood me, listened to me and for the first time, I thought that I could get something from this. This illuminated me.[209]

Trade unionism can open up new horizons, revealing that it is possible to resist and effect change. For example, Woman for Truth, who, with her colleagues and with the help of UVW, forced the university where she worked to bring its cleaners back in house, told me that joining UVW and having conversations with organisers were key to develop the consciousness and power needed to take action. She said: 'Then, I joined UVW and UVW helped us and enlightened us. Gave us the ideas. I was one of those who were trying to push my colleagues to join UVW. Because we could win, we could be brought in-house, we could achieve something better.'[210] She then developed long-lasting leadership skills as a result of her trade union engagement, allowing her to support and train her colleagues:

> Actually, they [my colleagues] thought that I was the union. If something happens, anything that happens at [the university], even outside, they said "call [Woman for Truth]". That's why I am always busy. Always busy. I always let them know what I know. If it something I cannot manage, I try to get better advice and get a better understanding. Because I don't want to mislead someone who doesn't understand what their rights are. But I advise, honestly, I am the counsellor at [my workplace]. I will just tell them "go this way, do this". Sometimes they don't have to go to UVW. I am the one to follow them to the meeting, to accompany them to the meeting to make sure they understand what it is.[211]

In the case of the cleaners at the LSE, the campaign created a highly combative workforce who successfully built long term power in the workplace, with local leaders able to represent themselves and their colleagues.

[209] Natalia, former cleaner and UVW organiser, translated from Spanish
[210] Woman For Truth, former cleaner a university in Central London
[211] Ibid

Those who had participated in trade union campaigns also felt transformed and empowered by the experience. Some were able to grow and build self-confidence after having experienced abuse. For example, Valentina said:

> I think I've claimed my rights because I've been psychologically mistreated, practically, and physically! Physically, because it is trauma, that we…. I still don't speak English well, but I could recover part of my self-esteem. Because that kind of treatment lowers your self-esteem psychologically! I felt bad. But I met courageous comrades at the union, they accompanied me […] Because we have to understand, migrants, foreigners need to understand that the fact that we come here to find work doesn't mean that we need to be trampled over by other people, even if they speak English very well.[212]

Some felt treated with greater respect at work as a result of the campaign. When asked about the impact of trade union campaigns on cleaners' lives, Violeta recounted a conversation with a cleaner who had participated in a campaign to be paid the London Living Wage at the Ministry of Justice:

> She was talking about what's changed, and obviously at the Ministry of Justice is somewhere where we got less wins. There have been small pay rises, but she was like, 'I don't know, but something has.' And she was like 'Respect, before I'd got to work and my cleaning trolley would be pushed away from the toilet [civil servants at the Ministry of Justice would push their way through despite the toilets being closed for cleaning], and then there was a story published in article with my face, and a woman came in and offered me £20 and said "sorry for the other day". I said "I don't want your £20, I'm earning my bread and butter through work"', but the fact that it was like… I think the respect, and the feeling that you have people behind you to fight. And then also obviously wages rising and people being able to take sick leave.[213]

Similarly, Nida told me that her interactions and cooperation with the doctors and nurses at the hospital where she worked had improved after becoming an NHS employee as a result of a campaign against outsourcing: 'Yeah, because now even nurse and doctors, they're looking on us, now it's different. You know, you can see because it was: "Ah this is company [cleaning contractor] people there". But now it's getting better.'[214]

Indeed, for many cleaners, going on strike had made their struggle visible in spaces where they were previously invisible. UVW and IWGB strikes and protests were notoriously loud and festive. Armed with typical picket line gear – vuvuzelas, kitchen pots, drums, loudspeakers and banners – cleaners were able to occupy and claim ownership of the spaces they cleaned. Strikes were opportunities to carve out moments of freedom from workplace

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[212] Valentina, former cleaner at a famous hotel chain in Central London
[213] Violeta, former UVW organiser
[214] Nida, cleaner at St Mary's Hospital

routine and discipline. In this sense, taking part in a campaign has a strong symbolic value, making power visible and reversing existing power relationships (Bassel 2013).

For many, joining a union was a valuable opportunity to be part of something, to exist not just as a migrant cleaner, but as an activist building a movement. Some felt that they were fighting for something bigger than themselves, beyond their individual interests, struggling for and in solidarity with migrant workers in general. Winning a campaign had made them feel useful, improving not just their own lives but also those of others. Thus, Rosa told me that she felt proud to have fought for better wages at the luxury store where she worked, even if she never enjoyed them herself as her employment was terminated soon after the campaign:

> Yes, I've had a very good experience of being in a union. Even if I am not working at [company name] anymore, I have the satisfaction of having obtained a higher wage for people who are working there now. Even if I don't know them. So, I feel good. Some people say: "Now we are being kicked out after working so hard for a higher wage! What was the point of working so hard? Who did we do it for?". I tell them: "you've worked so hard because you know that this was your responsibility. You've had the courage to do it".[215]

Indeed, regardless of whether any materials gains were obtained as a result, many cleaners appeared to develop a sense of class solidarity after taking part in a campaign or action against their employer. For example, Valentina, the only cleaner at her workplace who protested to shame her employer for months of unpaid wages, felt moved to see so many union members and activists come and support her, despite not having an immediate interest in participating in the protest:

> I felt very good, I felt supported, I felt empowered! [laughs] This day was historical for me because I felt protected, I was by myself... […] People I had never seen before were accompanying me in a struggle. For just one person they made the time to come. It was important. I liked it. I haven't been able to go to the union because of the coronavirus, but when this is over, I think that what they've done for me, I will do it for them.

We can therefore see how collective mobilisation creates ties amongst members, who develop a sense reciprocity and readiness to fight for their union comrades, reinforcing union engagement.

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[215] Rosa, former cleaner at Chanel

7.6 Limitations of trade union organising

However, there are limitations to the successes of trade union initiatives, and much that remains to be done to consolidate the victories won through collective mobilisation. These include the dangers of the servicing model, lack of representation, failure to protect workers against retaliation on the part of their employer and difficulties maintaining power in the workplace in the aftermath of successful campaigns. To illustrate those difficulties, this section focuses on UVW as an organisation in which I have had a deep insight throughout my fieldwork research.

7.6.1 The dangers of the servicing model

To what extent have new independent unions managed to develop members' capacity to act collectively? Arguably, they are yet to overcome the servicing model, whereby union activities revolve around providing services to individual members (Colling 2006). Under this approach, services are offered to union members as consumers, who pay their dues in exchange for the insurance that they will receive union support should they face problems at work. Although existing literature highlighted the centrality of campaigning and collective action to UVW's organising practices (Però 2019), my findings show that a considerable proportion of UVW's time and resources remain dedicated to individual casework. Indeed, access to individual representation and advice is an important reason why members join. When asked how she became a member, Tamara said:

> I found out about it through a friend who was in the union. So, she told me that I should become a member, that it was a very good union, because we didn't know the laws here. And on top of that the membership fees were very low, and if we ever had a problem, there were there to help us, and it was very good. So, this is why I became a member.[216]

One of the specificities of UVW as a union was that members could receive assistance immediately upon joining. For many members, this was UVW's key initial appeal. For example, LaPiti said: 'I went to LAWRS [Latin American Women's Rights Service][217], and they recommended UVW to me, saying that unlike other unions, in this union you didn't have to

[216] Tamara, office cleaner in Central London
[217] A charity that offers legal advice and counselling to Latin American women in the UK

wait three months before they would help you.' [218] Indeed, many members joined UVW with a pre-existing workplace issue. In these instances, the expectation of individual representation services, rather than a pre-existing interest in trade unionism and a commitment to collective values, is the main impetus for unionising.

Over reliance on individual casework becomes problematic for the long-term survival of the organisation. Whilst an important basis for recruitment, members' expectation to receive individual assistance can fail to develop into a more active engagement in trade union activities. As seen above, it was not uncommon to see UVW members cancelling their membership after having received assistance with their case. As the union grew, the rate at which members applied for assistance increased, but in a way that was disproportionate to the union's growth. As a small union (currently with only seven paid staff) with limited finances, UVW did not have the resources to adequately assist each member individually. Working as a UVW caseworker, it quickly became obvious that the union was experiencing intense individual demands. UVW offices were chaotic, crowded with distressed members seeking assistance, with the union phone's ringtone as a constant background noise. Quiet moments to reflect, prepare cases and draft letters were a rarity. In the hope of regulating the constant stream of members turning up to the office, the union adopted the policy that only members who had previously booked an appointment over the phone would be able to see a caseworker. This was a source of frustration for many members who expected to receive immediate assistance, especially when they experienced emergencies. Working as a caseworker was stressful and emotionally difficult, having to manage members' expectations and follow up on existing cases, whilst each appointment involved opening a new case. This resulted in burnt out staff and demoralised members who, dissatisfied with the outcome of their case and the quality of the representation, distanced themselves from the union. LaPiti became disillusioned with the union as her case was not resolved promptly:

> For me a union was like a mother and father. I thought that if you paid your membership, they would help you and support you. But if this is not what it is, I need to know it. The members think this is what the union is. I don't have many problems because I avoid them as much as I can but when I do have problems, I want the union to resolve it for me. I don't care if the union have 50 cases, I only know about my case. […] There is case that is open since May, now it's December and this is still not resolved.[219]

[218] LaPiti, cleaner at a cosmetics store in Central London
[219] LaPiti, cleaner at a cosmetics store in Central London

Indeed, a lack of understanding of trade union values, or a perception of unions as organisations that merely provide individual services, can shape expectations of what trade unionism is. As Violeta explained:

> It's hard, I think… To be an active member of a community in London when there's not the consciousness of the importance or need for it. I think consciousness is a big thing. As I was saying, at the beginning, I didn't know what a union was. I'm sure that if I had gone [to a union] then, not knowing what a union was and I had signed up and had an issue at work, I would have just phoned them about my problem at work, I wouldn't be getting involved. Because that was my understanding of what a union was for, what a union did.[220]

As the union does not have the capacity to meet members' expectations for individual representation, many are demoralised, resulting in tensions and a potentially declining or stagnating membership. Additionally, a union model focused on individual representation fails to empower members, who rely on the union to resolve workplace issues on their behalf. Indeed, throughout my time at UVW, it was not uncommon for members whose case had been recently resolved to return with a new grievance only a few weeks later.

7.6.2 Lack of inclusivity and representation

Despite their considerable level of membership participation, new independent unions are not immune from oligarchic tendencies, with decision making power concentrated in the hands of a few union staff members. Union leadership is often not representative of the people they are organising, as top positions tend to be held by white men (Holgate 2021). Union structures are often democratic in form, but not in substance: despite the existence of formal democratic processes, such as elections for leadership positions or AGMs to decide on the future direction of the organisation, members' participation is often low, which can lead to a self-replicating leadership (Ibid). For example, at both UVW and IWGB, the last elections for the General Secretary position were uncontested, and long-standing organisers tend to retain considerable influence on decision making processes.

Difficulties overcoming unequal power relations within the membership partly explain the low participation in decision-making processes as well as the lack of democratic

[220] Violeta, former UVW organiser

representation. Initially born from Latin Americans working in London's cleaning sector, UVW's dynamism attracted many supporters and activists who over time began to join the union and take up roles within it, forming groups associated with more qualified professions, such as lawyers or architects (Benavides 2021). Because of their higher levels of education, literacy, and social capital, the latter have been more inclined towards developing formal procedures, drafting constitutions and sophisticatedly worded motions. The influence of these new groups of workers changed the style of UVW meetings, indirectly undermining cleaners' participation. Indeed, the difficulties experienced by some cleaners were tangible when I observed and took part in the UVW's AGM in March 2021. Due to the covid-19 pandemic, the AGM took place online via Zoom. Prior to the meeting, UVW staff members and activists had put in considerable effort in encouraging as many members as possible to participate. A phone banking campaign was launched, aiming to contact every single member personally and invite them to attend. Workshops to inform members on the AGM procedures and discuss the proposed motions were also organised. Despite these efforts, the attendance and participation of cleaners of Latin American and African origin – who make up the bulk of UVW's membership – remained low. As a result, the debate was overwhelmingly dominated by white, English-speaking members employed in higher paid sectors.

There were many barriers to migrant cleaners' active participation in the AGM. Due to lack of IT skills, many felt uncomfortable using Zoom. Many did not have a quiet, private space at home from which to attend the meeting without being distracted or interrupted. For non-English speakers, communication was complicated by translation, often staggered due to bad online connection. Long working hours meant that many cleaners had not had sufficient time or headspace to adequately prepare and read the motions proposed, some of which had been written in an overly convoluted and legalistic style. Finally, unfamiliarity with the structure and the social codes involved in activist meetings meant that some felt uncomfortable participating. This resulted in decisions that could potentially involve diverting significant resources away from cleaners – despite them still constituting the bulk of the membership – towards sub-groups of workers in white collar jobs. Thus, cleaners were less able to take part and were directly disadvantaged by those decisions. Despite efforts to encourage participation, union structures reproduced existing social and economic inequalities within the membership.

This dynamic led to tensions amongst the membership, reflecting deeper, pre-existing feelings of marginalisation amongst non-English speaking members. In her interview, LaVoz expressed concerns about the union being ‘taken over’ by English speaking members, as many of the meetings were held in English and translated to Spanish, when they were previously primarily held in Spanish:

> But no, democratically it’s already… Before there wouldn’t be English members. We would only be Latinos. Now the talks and the campaigns are more for English people. […] I can’t identify much. I am not criticising the institution, it is a good union, they helped me a lot, I’ve developed a lot, I know many things, but they should give opportunities in other respects! […] Why should we exclude and remove the primary [Latin American] voice? The talks should be in Spanish and have an English translator. Not the opposite. [221]

In an attempt to reactivate union engagement among Latin Americans, in May 2021 UVW created Voces Hispanas Unidas (United Hispanic Voices), a group aimed at responding to the specific concerns and lived experiences of Spanish speaking UVW members. However, LaVoz doubted that the creation of this group would lead to greater inclusivity. Whilst Voces Hispanas Unidas was intended to be a specific space for Hispanic members to share experiences and encourage their participation in broader union structures, LaVoz did not believe that it would lead to improved representation, but rather that it would further entrench their marginalisation:

> But… Who is deciding, who is directing the union? The good positions are held by English people, and I think that we should have opportunities because the UVW union was created by and for Latin Americans. It started with Latin Americans. […] What he [The General Secretary] has done was to divide the union and put us apart, putting on one side those from here, and leaving us apart.[222]

More recently, efforts by the leadership to recalibrate its work towards its original mission and prioritise building collective action among precarious migrant workers have led to further tensions with some white-collar UVW members, as the latter found that their needs for individual casework resources were not met. In the case of the architecture workers, this divergence led to a split, and in November 2023 they left UVW to join Unite, the UK’s largest union. The group’s communications state the prospect of obtaining recognition deals with employers, as well as improved access to resources and casework support, as their rationale for joining Unite. Interestingly, UVW’s experience with

[221] LaVoz, cleaner at offices in Central London, translated from Spanish
[222] Ibid

architecture workers appears as the reverse story of Unite's initiatives with Latin American cleaners. Thus, both examples reveal the tension that can exist between a union's primary mission and organising approach on the one hand, and the inclinations, needs, and the reality of the work of some minority groups within the union on the other.

My findings point to significant challenges and developments that existing literature on new independent unions' organising initiatives (Pero 2019, Holgate 2021) has not yet addressed. Whilst offering a valuable insight into new independent union's efforts to represent primarily precarious migrant workers and remain inclusive through systematic translation in meetings and social media communications as well as a multicultural approach to running social events (Peró 2019), the literature does not discuss the limitations of such efforts as these organisations grow. My research revealed that the expansion to include more diverse types of workers can lead to two inter-related pitfalls that must be overcome in order to build an organisation that is truly from below: the reproduction of unequal power relations and conflicts between different types of workers within the union, and the erosion of democratic structures.

7.6.3 Difficulties moving on: employers' revenge and the campaign 'come-down'

Some participants found the aftermath of their campaign particularly challenging. Whilst they enjoyed improved pay and terms and conditions, this was sometimes at the cost of increased hostility at work, with antagonised colleagues and managers. For example, Chelita told me that the campaign for the London Living Wage at her workplace had been hugely divisive, breaking down the camaraderie and solidarity that previously existed:

> There were many changes [since we won the campaign]. For example, my bosses, a manager there, a supervisor: they barely speak to me. I told them that I was there if they want to speak but they ignore me. […] They used to come, they would be friendly, we would chat. We chatted a lot more. They would open up a bit more to the… to the cleaners let's say because right now there is a very tense atmosphere. As all the team is new, it's not like before. Before when we were fighting the Living Wage campaign, we were a team. We would all help each other out. But today we don't have that anymore. Now the bosses act very serious.[223]

[223] Chelita, cleaner at a luxury store, translated from Spanish

Rosa, a former cleaner at the same workplace, told me that out of the 15 cleaners who had actively participated in the living wage campaign in July 2019, all except two had either left or been dismissed by August 2020, at the time of the interview. As a punitive measure, their employer had decided to review the cleaners' immigration documents and dismissed those who did not have the right to work in the UK:

> They were all dismissed because of the campaign. Because they started picking on people who didn't have the immigration documents to work. Most of them were from Bolivia. […] Because they had come with a visa, the visa had expired and they were not legally allowed to keep working. As [company name] knew that 4 of us were Bolivians without documents, they decided to ask to review documents. Only those who had Spanish nationality could stay. The others were dismissed, as they were not in the country legally.[224]

Employers' attempts to intimidate and break union organisation can take even more extreme forms: in June 2009, after winning the London living wage, SOAS cleaners were called to 'an emergency staff meeting' by their company, only to find 40 immigration officers ready to detain and deport those without immigration documents (Hardy 2021). We can therefore see how, despite winning considerable victories, retaliation on the part of employers can prevent workers from developing long term power. Combined with the high turn-over rate in the cleaning sector, post-strike reprisals result in a situation where workplaces are deprived of their most combative workers with previous campaigning experience.

Following a successful campaign, it is not uncommon for cleaners to experience a 'campaign come-down', where they come to realise that despite tremendous organising efforts and significant improvements in their terms and conditions of employment, the nature of their work hasn't fundamentally changed, remaining deeply alienating and exploitative. This disappointment was particularly prominent among the LSE cleaners I interviewed, who became direct employees in June 2017 following a six months-long campaign against outsourcing. For example, one of them told me:

> There were no changes at all, whatsoever. This is why we now have another campaign. All the benefits we have is the sick leave, the 41 days annual leave and the pension contribution. Because we didn't have any of this with the contractor. These are the only changes. But if you look at the more physical changes, like working conditions, nothing has changed![225]

[224] Rosa, former cleaner at a luxury store, translated from Spanish
[225] Anonymised interviewee

Despite being directly employed by the LSE and obtaining improved terms and conditions, they reported still being treated as second class employees. In the words of one of the LSE cleaners: "We see the differences between the original LSE staff and us who [were brought in-house] recently. We can see that they treat us somehow differently. Even if we call them our colleagues now… you can see the difference, they don't treat us the same way."[226] Examples of unequal treatment mentioned by participants included not being on the same pay progression scheme, not being paid double for working on Sundays and not receiving an allowance for their uniform to be dry cleaned like other LSE staff. The cleaners also reported experiencing the same lack of respect and dignity at work as when they worked for the contractor. They deplored not having changing rooms and being forced to change in the corridors, as well as being required to use the back door to enter the university buildings and not being allowed to sit and spend time on campus before and after their shifts.

Added to that, the LSE cleaners had to endure a strongly antagonised management following the campaign. Indeed, when asked about his relationship with his managers, one of the cleaners said: 'It is very bad! They don't like us because we are fighters and we belong to UVW. They think that we are bad business for the school. I don't have a good relationship with any of my managers.'[227] Management's hostility towards the LSE cleaners manifested in a draconian disciplinary culture. In relation to LSE's human resources practices in the aftermath of the campaign, Guillem said: "So yes, material conditions change that, you can have better pay, better holiday and better sick pay but still be subject to terrible managerial practices. And this is something that I've seen among workers that were brought in-house. At LSE, I've never seen a more violent and despicable HR as the HR department at LSE. They are tremendously classist, racist and inhumane. One of the worst I've seen."[228]

Thus, improved formal terms and conditions can co-exist with bullying practices and a high rate of exploitation. Following the campaign, although the LSE cleaners had obtained improved formal terms and conditions, and, as seen above, were considerably empowered by the experience, they did not feel they had achieved greater dignity or respect at work. Whilst UVW turned its attention towards other workplaces that had not yet organised, the

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[226] Anonymised interviewee
[227] Anonymised interviewee
[228] Guillem, former IWGB organiser

LSE cleaners were left with a highly antagonised management and were still fundamentally dissatisfied with the nature of their work, with no clear vision or hope for a path forward.

7.7 The lessons learnt

The problems highlighted in the previous sections raise important questions, offering learning opportunities for workers seeking to transform their workplace experience. Rather than dictating the 'right' approach to be adopted, the aim of this section is to put forward important ingredients of success when campaigning and seeking to build a worker-led trade union.

7.7.1 Campaigning as a combination of multiple tactics

As seen above, individual acts, legal action and advocacy all have important limitations as strategies of resistance. Examples of successful cleaners' struggles show that no single tactic works as a panacea to achieve victory. Rather, a strategic combination of strikes, protests, media campaigns and litigation were used. In November 2020, previously subcontracted cleaners at the University of London were brought in-house, securing a pay rise, improved pensions, enhanced annual leave, as well as maternity and paternity leave. This was the fruit of almost a decade of struggle marked by strikes, protests, a media campaign, and a boycott of events held at the university's Senate House's building (Bindman 2020). As part of that campaign, the IWGB made an application for trade union recognition at the University of London, which was rejected by the Central Arbitration Committee on the basis that there was an existing voluntary recognition agreement in place with Unison. It then legally challenged the rejection of its application, arguing that it breached Article 11 of the European Convention of Human Rights on the fundamental right to collective bargaining. This was because, the argument goes, the IWGB was more representative of the employees at the University of London than Unison (Marshall and Woodcock, 2022). Although the case was not successful, it effectively drew attention to the campaign and publicly raised the issue of the limits of existing trade union rights. Marshall and Woodcock (2022) explain that:

> Although these legal cases were only one of many elements, the campaign was ultimately victorious at the University of London. Litigation alone could not have won the campaign, but at various points, it

> drew attention to the struggles taking place in the workplace. This is particularly effective in a sector like higher education where public image is so important to bosses. Through strikes, protests, and a boycott, the cleaners, security guards, and porters have all been insourced.

Thus, rather than isolated tactics to be used as substitutes for one another, media campaigns, strikes and legal action were each valuable tools which, when combined as part of a broader strategy, allowed the University of London cleaners to succeed.

The pioneering victory of the St Mary's hospital cleaners also illustrates the benefits of a campaigning strategy that combines different tactics. For the first time in history, an NHS trust was forced to bring its outsourced workers in-house, resulting in 1,200 cleaners across five hospitals becoming direct NHS employees and obtaining a significant pay rise (Weghmann 2023). The St Mary's workers first took strike action in October 2019. Throughout their campaign they used disruptive tactics, including noisy pickets, protests blockading the street, interruption of board meetings by activists and a silent sit-in demonstration inside the hospital. They benefitted from solidarity action from a wide network, including doctors at the hospital who put pressure on their employer by signing an open letter of support (Gayle 2020). Whilst negotiating with the Imperial Healthcare Trust, UVW submitted a report building a robust case against the outsourcing of ancillary services in hospitals from different angles, showing that it was associated with poorer patient health outcomes and led to poor treatment of staff, with no significant financial benefits (United Voices of the World, 2020). Thus, by presenting strong evidence that outsourcing in hospitals was morally, financially, and operationally unjustifiable, the report constituted an additional weapon, putting pressure on the Trust to give in to the workers' demands. Finally, as part of the campaign, UVW mobilised its legal team to file a high volume of individual and collective tribunal claims against Sodexo, the direct employer of the hospital workers at the time. Beyond obtaining financial compensation for the breach of individual members' employment rights, the purpose of submitting such a high number of claims was to increase pressure on their employer. Legal action served as evidence of the prevalence of unlawful practices, highlighting the incompetence of Sodexo management and the inefficiency of the outsourcing model. At the same time, it put pressure on Sodexo to discourage them from attempting to renew the contract with the NHS Trust. This strategy eventually forced Sodexo to recruit two additional HR partners to deal with the tribunal claims filed by UVW members.

These campaigns show that it is not the isolated use of a given tactic that allowed cleaners to win. Rather, in both cases, cleaners strategically drew from a combination of tactics, each subordinated to broader campaign goals.

7.7.2 Building a grassroots organisation: worker empowerment and politicisation

Worker empowerment can help overcome the union servicing model. I highlighted above the dangers of the latter: mainly focusing on providing individual services can lead to the passivity of members, who then rely on the union to act on their behalf. Unions can then experience a drain on resources and fail to meet demands for individual support, ultimately leading to a disillusioned membership. In addition, such a model fails to encourage members' participation in decision-making processes, leading to unrepresentative organisational structures that reproduce existing socio-economic inequalities. We therefore see the need to deepen participatory organising, building members' confidence to act collectively and resolve their own issues (Holgate 2021). Certain key elements of organising can contribute to such empowerment. Firstly, effective communication of the union's values is crucial in this respect, making it clear to workers upon their recruitment that they are expected or encouraged to actively participate in building the union (Ibid). Collectivising workplace issues and encouraging socialising can then help solidify a collective identity amongst the membership. Education and training, through organising or employment law workshops for example, can be a means to develop leadership skills and build capacity among members (Ibid). This would in turn encourage active participation in union organisational structures and help ensure that key strategic decisions are taken collectively by the workers themselves. Finally, maintaining a relationship of trust and care is also crucial to members' active participation (Weghmann 2023). It is important to note that all these elements of participatory organising are facilitated by the intimate size of indie unions and tend to be threatened as those unions grow.

Developing members' political consciousness is key to defeat the 'campaign come-down' that workers can experience. Politicisation can afford workers the capacity to grasp the nature of the employment relationship under the capitalist system and translate specific workplace grievances into a wider political issue. They are then equipped to articulate experiences of exploitation beyond bread-and-butter workplace demands and seek a

transformation of the world of work and of wider social relations (Holgate 2021). This entails a strategy that sees organising as a continuous, dynamic process rather than a linear progression that ends once specific concessions are obtained. Violeta's account highlights the need to sustain momentum and scale up demands, constantly building on previous victories:

> And it's also important to recognise – there's often a dispute come down. Like you have to fight so hard and you've got these people who are workplace leaders who are pouring all their time and energy into the union, when they're working crazy hours, stressful jobs. They're taking the lead in their workplaces, they've got the emotional toll, they've got so much spotlight on them. And it's like, you're fighting for a revolution, and you win!! But still, life hasn't fundamentally changed that much. You've often still got the same managers who are still absolute shits, you've just got a bit of a higher wage, a bit of sick pay, a bit more respect in the community, but it's suddenly this anti-climax. So, and I think the realisation that it's not over, the fight is not over, that's why it's so important for workplaces to stay organised and for people to stay organised, because otherwise a) conditions can be driven down, and b) that's just the beginning, that's touching the iceberg of what needs to happen.[229]

Organising should therefore build workers' ever-expanding power, each time taking action that is more powerful and ambitious - both in terms of its process as well as its objectives. According to Guilllem, organising should build workers' capacity to increase their collective control over the way work is organised:

> Organising is not only… People think they can go on strike just to improve their material conditions. You have that type of organising, that is about improving terms and conditions, but you also have to control your workplace. People should organise and go on strike more to change management practices, Hr practices, the way in which departmental meetings are held. The way in which managers take decisions. […] And I think this is what is really missing from labour organising. The question of who controls the workplace.[230]

Changes such as introducing democracy in the workplace, delegating decision-making power to cleaners, giving cleaners control over the labour process would amount to a complete transformation of the way the workplace is structured. Politicisation can energise workers and enable them to overcome the disappointment that may come after obtaining specific gains by shifting focus away from demands on wages and working conditions and instead toward questions of democracy and representation at the workplace, hence developing a wider social and political project.

7.8 Conclusion

[229] Violeta, former UVW organiser
[230] Guillem, former IWGB and UVW organiser

This chapter explored migrant cleaners' engagement with different resistance practices, highlighting the benefits and limitations of each tactic. Whilst individual acts of resistance carry the risk of retaliation and are in themselves insufficient to transform the workplace, they allow one to reclaim a sense of self-worth, which can contribute towards developing collective awareness and organisation. Legal action can lead to meaningful gains for individual claimants, yet it rarely leads to wider collective benefits. Whilst successful strategic litigation initiatives have led to positive developments in the law, these constitute marginal improvements rather than structural change, and are unlikely to have a practical impact on workers' lives in the absence of an effective enforcement mechanism. However, it is argued that legal action can in some instances contribute to workers' struggle by carrying a wider critique and highlighting the need for structural change in the world of work. Cleaners have also effectively used communicative strategies to amplify their message, rally support and put pressure on employers to make concessions. Yet, whilst this depends on mainstream media take-up of stories, discursive power alone is often insufficient to make change happen when it does not translate into economic damage for employer organisations. The example of the Living Wage Foundation illustrates the limited expressivist and instrumental value of strategies that rely on persuading employers. Finally, by organising with indie unions and taking successful industrial action, cleaners have secured concessions from employers, obtaining emotional rewards as well as significant material gains. Yet members' tendency to rely on the union to solve their problems, the lack of representation and participation in decision making structures, as well as difficulties moving on from the campaign come-down, all constitute limitations to trade union organising.

The research reveals that rather than using legal action, strikes, and media campaigns in isolation, successful campaigns have strategically coordinated those tactics. Thus, different forms of resistance should not be seen as substitutes for one another, but as useful tools that can be deployed at the service of a broader organising strategy. Whilst the successes of new independent unions have been much emphasised in academic debates on union revitalisation, the research revealed recent challenges encountered by those organisations, beyond their initial stages. For unions to be credible organisations that provide hope and vision, there needs to be a sustained effort to develop members' empowerment as well as their political consciousness, inspiring them to seek not only improvements in their wages and working conditions, but also increased power at the

workplace, in their own union, and in society more generally. Members' politicisation and self-emancipation can be both facilitated by the social bonds and intimacy in smaller sized unions. The challenge for indie unions is to sustain that sense of community as they grow.

8 CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has explored how migrant cleaners experience and navigate precarity in their everyday lives. Specifically, it examined participants' migration history and the initial challenges they faced after arriving in London, their experiences of precarity at work and beyond, and the resistance strategies they deploy. Two questions were central to this research: the first one aimed to explore London's migrant cleaners' experiences of precarity in different spheres of life, and the second one related to how they navigate and resist against those experiences. Few studies have a holistic approach to studying precarity, exploring experiences beyond the workplace. Seeking to apprehend cleaners' experiences holistically, I used participant observation and in-depth interviewing methods which generated rich insights, capturing subjective and intimate dimensions of cleaners' lives, such as their overall well-being, personal relationships, future aspirations, and decision-making processes.

This chapter starts with a summary of the main findings and contributions of this research. The findings complicate the neoclassical imagining of labour migration as a direct movement to a single destination, motivated by economic incentives. Cleaners' negotiations with the immigration regime and experiences of extreme exploitation and precarity after their arrival in London challenges the idea that UK migration policy is effectively managed, appropriately matching authorised migrants to labour market demands. Cleaners' workplace experiences and the direct connection between cleaning companies' business imperatives and cleaners' precarity and harsh working conditions also refute the neoclassical understanding of the employment relationship as a voluntary, mutually beneficial agreement between workers and employers. Cleaners' narratives show that precarity extends beyond the workplace to affect other spheres of life, revealing the interconnectedness and cumulative nature of experiences of precarity. The research highlights that cleaners' gender and status as racialised migrants were crucial to their experiences of precarity at work and beyond. Finally, cleaners' experiences of collective mobilisation show the need for an approach that strategically combines different forms of resistance. In light of the organising challenges faced by new independent unions, beyond

their initial stages, I advocate for workers' empowerment and politicisation as key organising principles. The chapter then explores the practical implications of these findings, outlining some recommendations for policy makers and the trade union movement, followed by an exploration of possible ways forward in future research on the challenges experienced by London's migrant cleaners.

8.2 Key findings

8.2.1 Conceptualising labour migration

The research nuances a common imagination of labour migration as a direct movement from one place to another as a result of people's rational economic choice to improve their income and employment opportunities (eg. Todaro 1969, Becker 1981). Most of my participants' journeys were complex and fragmented, motivated by multiple, inter-related factors. Whilst financial factors and employment opportunities were central to many cleaners' decision to migrate, this was often entangled with other, more personal motivations, such as the desire to re-unite with family members, travel, learn English, move on from heartbreak, and access educational opportunities for themselves and their children. The research also confirmed the relevance of gender in the motivations for migration (Martinez Buján 2015). Caring responsibilities and the best interests of children were at the heart of many female participants' decision to move to London. In contrast, financial factors and employment opportunities featured more prominently amongst male participants' discourses, in line with conventional gendered social expectations. Additionally, the findings confirm the role of social networks as intervening factors facilitating movement (Seven 2020). Many participants reported finalising their decision to move after being assured by acquaintances already living in London that they would have a place to stay and would rapidly find work following their arrival. For many, social connections were crucial to find housing and employment in London. In sum, these findings show that the decision to migrate was complex, highlighting that the cleaners at the heart of this study were not just economic agents in search of employment opportunities, but also human beings with personal desires, concerns, and affective ties.

For most participants, migration was a process rather than a direct movement from A to B. Their experience was mostly one of stepwise migration (King and Skeldon 2010, Toma and Castagnone 2015): more than half of the cleaners interviewed had first migrated to Spain, where they had established themselves and acquired a Spanish passport before moving on to London several years later, enjoying their European Union free movement rights. The latter often experienced the move to London as a regression and decline in their social status. Indeed, the decision to emigrate was often not informed by a long-term life project: many had fully settled in Spain, developed strong social ties and formed a family of their own, but were forced to move as they became unemployed when the 2008 financial crisis hit the Spanish economy. They therefore felt no real sense of ownership of their decision and were less prepared to endure the hardship associated with starting a new life in a different country. The research confirms that older migrants experience a particular vulnerability, as highlighted by existing research (Ciobanu et al 2017). For older participants, having to move to a different country, learn a new language and adapt to another culture was experienced as discontinuity in their life course. Overall, these findings suggest that we need a more fine-grained analysis of labour migration decision-making.

8.2.2 The reality of the UK immigration regime and labour market

My participants' experiences navigating immigration controls and the low paid labour market after their arrival contradict governmental portrayal of the UK migration policy as effectively managed, appropriately matching authorised migrants to a well-regulated labour market. Many had a variety of different immigration statuses overtime, with some reporting deliberately switching status and strategically choosing more advantageous visa options. Anderson and Ruhs' (2006) concept of semi-compliance is applicable to my findings, as some participants reported working in violation of the conditions attached to their immigration status at points in their lives. Many of my participants had difficulties accessing the formal labour and housing market, despite most of them having an EU passport, and the well-known demand for cheap migrant labour in low paid sectors. Securing a job was contingent on being able to provide a proof of address and opening a UK bank account, both of which required proof of employment. Initially excluded from official channels, many participants were thus 'trapped' in the informal sector, where they were vulnerable to extreme forms of

exploitation. For this reason, many initially relied on social connections and community networks to find employment and housing. The findings corroborate the ambiguous role of social networks, functioning simultaneously as tools of inclusion and exclusion (McIlwaine 2011). Many participants said they received considerable assistance from co-nationals, who were instrumental to their initial integration in London. But many also reported exploitative practices on the part of co-nationals, taking advantage of the vulnerability of new arrivals, for example by charging extortionate sums in exchange for crucial information or for letting people sleeping on their floor. The research shows that due to the unaffordability of housing in London, participants' reliance on the informal market to secure housing often persisted long after their arrival.

The finding of the extreme precarity experienced by my participants, most of whom had an EU passport and were legally resident, is an important contribution as it qualifies the focus on immigration controls as a driver of precarity that has been predominant in existing literature on migrant labour. The thesis highlights the need to move beyond De Genova's (2002) concept of deportability to fully understand the difficulties faced by migrant workers. Banki's (2013) notion of precarity place, which refers more generally to the vulnerability to removal from a physical place, rather than the risk of deportation from a national space because of the lack of legal status, is suggested as a more appropriate concept to understand the general challenges of migrant life.

8.2.3 Cleaners' experiences of precarity in the workplace and beyond

My findings highlight employers' and workers' conflicting interests, contradicting the neoclassical understanding of the employment relationship as a voluntary, mutually beneficial arrangement between individual employers and workers. The research reveals that cleaners' job precarity and harsh working conditions are the direct consequence of cleaning companies' business strategies and management imperatives. Prior research has highlighted the role of outsourcing in shaping cleaners' working conditions and cutting down labour costs (Wills 2008, Luis and Aguiar 2006, Grimshaw et al 2014). This thesis contributes to this literature and specifically offers a close focus on the different methods used by management to intensify cleaners' work. Excessive workloads and intense work rhythms are maintained by bullying practices, a harsh disciplinary culture, and HR systems designed to

de-legitimise complaints and suppress resistance, whilst concealing the inherent power imbalance between cleaners and their employers.

The analysis of cleaners' workplace experiences constitutes a deep dive into the cleaning sector and highlights the ways that the structural neoliberal context and management imperatives shaped participants' subjectivity and day to day experiences of work. Most of the cleaners interviewed had ambiguous feelings towards their job: many felt pride in their work, in the cleaning skills they had, and respected their job as the means of supporting their lives and relatives, yet deplored low pay and abusive employers, felt demoralised by the treatment they received at work and the social stigma attached to cleaning. Whilst they saw their work as purposeful and important, the structural context made it impossible to work in dignity.

In the context of a neo-liberal climate, the general degradation in terms and conditions of work, the decline in worker representation and the growth of non-standard forms of employment, the concept of precarity has become ever more popular (Standing 2011, Woodcock 2014, Alberti et al 2018). However, current understandings of precarity are often limited to workers' experiences of insecure employment. This thesis adopted a holistic approach to precarity, revealing its effects on cleaners' experiences beyond the workplace, in particular on their physical and mental health, housing situation and their family and social life. Overall, people's poor well-being and inability to sustain themselves and live decent lives despite having (several) jobs contradicts the mainstream idea that work is necessarily an exit from poverty. My participants' narratives, and the wider repercussions of their workplace experiences on their personal life and vice versa, show that experiences of precarity in different spheres of life are not isolated. Rather, they interconnect, accumulate, and mutually reinforce each other.

8.2.4 The relevance of gender, race, and migrant status to experiences of precarity

As shown throughout the course of this thesis, participants' gender, race, and migrant status were crucial to their experiences of precarity at work and beyond. Firstly, as migrants, for the most part people of colour from the Global South, they were predisposed to be employed in the cleaning sector. As seen in Chapter Four, in the context of global inequalities, the prospect of rapidly finding employment in London, where service jobs were

perceived to offer higher wages than in their home country, was a strong motivation for many people's decision to migrate. Many could only find work in the cleaning sector, as language barriers and lack of recognition of the qualifications they had obtained in their homeland limited their labour market options. Interviews with employers revealed that cleaning companies actively seek out certain nationality groups because they are seen as 'hard-working' and more exploitable than locals. Thus, as previously shown by Saucedo (2006), there is a deliberate strategy on the part of employers to hire migrant workers, with a view to keeping wages low and maintaining harsh working conditions.

Participants' positionality reinforced their workplace precarity and contributed to employers' abuse and impunity. Those who did not speak English were disproportionately vulnerable to illegal employment practices because they were not expected to be able to seek support and report abuse. Their race, gender, and migrant status also shaped managers' callous and contemptuous response to their concerns. This resonates with Waldinger and Lichter's (2003) idea that one of the reasons why employers prefer to employ migrants rather than 'their own kind' for low paid work is that it facilitates psychological distancing from morally unacceptable practices. My participants' positionality also contributed to their invisibility and stigma as cleaners. This is evident in the construction of cleaning as nightwork, widespread management instructions to be discreet and minimise interactions with the users of the spaces to be cleaned, and the prevalent blaming of cleaners for missing items in workplaces. As foreign born, BME workers employed by a third-party company, cleaners are seen as 'other' and are easy to scapegoat.

In addition to the overall gendering of cleaning, with women making up 81% of the workforce (Office for National Statistics 2018), the research revealed the existence of a gendered hierarchy within cleaning teams. Female participants reported often being given the hardest, most unpleasant jobs, such as cleaning toilets, whilst men are assigned tasks which are seen as more skilled and involve using machines. Thus, gender inequalities are reproduced within cleaning teams, confirming that gender oppression further devalues social reproductive work (Davis 1981). The gendered nature of cleaning work also contributes to the invisibility of the health issues that arise from it. Rather than sudden, one-off workplace accidents, participants more often suffered from the effect of long-term, repetitive straining movements, which are typical of conventionally female work. Yet occupational health and safety research, as well as the system for compensation for

workplace injury are more concerned with one-off, sudden accidents, which are more commonly experienced in workplaces where men predominate. This misunderstanding of the health issues that arise from cleaning can be seen as the product of gendered conceptions of 'work' and 'workers' (Wolkowitz 2006): cleaning is constructed as women's work and therefore not 'real work'.

Participants' gender, race and migrant identities also reinforced the difficulties they experienced beyond the workplace. The psychological challenges and pressures of migrant life were central to the widespread mental distress among participants: many suffered from social isolation, family separation, nostalgia for their past life, and a sense of status discord and failure of their migration project. Language barriers and lack of social connection and support network also reinforced their precarity, and added to their difficulties accessing housing, employment, and state benefits. As a result of these difficulties, many had to rely on community networks and the informal sector, exposing them to the risk of substandard practices. Precarity had particularly serious implications for the seven participants who were single mothers, as low paid work and long working hours squeezed their time and undermined their ability to fulfil their caring responsibilities.

8.2.5 The need for a strategic coordination of different forms of resistance

Different forms of resistance are often considered in isolation, as distinct spheres of action involving different actors. For instance, legal victories are generally seen as ends in themselves and are rarely evaluated in relation to their contributions to struggles beyond the courtroom. However, the research found limitations in each resistance strategy examined - namely everyday individual acts of resistance, legal action, communicative strategies and industrial action – and argues that different forms of resistance cannot been seen as isolated tactics to be used as substitutes for one another. In its analysis of successful workplace campaigns, the research shows that cleaners did not rely on a single tactic but combined different forms of resistance in their struggle, each being subordinated to a broader organising strategy.

8.2.6 The challenges experienced by indie unions

In recent years there has been a surge of interest in new independent unions' pioneering victories organising with precarious migrant workers and fighting against outsourcing (Però 2020, Holgate 2021, Hardy 2021). However, the existing literature does not adequately document the challenges those unions experience as they grow, beyond their initial stages. My research critically examined the work of indie unions, and, with a specific focus on UVW as organisation in which I have had a deep insight, identified several difficulties in the development of a grassroots, members' led organisation. Firstly, they have yet to overcome the dangers of the servicing model, which focuses on providing services to individual members. A significant proportion of union time and resources remains dedicated to individual casework, which fails to promote members' engagement and empower them to act for themselves. Secondly, I highlighted a lack of democratic representation within union structures, with a self-replicating leadership and unequal participation in decision making processes within the membership. Finally, it is argued that indie unions are yet to develop a strategy to overcome the 'campaign come-down' in the aftermath of successful campaigns. Cleaners reported facing antagonised management and retaliation from employers following their victory. Despite having achieved significant improvements in their terms and conditions, the nature of their work had not fundamentally changed, and many felt dissatisfied but lacked a clear path forward. In light of these difficulties, I advocate for worker empowerment and politicisation as key guiding principles for worker organising. Whilst an empowered membership would strengthen indie unions' internal democracy and maintain members' engagement as they grow, politicisation would allow them to build on the gains from successful campaigns, expanding organising efforts to more ambitious demands and broader societal claims.

8.3 Ways forward: future research and policy recommendations

8.3.1 A recommendation for future research

This thesis could be built on by examining specific age groups and the relevance of age in shaping experiences of precarity. The research gives a glimpse of the specific vulnerability of older migrants, who faced particular challenges settling in London, felt out of sync with conventional life cycles, experienced health issues and other difficulties associated with

being forced to work beyond retirement age. It would also be relevant to explore the experiences of children in low paid migrant worker households. The findings showed how working long hours undermined cleaners' social reproductive capacities, with severe repercussions on their family life, and their children in particular. The latter suffered the repercussions and were the direct witnesses of the difficulties experienced by their parents. Many of my participants deplored that their children, who were forced to spend considerable amounts of time alone, exhibited obvious signs of distress as well as unusual levels of autonomy and resourcefulness. Their English language skills were often a key asset for families when navigating difficulties. The consequences of these early experiences of precarity on their future prospects, and their role within their households are important questions that deserve future research. A closer focus on age and family relationships is needed is we are to go beyond seeing people as 'just workers', as advocated throughout the course of this thesis.

8.3.2 Recommendations for policy makers

The findings of this research regarding the lives of London's migrant cleaners contribute to our understanding of the broader issues around low-paid work and in-work poverty in the UK. Despite being legally resident, formally employed, sometimes working over 60 weekly hours and in so doing damaging their health, many of my participants lived in substandard housing conditions, had no free time, and were unable to achieve a basic standard of living. Although London's migrant cleaners experience particularly severe precarity due to their overlapping difficulties in different spheres of life, many of their experiences are shared by other segments of the working population. Indeed, workers in the UK face a decline in their living standards, as wages fail to keep pace with rising cost of living (Shenker 2019). In-work poverty has been on the rise: in 2017, 60% of people in Britain living in poverty had jobs (Butler 2017). A measure of the increased poverty has been a surge in the use of food banks: in 2018, one in several people using food banks were in working households (Trussell Trust, 2020). Workers' income in the UK fell further as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and, more recently, the cost-of-living crisis. In November 2022, as inflation reached its highest level in 41 years, almost a third of adults in the UK experienced food insecurity (Brewer et al 2023).

There is nevertheless a persistent, widespread narrative that people can improve their living standards through work, epitomised by former Prime Minister Theresa May's declaration that 'work is the best route out of poverty'.[231] Rising employment rates, especially among the most disadvantaged groups, have been celebrated as a positive development and an indication of a healthy economy. In particular, a report by the Resolution Foundation sees this job boom as indicative of 'more fairly sharing opportunity in Britain' (Clarke and Cominetti 2019: 5). This is despite a clear fall in real average wages since 2008, and the fact that people have been forced into low paid work by welfare cuts and increased conditionality of the benefits system (Hardy 2021). Economic insecurity therefore remains pervasive among the UK's working population.

Thus, a clear message of this thesis is that for many, the labour market is not a place of opportunity. Paid employment does not necessarily protect one from poverty, or even allow one to survive. Paradoxically, this is in the context of regulated labour market, existing (although insufficient) employment law protections, and relatively low rates of informality – amounting to only 0.28% of work in England's non-agricultural sectors in 2020 (Office for National Statistics 2021). We can conclude that work in the UK is currently in crisis, and many jobs do not pay enough to live decently. Policy efforts to tackle poverty cannot simply focus on achieving full employment and incentivising people into work. A practical implication of this situation is the need for a transformation of labour law, with a substantial increase of the legal minimum wage, supported by effective enforcement mechanisms, as well as legislation reforms creating the conditions for greater trade union powers. This would be combined with an expansion of the amounts and entitlements to benefits, to guarantee life-long material security for all. Such restructuring of welfare services would, to an extent, detach economic security from employment, providing alternatives to low paid work, and increasing employer incentives to raise wages.

8.3.3 Recommendations for the labour movement

As discussed above, the evaluation in this thesis have shown the limitations in indie unions' initiatives organising migrant cleaners despite their significant, pioneering victories.

[231] ITV News, 30 April 2017 'Theresa May on not raising VAT, Tax Pledges, Welfare and Brexit', https://www.itv.com/news/2017-04-30/theresa-may-on-peston-we-wont-be-increasing-vat

To learn from these experiences, I advocate for worker empowerment and politicisation as key principles to overcome the campaign come down and the dangers of the servicing model. The implication of following these two principles would be to reform our unions to adopt a social movement model - an approach that broadens the fight beyond specific bread-and-butter workplace issues, to make links with social movements and take up struggles around housing, immigration, oppression, imperialism, and the climate (Behrent 2015). Under this model, unions organise to build up members' confidence, capacity, and political consciousness, fighting not just for better workplaces, but also for a better world (Hughes and Woodcock 2023). Adopting this model is of crucial importance for unions to survive, grow, and make real gains that improve not just the workplace but our lives more generally. It would be useful for activists to reflect on the implications of the pursuit of radical social change for the trade union movement. What would this look like in practice? What trade union activities, internal systems and structures would enable such model?

One first step would be to investigate the role of organisational structures in shaping internal democracy, member engagement and consciousness. This would involve learning from previous struggles, but also thinking about potential new models, adapted to capitalism's current configurations. Chapter Seven raised the question of the role of the small size of indie unions in facilitating relationships of trust and care and members' engagement in day-to-day union activities, which is being threatened as these unions grow. Enlarged unions risk becoming more remote from the workers they represent: growth involves a development of structures and resources, as well as enlarged paid staff teams, with specialised caseworkers and organisers, branch administrators and dedicated staff to maintain the finance system (Hughes and Woodcock 2023). Whilst UVW and IWGB do have former cleaners in elected and paid positions, many staff members in both unions are former student activists - me included - who do not have experience working alongside the workers they represent, partly due to language barriers and the difficulties some rank-and-file members have communicating with their employers. Large teams of specialised, paid staff can lead to the passivity of the membership, as professionalising union activities fails to encourage members to develop the confidence and capacity to act for themselves (Hughes and Woodcock 2023). Additionally, it has implications for unions' internal democracy: as paid staff might have more direct access to union resources and insider knowledge of union procedures and debates, they are likely to have more weight in decision-making processes.

These reflections also highlight the need explore the possibility for a trade union movement that works towards a broader societal project in the current UK legal and political context. Consciousness is embedded in action: the previous chapter shows the potential of collective action in transforming not only our material conditions but also ourselves, developing our confidence and leadership skills. Building up members' political consciousness thus necessarily involves taking political action. Yet the current UK legal framework imposes strict constraints on the scope and orientation of trade union activities. To be legally protected, a dispute must be between workers and their employer and action can only be taken in pursuit of specific purposes, namely: the terms and conditions of employment, the termination of employment of workers, the allocation of work, matters of discipline, and trade union matters.[232] Solidarity action or strike action making broader societal claims would thus not benefit from legal immunities. The result is to encourage unions to focus solely on workplace issues, representing workers' immediate interests against their employers (Adams 2023).

Organising with a more explicitly political orientation carries considerable risk for trade unions, which have strong incentives to comply with the law. Firstly, compliance serves the interests of paid staff, whose livelihoods depend on the continued existence of the organisation and may therefore advocate for a more conservative stance (Hughes and Woodcock 2023). Even if unions and their members chose to defy the law, doing so would expose them to legal repression through criminal sanctions or expensive fines which, if imposed on a union, could bankrupt it (Knox 2016). The injunction served on striking security guards at GOSH in February 2022 illustrates the ferocity of legal repression and the existential threat it poses trade union activities. The workers striking for sick pay were banned by the High Court from picketing on the grounds that the noise was disrupting the hospital's ability to provide care (Cant 2022). In practice, this meant that UVW members could be held liable for contempt of court and imposed a fine or a prison sentence if they disobeyed the injunction. The effect of this court order was to radically undermine the workers' leverage by taking away their ability to undertake effective, disruptive action, and eventually led to the suspension of the strikes. It is important to note that such draconian measures were deployed against workers who had complied with the legal restrictions on

[232] Section 244, Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992

strike action and did not go beyond standard picketing practices (Cant 2022), giving a glimpse of the level of repression awaiting action taken in defiance of the law.

Thus, the current legal and political parameters several constrain unions' potential to play a more political role in society if they are to comply with the law. Zoe Adams (2023) argued that more radical orientations for trade unions' operations emerged in historical contexts where their activities were largely illegal, and workers had no choice but to resort to direct action. Whilst workers were heavily sanctioned - the story of six agricultural workers of Tolpuddle who, in 1834, were sentenced to seven years' transportation to Australia after they organised against a pay cut (Cant 2022) is but one example of the ferocity of the repression they faced -, this situation contributed to developing their consciousness and militancy. As they were progressively legalised, trade unions were expected to integrate their activities within sanctioned frameworks and became more reformist, seeking to minimise the effects rather than addressing the structural causes of the problems people faced (Adams 2023). As seen in previous chapters, successive attacks on trade union powers under the neo-liberal era then severely constrained their activities, showing the ease with which legal protections can be dismantled and the contingency of unions' high degree of autonomy in the mid-twentieth century.

We can therefore see that operating within the narrow range of legal forms of industrial action limits the scope for unions to pursue structural change. But short of adopting risky and expensive non-sanctioned forms of actions, how are unions to adopt a more radical orientation? A good starting point would be for organisations to frame their publicity campaigns in a way that politicises their activities, articulating their grievances and demands to expose wider structural issues (Adams 2023). Even when pursuing expedient action to secure immediate concessions, unions should always keep the broader picture in mind, acknowledging the limitations in their victories and highlighting the need for further efforts to move beyond the existing system. Such a strategy might contribute to the development of a political consciousness and thus build momentum for the struggle for structural change.

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Appendices

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SOAS, University of London

Information Sheet For:
What is the relationship between immigration controls, labour market structures and experiences of precarity in different spheres of the lives of migrant workers in the UK cleaning sector?

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you with information, so you can decide whether to participate in this study. Any questions you may have will be answered by the researcher or by the other contact persons provided below. Once you are familiar with the information on this sheet and have asked any questions you may have, you can decide whether or not to participate. If you agree, you will be asked to fill in the consent form for this study or record your consent verbally.

Name and contact details of researcher: Claire Marcel, Department of Development Studies**,** SOAS, University of London**,** Mobile phone : +447786128789, Email: 593851@soas.ac.uk

Name and contact details of supervisor: Anna Lindley, Department of Development Studies, SOAS, University of London, Office Phone: 0207 898 4690, Email: al29@soas.ac.uk

What type of research project is this? This is a self-funded PhD research project.

Who else is involved with the research project? No other organisation is involved in the project

What is the research project's purposes? This study is part of PhD research project, which aims to contribute to our understanding of how immigration controls and labour market structures combine to affect different spheres of migrant workers' lives, including health, housing situation, social and family life. The study aims to further our understanding of migrant workers' experiences of precarity in the UK and inform future policy.

Why have I been chosen? You have been invited because either

(a) You are over 18, you are not a UK citizen and you are employed in the cleaning sector; <u>OR</u>
(b) You work for an organisation operating in the cleaning sector or for an organisation involved with workers in these sectors.

Do I have to take part? Taking part in the research project is entirely voluntary. Please be aware that you can discontinue participation at any time, and that you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to.

What will happen to me if I take part? If you are willing to take part in the research, you will be asked to attend a single interview, which will take place at the location of your choice. The interview can also be conducted on the spot if you prefer to do so. You will be asked to answer a set of questions regarding your experience working in the UK. This should take between 30 minutes and an hour.

Will I be recorded and how will the recordings be used? If you accept, your interview may be audio recorded. The recording would then be transcribed into a word document, which I would add to my interview notes.

How will the information I provide be kept secure? The information will be collected on my personal, password-protected laptop and backed up on my network drive at my university. Only my supervisor and myself will have access to interview transcripts.

Will I be kept anonymous in this research project? Should you wish to remain anonymous, I will remove from your name from the interview transcript and I will not use your name or details that make you personally identifiable in any publications.

What will happen to the results of this research project? The results of this research project will form part of my PhD thesis, which will be made Open Access via the Internet, as well as published in academic journals and shorter online articles and briefings.

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The data controller for this project will be SOAS University of London. The SOAS Data Protection Officer provides oversight of SOAS activities involving the processing of personal data and can be contacted at: dataprotection@soas.ac.uk

Your personal data will be processed for the purposes outlined in this Information Sheet. The legal basis that would be used to process your personal data under data protection legislation is the performance of a task in the public interest or in our official authority as a controller. However, for ethical reasons we need your consent to take part in this research project. You can provide your consent for the use of your personal data in this project by

completing the consent form that has been provided for you or via audio recording of the information sheet and consent form content.

Your Rights

You have the right to request access under the General Data Protection Regulation to the information which SOAS holds about you. Further information about your rights under the Regulation and how SOAS handles personal data is available on the Data Protection pages of the SOAS website (http://www.soas.ac.uk/infocomp/dp a/index.html), and by contacting the Information Compliance Manager at the following address: Information Compliance Manager, SOAS, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, United Kingdom (email to: dataprotection@soas.ac.uk).

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact SOAS In the first instance at dataprotection@soas.ac.uk

If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: https://ico.org.uk/fororganisations/dataprotectionreform/overviewofthegdpr/individualsrig hts/

Copyright Notice

The consent form asks you to waive copyright so that SOAS and the researcher can edit, quote, disseminate, publish (by whatever means) your contribution to this research project in the manner described to you by the researcher during the consent process.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research study.

Consent Form for: The relationship between immigration controls, labour market structures and experiences of precarity among migrant workers in the UK

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an equivalent explanation about the research

Project Title: **The relationship between immigration controls, labour market structures and experiences of precarity among migrant workers in the UK**

Researcher Name: **Claire Marcel**

Please tick the appropriate boxes	**Yes**	**No**
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated DD/MM/YYYY, or it has been read to me.		
I have been able to ask questions about the project		
I agree to take part in the project and understand that this involves taking part in a personal interview, which may be audio recorded.		
I agree that my interview is audio recorded		
I understand that I can refuse to answer questions		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time by notifying the researcher involved and I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part		
I understand that my withdrawal or refusal to take part will not affect my relationship with SOAS University of London		

I understand that that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the research team		
I understand information I provide will be stored securely in the researcher's password protected laptop		
I understand that the information I provided will be used for the researcher's PhD thesis and made available on SOAS Research Online		
I would like to be named in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs		
I would NOT like to be named in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs		
I agree to waive copyright and other intellectual property rights in the material I contribute to the project		

Contact Information:

Claire Marcel
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Alternative contact:

Anna Lindley
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SOAS, University of London
Office Phone: 0207 898 4690
Email: al29@soas.ac.uk

Research Participant Declaration:

____________________________ ____________________ ______________

Name of Participant Signature Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands what they are freely consenting.

__________________________ ____________________ _____________

Name of researcher Signature Date

Cleaners interview guide

'Basic facts' section

- What is your nationality?
- How long have you been living in the UK?
- How long have you been working as a cleaner?
- How many cleaning jobs do you have?
- Where did you work before?

Pre-migration situation

Please can you tell me about how you came to be working in London:

- Tell me about where you lived before / in x country? What is it like where you grew up? What were you doing before coming here (work / education / family)?
- Do you still keep in contact with people there – who – family, friends?
- How did you come to leave? What things were you thinking about when you made the decision? How did you come into the UK – what sort of visa at first?
- Where did you live when you first came to the UK? How did you find living there? Living alone or with others? How did you come to find work at [organisation]?

Current employment situation in the UK

- When and how did you get the job?
- How are you paid? (frequency / wage rate / non-wage benefits)
- What are your working hours like? (hours, pattern, regularity/changes, over-time hours, average hours pwk/month, maximum permitted if applies)
- Do you have a contract? What sort of contract is it? (pt/ft, guaranteed hours, minimum hours, notice period)
- Is the company where you do cleaning work your employer?
- How many people do you work with?
- Do you interact with the people who work in the company where you do cleaning work?
- How have you found the relationship with colleagues?
- How have you found the relationship with supervisors and managers?
- What things do you like about your job and why?
- What things don't you like and why?
- How safe and how comfortable do you feel at work?
- Have you ever had problems at work? What were the problems?
- Are there any other times you've felt uncomfortable at work?
- How have you dealt with these issues? Have you been able to resolve them? How? Was there anything that helped you with this / anyone you turned to for help

- Are you part of a trade union? Have you ever been able to stand up together against your employer? What did you do and what was the impact on your experience at work?

Workplace campaigns

Can you tell me a bit more about the campaign at your workplace? Had did the campaign start? How did you manage to organise your colleagues for the strike?
How was your experience of this campaign? What did you like about it? What were the things you found difficult? What were the obstacles?
What do you think you have learnt from this experience?
Do you think this victory will change your life in any way? How so?

Covid 19:

Can you tell me a little bit about this situation with Covid 19 at your workplace. Do you feel protected by your employer? Have they given you adequate PPE? How have they dealt with the crisis?
How do you feel about the situation?

Personal life

- Can you tell me about where you live?
- This is a bit of a personal question, but I'm interested in how work and migration influences all aspects of our lives so I'd like to ask you a little bit about relationships and family, is that's ok?
- Are you supporting family members in London/elsewhere, how do you find this?
- Work-life balance. Do you encounter challenges in bringing up children, couple relationships?
- What do you like doing in your free time?
- How would you rate your general health and well-being at the moment?
- Can you tell me anything more about worries, and fears for the future / things that make you happy, goals and hopes for the future?
- Brexit has been at the forefront of the public debate, and there is still a lot of uncertainty as to what Brexit will mean to the EU citizens residing in the UK. Do you think Brexit will have an impact on your working conditions and on your life more generally?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience/the living and working conditions of migrant cleaners in London more generally?