

A Continuum of Precarity: The Disposable Lives of Portugal's Cleaning Workers during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

On March 2, 2020, the first case of Covid-19 was detected in Portugal. Starting then, the public narrative was that everyone was in the same boat, as the virus supposedly did not attack differentiating on gender, race, nationality, class, or any other social category. However, everyday life told a radically different story. Industrial cleaning workers, an essential part of the frontline of the fight against the pandemic, represent a paradigmatic example of this inequality. As society acknowledged the critical role of cleaning in curbing the transmission of the virus, they assumed the responsibility of preventing its spread and maintaining the functionality of society during the unprecedented “new normal”. Unlike other sectors with remote work options, cleaning workers were unable to retreat to the safety of their homes, as their indispensable tasks required their physical presence at the workplaces. Despite the looming fear of contagion, they did not abandon the public space and did not cease fighting the disease. Every day, they risked their own lives to safeguard the well-being of others. In spite of the significance of their roles, cleaning workers have historically faced numerous challenges regarding their working conditions, compensations, and the acknowledgment of their essential contributions. Even prior to the pandemic, their work was often regarded as unskilled, resulting in a consistent undervaluation. As a result, they have been deprived of safe working environments, fair remunerations, and respect for the crucial tasks they perform. In this sense, cleaning work often serves as a prime example of precarious employment.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the current body of literature by examining the intersectionality of precarious work, with a specific focus on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on occupational sectors predominantly employing women in precarious positions, namely cleaning. Given this, my research question was: how did the Covid-19 pandemic impact the precarious working conditions of the intersectional Portugal’s industrial cleaning workforce? To answer it, I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with industrial cleaning workers employed by firms located in the municipality of Seixal, a southern suburb of Lisbon, the capital city of Portugal. Based on the insights gathered from the interviews, I argue that the Covid-19 pandemic perpetuated a continuum of precarity for cleaning workers. Even before the outbreak of the virus, cleaners were a trapped workforce within the sector due to financial hardships and intersectional aspects of their identities. As a consequence, they worked in the sector out of financial need, a situation that placed them in a setting of forced flexibility and rendered them vulnerable

to precarity. In reality, they already experienced several manifestations of precarity as a result of the convergence of different neoliberal market forces. During the pandemic, the combination of increased workloads, lack of protection, appreciation, and recognition exacerbated the pre-existing precarity faced by cleaning workers. However, driven by the necessity to secure income for themselves and their families, they had little choice but to continue working in unsafe conditions. In the context of an economic crisis characterized by limited job prospects, various intersecting factors, such as advanced age, migrant status, low levels of education, and responsibilities for dependents, further heightened their vulnerability. As a result, they were compelled to persist in their employment, perpetuating a continuum of precarity that characterized their work experiences. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic was not an isolated crisis for these workers but rather an amplification of the pre-existing precarity they faced.

Keywords: Cleaning workers; Precarity; Intersectionality; Covid-19 pandemic; Portugal

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Who would I be without you, without them?

– *boygenius*

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

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Signed: Sara Anselmo

Table of contents

Introduction	1
Political context	5
Native and migrant women’s participation in Portugal’s labor market.....	5
Austerity setting the precarious scenario for Covid-19	6
Literature Review	11
Introduction	11
The invisible reality of performing undervalued dirty work	11
The neoliberalization of cleaning: a precarious workforce	14
The impacts of Covid-19 in essential, precarious women’s work.....	16
Conclusion	19
Theoretical Framework	20
Introduction	20
Precarity.....	21
Intersectionality	23
Conclusion	25
Methodology.....	27
Semi-structured interviews with industrial cleaning workers	27
The region of Seixal	28
The particular group of <i>trabalhadoras</i> who clean.....	29
Positionality and reflexivity.....	31
Research ethics	34
Limitations.....	34
Behind the scenes of industrial cleaning: Uncovering the precarious working conditions preceding the Covid-19 pandemic	36
Introduction	36
A trapped workforce	37
The specific precarious aspects of cleaning	40
Resisting the intersections of precarity with invisibility, disrespect, and servitude...	47
Conclusion	53
The plight of cleaners amidst increased workload, lack of protection, and diminished recognition during the Covid-19 pandemic.....	55
Introduction	55
Cleaning responsibilities in the so-called “new normal”	56
Working under no protection in a life-threatening scenario.....	63
A trapped workforce combatting a deadly virus within a continuum of precarity	70
Conclusion	75

Conclusion	77
Appendix 1: Sociodemographic data of the interviewees	80
Appendix 2: The interviewees' entry into the sector	81
Appendix 3: Work location, employment contract and multiple jobs of the interviewees	83
Bibliography.....	85

Introduction

On March 2, 2020, the first case of Covid-19 was detected in Portugal. Starting then, the public narrative was that everyone was in the same boat, as the virus supposedly did not attack differentiating on gender, race, nationality, class, or any other social category. However, everyday life told a radically different story.

Industrial cleaning workers, an essential part of the frontline of the fight against the pandemic, represent a paradigmatic example of this inequality. As society acknowledged the critical role of cleaning in curbing the transmission of the virus, cleaning workers assumed the responsibility of preventing its spread and maintaining the functionality of society during the unprecedented “new normal”. While Portugal experienced lockdowns, these workers remained steadfast, sanitizing vital spaces such as hospitals, pharmacies, supermarkets, nursing homes, the national parliament, and the few organizations still operating in person. Unlike other sectors with remote work options, cleaning workers were unable to retreat to the safety of their homes, as their indispensable tasks required their physical presence at the workplaces. Despite the looming fear of contagion, they did not abandon the public space and did not cease fighting the disease. Every day, they risked their own lives to safeguard the well-being of others.

In spite of the significance of their roles, cleaning workers have historically faced numerous challenges regarding their working conditions, compensations, and the acknowledgment of their essential contributions. Even prior to the pandemic, their work was often regarded as unskilled, resulting in a consistent undervaluation. As a result, they have been deprived of safe working environments, fair remunerations, and respect for the crucial tasks they perform. In this sense, cleaning work often serves as a prime example of precarious employment. For instance, these workers have been remunerated at the national minimum wage in Portugal, which stood at €635 in 2020, €665 in 2021, and €705 in 2022 (Carvalho 2022). Additionally, the prevalence of outsourcing within the sector has further marginalized these workers within the labor market. Since they are not directly employed by the establishments they clean, they experience a lack of job security, limited access to benefits and protections, and challenges in asserting their rights (ibid.).

The examination of cleaning work from an intersectional perspective sheds light on the interplay between different social categories such as gender, race, nationality, and class. These intersecting identities shape the experiences of individuals employed in the

cleaning sector, with a particular emphasis on women who have historically borne the disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic labor. The cleaning sector provides a clear example of how gender dynamics are intricately woven into its fabric, as women constitute the majority of workers within the field (RTP 2020). Traditional gender roles have long dictated the association of cleaning work with women, who are expected to fulfill domestic responsibilities and uphold cleanliness. This gendered division of labor further perpetuates the devaluation of cleaning as “women’s work”, resulting in persistent challenges such as low wages, restricted avenues for career progression, and a lack of acknowledgment for the skills required in this profession. The intersection of race further shapes the experiences of cleaners, as racialized minorities, particularly migrants, often face additional layers of precarity and discrimination in the cleaning industry (Abbasian and Hellgren 2012). In the case of migrants, they confront specific vulnerabilities stemming from their legal status, language barriers, and limited social support networks (Ollus 2016). Moreover, the class dimension is also intertwined with cleaning work. Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often find themselves trapped in low-paying cleaning jobs due to limited educational opportunities and systemic barriers (Coyle 1985). The intersection of class amplifies the economic vulnerabilities faced by cleaners, leaving them particularly exposed to financial insecurity and a lack of social mobility. By recognizing the intersectional nature of cleaning work, it becomes evident that the inequalities faced by cleaners are not solely driven by their occupation but are deeply rooted in systemic structures of power and oppression.

Taking into account the aspects mentioned above, this thesis seeks to contribute to the current body of literature by examining the intersectionality of precarious work, with a specific focus on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on occupational sectors predominantly employing women in precarious positions, namely cleaning. Given this, my research question will be: how did the Covid-19 pandemic impact the precarious working conditions of the intersectional Portugal’s industrial cleaning workforce? To address this research question, I will examine two contrasting hypotheses that emerged during the pandemic. The first hypothesis suggests a potential revaluation of essential work, leading to improvements in working conditions for cleaners. It posits that the increased importance placed on cleanliness during the pandemic may have enhanced the recognition and appreciation of cleaning work, resulting in better working conditions and increased bargaining power for cleaners. On the other hand, the second hypothesis

proposes that the pandemic may have exacerbated the already precarious conditions experienced by the cleaning workforce. It suggests that an economic crisis with high unemployment rates may have further trapped cleaners in their jobs, leaving them vulnerable to intensified precarity and inadequate working conditions.

To explore these hypotheses, I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with industrial cleaning workers employed by firms located in the municipality of Seixal, a southern suburb of Lisbon, the capital city of Portugal. The decision to employ interviews as the primary research method was guided by a feminist methodology that prioritizes the lived experiences of individuals, influenced by the concept of a “view from a body” proposed by Haraway (1991) and the emphasis on intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection emphasized by Conquergood (2002). By centering the methodology on the accounts and perspectives of these workers, I employed a grounded theory approach (Glasser and Strauss 1967) to develop a comprehensive understanding of their embodied experiences.

Based on the insights gathered from the interviews, I will argue that the Covid-19 pandemic perpetuated a continuum of precarity for cleaning workers. Even before the outbreak of the virus, cleaners were a trapped workforce within the sector due to financial hardships and intersectional aspects of their identities. As a consequence, they worked in the sector out of financial need, a situation that placed them in a setting of forced flexibility and rendered them vulnerable to precarity. In reality, they already experienced several manifestations of precarity as a result of the convergence of different neoliberal market forces. During the pandemic, the combination of increased workloads, lack of protection, appreciation, and recognition exacerbated the pre-existing precarity faced by cleaning workers. However, driven by the necessity to secure income for themselves and their families, they had little choice but to continue working in unsafe conditions. In the context of an economic crisis characterized by limited job prospects, various intersecting factors, such as advanced age, migrant status, low levels of education, and responsibilities for dependents, further heightened their vulnerability. As a result, they were compelled to persist in their employment, perpetuating a continuum of precarity that characterized their work experiences. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic was not an isolated crisis for these workers but rather an amplification of the pre-existing precarity they faced.

To provide a framework for the research, my thesis begins with an overview of the political context in Portugal. This section explores the participation of both native and

migrant women in Portugal's labor market, as well as the impact of austerity measures on the labor market following the 2008 crisis, which have set the stage for the precarious scenario that unfolded during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following chapter offers a literature review that delves into the invisible reality of performing undervalued dirty work, the neoliberalization of cleaning as a precarious workforce, and the specific impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on essential and precarious women's work. By examining these areas, the literature review identifies a significant gap in current scholarship and emphasizes the need to explore the intersectional dimensions of precarious work within the context of industrial cleaning during the pandemic. Drawing from the insights gained through the literature review, the subsequent chapter establishes a theoretical framework rooted in the concepts of precarity and intersectionality that serves as a guiding lens for analyzing the research findings. In the following methodology chapter, the research design methods utilized in this thesis are detailed, along with an exploration of aspects such as positionality, reflexivity, ethical considerations, and the limitations of the study. The chapter provides an overview of how semi-structured interviews were employed to engage with industrial cleaning workers residing in the municipality of Seixal, facilitating an in-depth exploration of their experiences. The subsequent chapters present the findings of my research. The first analytical chapter focuses on the precarious working conditions experienced by the interviewed cleaners prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter explores the multifaceted aspects of cleaning work, considering both the embodied experiences and material conditions of cleaners, by highlighting the diverse range of experiences within the cleaning workforce based on an intersectional analysis. The second analytical chapter delves into the exacerbation of precarious conditions experienced by cleaning workers during the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting the persistence of a continuum of precarity. This chapter aims to illuminate the multitude of aspects and consequences associated with the persisting precarity. By doing so, it aims to emphasize the plight of this trapped workforce, compelled to persist in their work despite the risks involved. In the conclusion, the key insights of the thesis are summarized, and their implications and significance are reflected upon. Additionally, the limitations of the research are addressed, acknowledging the constraints that may have influenced the outcomes of the research. Furthermore, potential avenues for future studies are identified, highlighting areas that deserve further investigation in order to deepen our understanding of the intersectionality of precarious cleaning work and its manifestations during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Political context

Native and migrant women's participation in Portugal's labor market

Portugal is often described as the first and last colonial empire, managing to survive from 1415 to 1975 (Arenas 2015). During the last years of its imperial life, namely from 1933 to 1974, the country was governed by a fascist dictatorship known as *Estado Novo* or the New State. This autocratic and nationalist regime had to constantly justify the continuation of its colonial empire, which included Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Sao Tomé, Cape Verde, Macau, Goa, and East Timor (Sousa 2021). *Estado Novo* attempted to defend it through the ideology of lusotropicalism, which, based on benevolent notions of miscegenation, propagated the Portuguese colonial administration as gentler than those of other powers, as it was supposedly a source of civilization and stability to the colonized territories (Gianolla, Raggi, and Querol 2021). Nevertheless, as the era witnessed the dissolution of European empires, the regime encountered difficulties in maintaining its colonial territories. In the 1960s, colonial wars broke out between the Portuguese Armed Forces and the independence movements of Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique. The repressive nature of the dictatorship, encompassing censorship, persecution, and mandatory military service in these wars, led to a wave of male migration. As a result, women's participation in the labor market began to increase during the 1960s (Ferreira 2014). Consequently, Portugal still stands out in southern Europe for its significant and continuously growing number of women engaged in paid employment (Cruz and Abrantes 2013).

However, the labor market in Portugal still exhibits enduring patterns of gender segregation, as women tend to be disproportionately represented in precarious forms of employment, the informal economy, and low-skilled jobs (Ferreira 2014). This indicates that while the dynamics of the labor market have facilitated women's participation and contributed to high rates of female employment, it has also resulted in a prevalence of poorly qualified and low-paying full-time positions for women (ibid.). These labor market patterns particularly place women with lower levels of education or immigrant backgrounds at a distinct disadvantage, as they experience a heightened concentration within the peripheral labor market (Cruz and Abrantes 2013).

To understand this pattern, it is necessary to contextualize it within the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution of 1974, which signified the fall of the fascist regime, the transition

to democracy, the end of the last colonial wars in Angola and Mozambique, and the independence of those territories in 1975. Despite the end of the wars, the aftermath of the 13-year conflicts continued to have lasting effects. For instance, the destruction caused during the wars resulted in an unprecedented wave of migration to Portugal (Dias 2011, 29). Between 1974 and 1980, the foreign population in the country increased from 32,000 to 58,000, with 48% being African citizens, the majority of whom originated from former African colonies (Góis et al. 2018, 70). Within the labor sector, the integration of these new migrants into the Portuguese labor market perpetuated a colonial matrix of power, characterized by precarious working conditions and their overrepresentation in socially undervalued and low-paying positions (Dias 2011, 37). This process also exhibited a gendered pattern, where men were predominantly assigned to construction work while women were relegated to cleaning, domestic, and care services (Dias 2011, 38). This trend persists to this day, as indicated by the 2021 Census, wherein cleaning work continues to serve as the main source of income for the foreign population (Instituto Nacional de Estatística 2023a).

Based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estatística 2023b), the cleaning sector in Portugal consisted of 5,841 companies and employed 75,554 workers in 2020. The Trade Union STAD – Sindicato dos Trabalhadores de Serviços de Portaria, Vigilância, Limpeza, Domésticas e Atividades Diversas, which represents cleaning workers, estimates that approximately half of these are migrants (Carvalho 2022). However, it is important to note that the exact number of racialized and migrant women within this sector cannot be determined due to the prohibition of collecting data on racial and ethnic origin in the country (Matos 2019). What is known is that women make up approximately 90% of the cleaning sector in Portugal, representing the highest proportion of female representation within the sector across Europe (RTP 2020).

Austerity setting the precarious scenario for Covid-19

In order to comprehend the precarious accounts reported by industrial cleaning workers during the pandemic, it is crucial to examine recent significant labor reforms and place them in the context of broader political circumstances. To understand how labor welfare was defined at the onset of the pandemic, I will focus on the key changes made to the

Portuguese Labor Code between 2011 and 2019, particularly those concerning precarious workers such as cleaners.

In 2008, an economic crisis erupted in Portugal, resulting from the combination of external and internal factors: a financial crash that started in the United States but soon spread globally and a preceding fragile national economy that can be traced down to the economic liberalization characterizing the country's integration in the European Union and later in the Eurozone (Cerdeira, Kovács, and Dias 2014, 634). In April 2011, Portugal sought assistance from Troika, which resulted in their involvement in a financial bailout for the country in May of that same year (Cerdeira, Kovács, and Dias 2014, 636; Moury and Freire 2013, 36). Consequently, Portugal successfully obtained a financial rescue package totaling 78 billion euros.

The rules of the rescue were signed by PS – Socialist Party, PSD – Social Democratic Party, CDS – People's Party, and Troika in a Memorandum of Understanding, an agreement that assumed austerity as the sole guiding principle for the resolution of the crisis (Campos 2020, 30). In June of that year, a coalition constituted by the two right-wing parties, PSD and CDS, won the national elections while framing the crisis and the bailout as a consequence of the country's previous unsustainable budgets and of the working and middle classes' irresponsible behavior by living above their possibilities (Abreu et al. 2013, 9). According to the logic of this discourse, the responsibility of rectifying their wrongdoings was subsequently placed onto the population, creating room for labor welfare cuts and neutralizing resistance (Campos 2020, 31). Thus, during this period, the area of labor welfare was the most affected with the highest number of austerity policies, leading to what some scholars call a new phase of labor precarity in the country, marked by an unparalleled neoliberal flexibilization of work and workers' rights (Soeiro 2015; Leite et al. 2014).

The main changes to the labor market were realized through the Labor Code Law 23/2012, which brought together measures stipulated in the Memorandum, others agreed in the Social Concertation Agreement of that year, and additional policies determined by the government alone. For instance, the national minimum wage, an important source of social justice to which precarious workers are often relegated, was frozen from 2011 until 2014, fixed at 485€. During this period, the number of workers earning the minimum wage increased from 11,3% (around 400,000) to 19,6% (about 1 million) (PORDATA 2019). Simultaneously, there was a 75% decrease in the payment of overtime work hours;

the end of the compensatory rest for each hour and day of overtime; a reduction of payment for work performed on public holidays; and the elimination of three vacation days and four national holidays. Therefore, there was not only a punishment of the lowest salaries, with no wage progress being offered at a time of crisis with an increasing cost of living (Soeiro 2015, 304), but also an overall devaluation of work. Besides the devaluation of paid work, there was also a degradation of working conditions, which materialized in a reduction of the monetary compensation for terminating contracts, as well as the facilitation of its process; a decline in the obligations of labor inspections; the introduction of the possibility to work six consecutive hours; a liberalization of the hour bank; and a diminution of the duration of the unemployment benefit, along with a cut on its maximum value.

All of these changes were occurring within a wider strategy of decentralization and individualization of labor relations, which affected the loss of autonomy of social partners, such as unions (Leite et al. 2014). Namely, these labor code transformations encompassed the devaluation of the role of unions in collective bargaining, by dramatically reducing the number of sectoral agreements and the number of workers covered by collective agreements. Therefore, a brutal reduction in workers' protection was enforced, which further isolated them. Overall, a structural labor reform took place during this period, drastically changing the (im)balances of power between employer and employee (Rodrigues and Adão e Silva 2015, 16). Specifically, these labor code modifications accentuated the asymmetries and polarization between classes, by intensifying the vulnerability and subordination of the working class towards the higher classes (Barbosa 2019, 47).

After 4 years of the country being governed by PSD and CDS, new national elections occurred in October 2015. Following a historical political agreement between PS with the left-wing parties BE – Left Bloc, PCP – Portuguese Communist Party, and PEV – Ecological Party The Greens, a new government was formed in Portugal. Even though a formal coalition with a common program was not created, PS signed three compromising documents with PCP, BE, and PEV, that converged around the goals of combatting the economic crisis and reverting the austerity measures imposed by Troika and the former government (Campos 2021). In light of these agreements, the political conditions to fulfill PS' slogan during the campaign, of “turning the page of austerity”, appeared to be met.

Over the course of their 4 years of governing, the national minimum wage got increased from 485€ in 2014 to 505€ in 2015, 530€ in 2016, 557€ in 2017, 580€ in 2018, and 600€ in 2019. However, these slow rises did not restore the standard of living prior to the intervention of Troika, at the same time as the cost of living in the country increased brutally due to real estate speculation and the growth of tourism (Barbosa 2019, 51). In consequence, Portugal became what some economists call “a country of minimum wages”, with the minimum wage serving as a reference for the average wage since the gap between the two has progressively diminished (Observatório sobre Crises e Alternativas 2018, 1).

The revision of the Labor Code, which was pushed by the left-wing parties in the hope of reverting the stricter austerity measures, kept being delayed by PS (Lourenço 2019). The Labor Code’s modifications only materialized in the Law 93/2019, and turned out to be significantly more moderate and oriented towards a neoliberal ideology than what the left-wing parties had envisioned. Firstly, the aforementioned Law 23/2012 remained in force, which meant that the reduction of remuneration for overtime work, the criteria and compensation for terminating contracts, the liberalization of the hour bank, amongst other policies, were left untouched. Moreover, not only was there a lack of reversal of austerity policies, but even a further flexibilization of the labor market. For instance, this law introduced the extension, in all sectors, of very short-term contracts from 15 to 35 days; the expansion of the probation period, in permanent employment contracts for workers looking for their first job and long-term unemployed, from 90 to 180 days; the reduction of the percentage from 70% to 60% of workers to approve a group hour bank; the definition of a 3-month deadline for non-unionized workers to adhere to collective agreements from the beginning of their contract; and the limitation of membership time on a collective agreement to 15 months.

Analyzing the labor trends of this period, the Portuguese Observatory on Crises and Alternatives (2018, 2) concluded that there was a reduction in the number of permanent contracts within the private sector; the predominance of different types of precarious contracts in the labor market; the proliferation of employment in services; and the degradation of average wages for the new permanent contracts. Moreover, data from Eurostat (2020) demonstrates that during this legislature, Portugal had one of the worst situations at the European level regarding the involuntary nature of job insecurity. For

instance, around 82% employees in a term contract admitted that they only accepted it due to no alternative or better offer, whereas the European average was 45%.

Therefore, one can conclude that precarity did not disappear with the change of political cycle – if anything, it got aggravated with the further flexibilization of the labor market, through the elimination of additional workers’ protections. Although the restoration of certain benefits lost during austerity were important, they were insufficient to respond to the extensive degradation of labor relations that had happened at the hands of the previous government, combined with the expanding cost of living in the country. In this sense, PS’ slogan of “turning the page of austerity” was mostly a matter of semantics, with very little practice – in fact, by ignoring the progressive revindications of BE, PCP, and PEV, PS showed no interest to radically change the paradigm of precarity and to protect workers. Hence, as 2019 drew to an end, the labor market remained plagued by precarity, setting the stage for the detrimental impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, which will be explored through the firsthand experiences of the interviewed cleaning workers.

Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter I will highlight the puzzle that leads to my research question, which focusses on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic upon the precarious working conditions of Portugal's intersectional industrial cleaning workforce. In order to comprehend the effects of the pandemic in the industrial cleaning sector, it is necessary to examine the working conditions that existed prior to the outbreak. For this reason, firstly I will review the literature around the status of cleaning, namely by concentrating on the aspects of invisibility and devaluation; secondly, the scholarly work concerning the effects of neoliberalism into the precarity of the industry; and lastly, what recent studies have concluded from the gendered Covid-19 impacts in the labor market, specifically in essential work performed by women in precarious conditions, such as cleaning. Using the literature as the foundational knowledge for my own contribution, I will demonstrate that there has been insufficient investigation into the working conditions of cleaning workers during the Covid-19 pandemic, despite the fact that cleaning is a prime example of essential work predominantly performed by women under precarious conditions.

The invisible reality of performing undervalued dirty work

Scholars widely agree that the assumption that cleaning is a natural responsibility for women in their domestic roles has carried over to the waged workforce, leading to the perception that paid cleaning is a traditional job for women (Seifert and Messing 2006). This perspective has resulted in the belief that cleaning work does not require any specialized skills and that women are inherently qualified for it (Recio and Godino 2011). According to Soni-Sinha and Yates (2013), the historical association of cleaning with servitude further contributes to its undervaluation, despite its crucial role for the functioning of all sorts of spaces. Furthermore, Vergès (2019) and Herod and Aguiar (2006a) have highlighted that the intangible nature of cleaning tasks makes it challenging for individuals to fully comprehend their importance. As a matter of fact, the very essence of the profession requires that cleaners render their labor invisible. In the view of Duffy (2007), the combination of these factors causes paid cleaning jobs to maintain the

invisibility and devaluation they hold within households. Consequently, the significance of cleaning only becomes evident when it is neglected or not performed.

Authors have demonstrated that the profession of cleaning is not only segregated by gender, but also by ethnicity and class. That is, working-class women, usually with low educational levels, few marketable skills, and discontinuous work trajectories, constitute the overwhelming majority of the workforce (Cruz and Abrantes 2013). Additionally, racialized terms are also employed to deem certain bodies more naturally suitable for cleaning (Herod and Aguiar 2006c). According to Glenn (1992) and Roberts (1997), racialized women, in comparison to their white counterparts, are disproportionately represented in “dirty, back-room” jobs and “menial” work such as cleaning due to the belief that these jobs do not require intellectual skills. Simultaneously, Campbell and Peeters (2008) have demonstrated that growing numbers of workers in the sector are migrant, with cleaning serving as a channel of entry into the labor market for those with limited job opportunities, language barriers, and unrecognized foreign qualifications. From Abbasian and Hellgren’s (2012) perspective, the intersection of all these social categories with asymmetrical power dynamics and historical relations leads to the emergence of a particular vulnerable and marginalized labor force.

This marginalization is remarkably apparent in the sense of invisibility cleaners report feeling while performing their duties. Herod and Aguiar (2006a) have emphasized that the industry instructs workers to make their bodies imperceptible while conducting their services so as not to disrupt costumers. As Recio and Godino (2011) point out, cleaning, in this sense, can be a very individualized profession, which increases workers’ risk of harassment and can have dire psychological effects. Even when they cross paths with customers, their presence is erased by others (Vergès 2019). Rabelo and Mahalingam’s (2018) study shows that this practice takes on various forms, such as neglecting to acknowledge the workers’ presence by not greeting them, avoiding eye contact, or disregarding their cleaning signs, leading to others ruining their work. Through this process of invisibilization, the cleaning worker becomes part of the landscape and is completely dehumanized, being disregarded as someone with no subjectivity (Martins et al. 2020). Therefore, the invisibility they experience is closely tied to the power dynamics at play within cleaning, such as social devaluation, socio-spatial exclusions, and strong hierarchies between workers (Rabelo and Mahalingam 2018). Viewed in this way,

invisibility is understood by authors such as Martins et al. (2020) as a form of reifying class boundaries and enhancing the subalternity of cleaning workers.

Besides the minimal social interaction, Sjøgaard et al. (2006) have verified that cleaning also entails high monotony as it requires the performance of repetitive tasks that provide little mental stimulation. These duties demand physical strength that place a strain on the workers' bodies, since they have to stand and walk long distances to clean surfaces, wash floors, and remove dust, while pushing and carrying heavy cleaning products, some of which contain toxic chemicals (Petro 2014). For this reason, Herod and Aguiar (2006a) assert that cleaning is one of the most injury-prone occupations, even if workers often receive no professional training and risk allowance for it. According to Sjøgaard et al. (2006), this lack of support frequently leads to cleaners being forced into early retirement or being deemed unfit to continue working in the profession.

Although physical exertion is a common requirement in all cleaning roles, the division of labor in the industry is often based on gender. Herod and Aguiar (2006a) argue that women are typically categorized as general cleaners, while men are viewed as maintenance workers. Consequently, analyses of the sector such as the one conducted by Coyle (1985) show that women tend to perform more traditional "women's work", while men are assigned heavy cleaning tasks that often entail greater physical strength and the use of machinery. Furthermore, men may also be expected to perform logistical duties in addition to their cleaning responsibilities (Lebeer and Martinez 2012). Whatsoever, common across the whole sector is the stigmatization of cleaners through their association with the dirt they remove, as Seifert and Messing (2006) have showed. In other words, the physical labor involving trash that cleaning workers do stains their bodies, with the negative perception associated with dirt being projected onto them (Simpson and Simpson 2018). Thus, Rabelo and Mahalingam (2018) maintain that "dirty work" transforms those who perform it in "dirty workers".

In conclusion, scholars have demonstrated that the invisibility and undervaluation of cleaning work is deeply rooted in historical, social, and economic factors that have resulted in the stigmatization of the profession and its workers. This has caused certain social groups, such as working-class, racialized, and migrant women, to be disproportionately represented in the industry. Men, on the other hand, are expected to perform more physically demanding or logistical tasks due to a traditional gendered division of labor. Despite these differences, studies show that all workers in the cleaning

industry face harsh working conditions, such as physical strain and risk of injury, and receive little recognition for their efforts. Although their labor is essential in maintaining clean spaces, customers often fail to acknowledge their presence and their association with dirt only serves to further stigmatize them. These experiences are closely linked to power dynamics and cause the marginalization and dehumanization of cleaning workers.

The neoliberalization of cleaning: a precarious workforce

Coyle (1985) theorized cleaners as a trapped workforce, since they are often compelled to work in the sector out of necessity rather than by choice. According to Abbasian and Hellgren (2012), this necessity can derive from financial difficulties, low education levels, few marketable abilities, lack of language skills, immigration status, and the need to send remittances to home countries. Despite the motive, Ollus (2016) defends that if instead of an active choice, individuals end up working in the cleaning sector due to a lack of other employment alternatives, then workers find themselves in a situation of forced flexibility. In other words, with no bargaining power, they are forced to accept jobs on any terms, which renders them more prone to exploitative and precarious working conditions (ibid.). As per Aguiar (2006), cleaning workers subsequently endure a form of sweatshop citizenship, given that the dire working conditions they face are actually legal under contemporary neoliberal labor legislation. Building on it, Herod and Aguiar (2006b) contend that the precarious working conditions in the cleaning industry have been worsened by the neoliberal agenda, which has led to increased deregulation, work intensification, and attacks on unions. This shift means that workers, rather than employers, are now responsible for assuming the risks of employment (ibid.).

As a consequence, the sector has witnessed the move from permanent employment to the casualization of labor. For instance, Lebeer and Martinez (2012) have disclosed that cleaners are frequently subjected to part-time work contracts, which drives them to seek multiple jobs. Carvalho (2022) illustrated that balancing those results in a working day which can easily reach more than 12 hours, with split hours shifts and scattered locations. The synchronization of various positions is usually navigated through public transportation, entailing several trips beginning at the first hours of dawn and going into late at night (Lebeer and Martinez 2012). These antisocial working times are located outside of the standard working day for the majority of the population and therefore

disrupt the cleaners' private lives (Coyle 1985). As noted by Campbell and Peeters (2008), cleaners thus struggle to manage their personal, social, and family responsibilities due to having limited opportunities to utilize the free time between jobs.

For Herod and Aguiar (2006b), outsourcing is another neoliberal feature in the sector, resulting in the significant deterioration of cleaners' wages and working conditions. The authors explain that in contrast to the Fordism era, where companies hired workers to perform services that supported their main activities, today such duties are increasingly being subcontracted to other firms in order to cut costs and increase profits. Gomes (2020) and Seifert and Messing (2006) have demonstrated that justified on the basis of a "core business model", in which only employees considered essential to the business are directly employed by firms, increasing numbers of workplaces make use of outsourcing to hire their cleaning staff. Recio and Godino (2011) sustain that although outsourcing was first implemented in the private sector, it has been normalized in the public sector as a means to reduce state expenditures. As described by Lebeer and Martinez (2012), in the public sector, cleaning services are awarded through frequent processes of public tendering, in which the cost is typically the most significant factor in determining the winning company, rather than the quality. The two authors also argue that the process of outsourcing creates a triangular relationship between the employer, the employee, and the company contractor, replacing the traditional salary relationship between the employer and employee. As Bezuidenhout and Fakier (2006) see it, this situation can place outsourced workers in a confusing emotional position that firms exploit, as some of them continue to perceive themselves as working for the main organization, even though they are contracted by a separate company.

Herod and Aguiar (2006a) defend that the process of neoliberalization in the cleaning sector has also created a new context that has made organizing more challenging for cleaners' unions. In fact, the number of unionized cleaners has significantly decreased in most industrialized countries over the last 15 years (Aguiar 2006). Authors stress various reasons behind this phenomenon. For Seifert and Messing (2006), the fragmentation of the workplace between directly employed and outsourced workers is a significant factor, as it fosters division between different groups, such as natives and migrants or more-senior and less-senior cleaners. In this regard, the combination of economic insecurity and differences in employment status leads to conflict and diminishes solidarity among workers. Furthermore, Aguiar (2006) underscores that the constant change of firms and

the rise of small companies, as a consequence of outsourcing, has limited the effectiveness of collective bargaining with larger firms. According to the scholar, non-standard employment contracts and low levels of remuneration among cleaners often require them to work multiple jobs just to make ends meet, leaving them with little time for political activities. The collective influence of these factors results in a significant negative effect on the unity among workers and the capacity of labor unions to form consistent strategies for addressing workplace challenges, as noted by Herod and Aguiar (2006c).

To conclude, scholars have established that the cleaning sector is characterized by a trapped and precarious workforce, whose working conditions have been exacerbated by neoliberal policies that prioritize cost-cutting over the well-being of workers. In this regard, neoliberalism has had a profound impact on the cleaning sector, including the shift from permanent employment to the casualization of labor, the prevalence of outsourcing, and the increasing difficulty of union organizing. Combined, all these factors have created a situation where workers bear the risks of their own employment, while employers benefit from their vulnerability.

The impacts of Covid-19 in essential, precarious women's work

Rubbery and Rafferty (2013) argue that a recession has distinctive gender impacts based on the different characteristics and roles of women in the labor market – such as job segregation, working time, and pay –, as well as in the household and welfare state. For the authors, both the immediate gendered outcomes of a downturn and the pattern of changes in the recovery period vary considerably according to each context. In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, a key difference between its recession and others that preceded it lie in its impact on women's employment. Whereas recent pre-pandemic recessions, such as the 2008 financial crisis, have usually been referred as “mancessions” in which men lost more jobs than women, scholars now claim that the Covid-19 crisis caused a “she-cession” where women's labor market positions have deteriorated disproportionately (Alon et al. 2021; Bluedorn et al. 2021).

According to the United Nations (2020), when the Covid-19 pandemic hit preexisting inequalities shaped who has most affected and in which ways. In turn, these preceding disparities have also been exacerbated by the pandemic (UN Women 2020b). As Nieves, Gaddis, and Muller (2021) have shown, while men had higher Covid-19 mortality rates,

women suffered more economic and social impacts, including further job and income losses. Similarly, Bluedorn et al. (2021) and Monteiro and Jalali (2022) have highlighted that the pandemic had regressive effects in the labor market, with vulnerable and precarious workers being the more impacted. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2022) has observed that due to factors such as insecure employment, lower wages, and higher prevalence of part-time, temporary, and informal work, women were disproportionately affected by the economic consequences of the pandemic.

Nieves, Gaddis, and Muller (2021), as well as UN Women (2020b), point out that the contact-intensive economic sectors that employ a disproportionate share of women were the hardest hit, exposing a sectoral segregation. The International Labor Organization (2020) emphasized that this was particularly visible in the overrepresentation of women in the service sector, which was more affected by cuts and lay-offs. As the European Institute for Gender Equality (2021) reports at the European Union level, the pandemic laid bare the gendered segregation in essential jobs. That is, women constituted the bulk of frontline workers, sacrificing their health for economic security, as they faced higher risks of infection. In this sense, while there is extensive literature (Stefanović 2023; Bateman and Ross 2020; Yavorsky, Qian, and Sargent 2021; Dugarova 2020) discussing the experiences of white-collar women during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to acknowledge that blue-collar workers faced a contrasting reality. While significant attention has been given to the disparities related to unpaid care work, it is essential to recognize that there are additional inequalities experienced by blue-collar workers in frontline waged labor, beyond the context of remote work. Despite having childcare responsibilities, these workers were unable to leave their jobs due to financial constraints and heavily relied on their income to support their families, especially given the limited access to schooling and childcare services during lockdowns.

In these essential manual occupations that could not be done through teleworking, migrant and racialized women were overrepresented (UN Women 2020a; OECD 2022). Thus, when analyzing the impacts of the pandemic women cannot be assumed as a homogeneous group, since distinct groups of women lived the pandemic differently, facing specific vulnerabilities depending on their intersectional identities. For instance, the UN Women (2020a) concluded that racialized women were particularly at risk, being more exposed to higher rates of mortality and secondary impacts. Within the European

Union, the OECD (2022) and EIGE (2021) stated that female migrants were hit harder than native born as a consequence of their high concentration in undervalued and underpaid occupations, employment with precarious contracts, and accumulation of several jobs.

As previously mentioned, cleaning is an example of an essential occupation performed under precarious conditions that employ an overwhelming proportion of particular groups of women. In the context of the pandemic, cleaners had to cope with increased workloads usually without personal protective equipment or overtime compensation (UN Women 2020a, 3). Consequently, by performing manual tasks without the necessary protection, their risk of infection was higher, which according to Mamede, Pereira, and Simões (2020), demonstrates the gender- and class-biased disparities between blue collared and white collared workers during the pandemic. The only Portuguese academic study (Dias et al. 2022) focusing solely on cleaning workers during the pandemic has concluded that Covid-19 worsened their feelings of insecurity and perception of health risks. With an emphasis on the psychological wellbeing of women cleaners, the article shows a link between their performance during the Covid-19 crisis and increased anxiety levels and worsening mental health. Moreover, the authors recognize a set of pre-existing difficulties in the sector, with the sociodemographic profile of workers aggravating the risks to which they were exposed over the pandemic.

However, the precarious working conditions experienced by cleaners during the pandemic have been under researched. Considering the essential role that cleaning played during the pandemic, it is crucial to investigate whether the profession's significance was re-evaluated, potentially challenging its historical invisibility, undervaluation, and precarity. As a remarkable representation of essential women's work performed under precarious conditions, it is necessary to research whether the Covid-19 pandemic led to an increased visibility of cleaning workers, resulting in improved opportunities to negotiate their working conditions and gain more bargaining power to demand better wages and employment protection. Or, if on the other hand, cleaning workers were trapped in a continuum of precarity due to their already vulnerable working conditions and the economic downturn caused by the pandemic, leaving them with no choice but to accept their jobs in a context of widespread employment losses.

In summary, the Covid-19 pandemic caused a “she-cession” where women's labor market positions deteriorated disproportionately, facing more job losses, income reduction, and

exposure to health risks. The crisis exposed preexisting inequalities in terms of employment conditions and sectoral segregation. Women, especially migrant and racialized, were overrepresented in essential jobs at the forefront of the fight against the virus, with cleaning being one of those professions. The case of cleaning workers exemplifies the gender and class-biased disparities between blue and white collared workers during the pandemic, as they had to cope with increased manual workloads without personal protective equipment or overtime compensation. Despite its importance, there is a lack of research on the specific precarious working conditions of cleaners during the pandemic, which underscores the need for further investigation, as outlined in the research question for this thesis.

Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review was to highlight the importance of my research, which focuses on a crucial yet understudied aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic: its impact on women's precarious employment in essential jobs, namely in cleaning. After having identified and explained the significance of this gap in the literature, in this thesis I will argue that the preexisting precarious working conditions of Portugal's industrial cleaning workforce were exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic, as they were tasked with the dangerous work of cleaning spaces without adequate protection or recognition. Prior to the outbreak, these workers were already located at the intersection of multiple neoliberal labor trends that had eroded their bargaining power and labor protections, and the pandemic only worsened their situation. However, despite the dangers of their job, cleaners had no choice but to continue working in order to support themselves and their families, as there were no alternative employment options available to them. In this sense, the Covid-19 crisis did not occur in isolation from broader structures of precarity. Instead, it must be analyzed as taking place within a continuum of precarity.

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

Considering that my research question emphasizes intersectional embodied elements and precarious material aspects of cleaning during the Covid-19 pandemic, the main theoretical concepts applied throughout this thesis will be precarity and intersectionality. In this chapter, I aim to explain the significance of employing these theoretical concepts in my research and how they will help to develop my argument.

By drawing upon those two concepts, I will demonstrate that the preexisting precarious working conditions of industrial cleaning workers in Portugal were aggravated during the pandemic. In this sense, the effects of the pandemic cannot be understood in isolation, but must be rather analyzed in a broader context of precarity. Furthermore, I will argue that the experienced precarity prior to and throughout Covid-19 is influenced by different intersectional aspects of cleaners. That is, I will analyze the ways in which distinct characteristics of cleaners' identities influenced their experiences of precarity. In this sense, a comprehensive understanding of precarity requires more than just a mainstream perspective, as it necessitates an intersectional analysis to examine how it operates differently across various social groups. However, intersectionality alone does not fully elucidate the underlying power structures at play. It is through complementing it with a decolonial perspective that we can better comprehend the roots of this intersectional precarity. For instance, the colonial history of Portugal highlights the significance of employing an intersectional decolonial feminist framework to comprehend the racialized division present in cleaning occupations and the heightened levels of precarity experienced by specific workers.

To incorporate these theoretical frameworks, feminist political economy emerges as a valuable approach that connects precarity, intersectionality, and coloniality. It provides a critical analysis of the ways in which gender inequality is sustained within neoliberal economies and recognizes the intersections between gender and other social categories, such as race and class (Lokot and Bhatia 2020). By doing so, it challenges the ways in which the economic system perpetuates intersecting inequalities, particularly in terms of labor distribution and labor valuation (Lotok and Bhatia 2020; Rao and Akram-Lodhi 2021). Consequently, a feminist political economy lens will be applied across the various subsections of this chapter.

Precarity

As my literature review previously demonstrated, cleaning can be interpreted as one of the archetypes of precarious work. Precarity, similarly to the work it describes, is a flexible term. It is used as an umbrella concept that encompasses “atypical, irregular or nonstandard work, work that is temporary or seasonal, casualization and part-time work, homeworking, self-employment, contracting-in, contracting-out and outworking, informalization, flexibilization and contingent employment” (Hewison 2016, 428). Scholars often refer to the new transnational class impacted by the paradigmatic shift towards precarious work as the “precarariat” (Standing 2011; Vosko 2010). Regarding its origins, the literature traces back precarity to the neoliberal economic policies that gained momentum in the 1970s. Within a logic of increased profits and reduced costs for employers, these measures promoted flexibilization of labor regulations, the erosion of social welfare, the weakening of minimum wage standards, privatizations, outsourcing, and opposition to collective bargaining (Hewison 2016; Kalleberg and Vallas 2018). Recent literature also links the expansion of precarious work worldwide to the global impacts of the 2008 financial crisis, which resulted in austerity measures that further worsened worker welfare and pushed more workers into precarious conditions (Betti 2018).

Neoliberal capitalism, as an economic system designed to maximize profit for capitalists, requires the extraction of surplus value from employees (Golash-Boza 2021). In this sense, the system inherently leads to a pervasive precarity in the workforce due to its reliance on a flexible and compliant labor supply (Ramírez et al. 2021). Greater and more widespread inequalities are thus inherent to the nature of neoliberal capitalism (Golash-Boza 2021). Consequently, although precarity is often defended as a means of achieving greater competitiveness and profitability, it has resulted in the decline of the so-called standard employment, associated with long-term security (Hewison 2016, 428). Namely, it has signified less predictability, fewer welfare benefits, lower wages, and more vulnerability for employees, at the same time as they tend to work longer and harder in often multiple jobs (ibid.). With uncertainty, instability, insecurity, and no guarantee of social protection and employer benefits, employers and states have shifted responsibility and risk of employment onto workers (Ramírez et al. 2021; Kalleberg and Vallas 2018).

The transformations brought about by precarity have limited the collective action options of workers, leading to its interpretation as a form of social and political control and regulation against them (Bourdieu 1998; Butler 2015). On this basis, precarity has been analyzed as a hegemonic regime that not only governs workers but also forces them to govern themselves (Butler 2015). Therefore, more than a mere condition, precarity refers to an everyday existence characterized by vulnerability, unpredictability, and insecurity (Ramírez et al. 2021). Considering this, the concept serves to link the subjective sense of vulnerability with the political, social, and economic forces and institutions, bridging the gap between the micro and macro levels of analysis (ibid.). Taking this into account, the term will help me bridge the precarious working experiences of cleaners during Covid-19 with a continuum of precarity that preceded the pandemic, and will also shed light on the notion of a “trapped workforce” (Coyle 1985). With limited alternative employment options available and amongst an economic crisis involving widespread employment losses, cleaning workers were stuck in a cycle of precarity. As a result, they had to continue working to support themselves and their families, despite the risks involved.

Although precarity has become an increasingly prevalent reality for a significant portion of the working population under neoliberalism, workers experience it differently depending on their social context and social location (Vosko 2010, 2; Golash-Boza 2021; Flores-Garrido 2020). Consequently, precarity has disparate effects that reflect structural societal power relations and hierarchies (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018). Accordingly, precarity is not a uniform experience, and understanding its intersectional nature is crucial to fully comprehend its impact to different workers (Mosoetsa, Stillerman, and Tilly 2016, 14). In this sense, intersectionality is useful to link precarity to systems of oppression and to understand how those interactions create particular social experiences (Flores-Garrido 2020, 7). For instance, feminist political economy highlights the existence of a sexual division of labor, which signifies the distinct roles and tasks assigned to men and women. This division is characterized by the undervaluation of activities predominantly performed by women. Consequently, the sexual division of labor actively constructs women’s jobs as inferior and more susceptible to precarity (Flores-Garrido 2020, 2). Furthermore, the concept of precarity of feminization emphasizes that it is not women’s participation in precarious jobs that precedes their association with them. Rather, it underscores how any social activity culturally linked to women is automatically

degraded and subjected to precarization, as exemplified by the cleaning sector (Flores-Garrido 2020, 2).

The precarity experienced by women in the workforce is further compounded for racialized women, particularly those who are migrants or come from migrant backgrounds. These women occupy the lowest levels of occupational hierarchies and form the core of the precariat (Hewison 2016, 436; Standing 2011; Bradley 2016, 76). In Portugal, a similar trend is observed, with female migrants from former African colonies, Eastern Europe, and Latin America predominantly confined to precarious jobs, including cleaning (Pereira 2014; Padilla and Ortiz 2012; Cabral and Duarte 2011; Lopes 2011; Wall et al. 2008; Neves et al. 2014). In light of this, analyzing the embodied aspects of cleaners becomes crucial when considering the precarious material conditions of the profession. This underscores the significance of intersectionality, combined with a decolonial approach, as the second key theoretical concept for my thesis.

Intersectionality

Women are not a monolithic group, as gender is not constructed and performed in isolation (Flores-Garrido 2020, 6). It moves across a complex geography of injustice, which reciprocally interacts with other axes of oppression such as race, class, and nationality (Guidroz and Berger 2009, 63). Thus, these entities cannot be understood as unitary and mutually exclusive, but rather as always relational to each other. To deploy such an approach to interweaving social categories, intersectionality stands as the most valuable framework, since it assumes that they are not individual, mutually exclusive, and merely added together, but rather intersecting, relational, and integrative to each other (Hancock 2007, 251; Hill Collins and Bilge 2020, 12). According to Kathy Davis (2008), intersectionality acknowledges the interactions “between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (68). In this sense, it recognizes that inequalities are not caused by a single factor, but by layers of complex interactions amongst several social categories (Hill Collins and Bilge 2020, 36).

Employing intersectionality as a theoretical concept is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the particular dynamics of the industrial cleaning sector

in Portugal. For instance, according to the most recent statistics available, the Portuguese sector is constituted by 90% of women – having the highest female proportion in Europe (RTP 2020). Of these 90%, it is not possible to determine how many are racialized and migrant women due to the prohibition of collection of data concerning racial and ethnic origin in the country (Matos 2019). However, by closely observing who are the women who clean in Portugal, one can quickly notice a racialized and migrant pattern that is still invisible to statistics (Henriques 2019). Hence, when researching the Portuguese cleaning sector, one cannot have these aspects as a blind spot. Otherwise, an incomplete analysis that fosters a homogeneous notion of cleaning workers would be produced. Therefore, when analyzing the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in Portugal's industrial cleaning sector, it is necessary to identify the multidimensional intersections of gender, race, nationality, class, amongst others, that characterize the workers in the field and affect their experiences of precarity.

In this sense, as Sara Salem (2018, 410) proposed, I must question which women are employed in the sector and in which ways. By doing so, I will acknowledge the specific and simultaneous conditions that are created by the synthesis of gender, race, class, and migrant oppressions (Combahee River Collective Statement 1978, 1-4). In this regard, intersectionality will be capable of understanding the multidimensionality of Portugal's cleaning workers' experiences of precarity, since it will refuse a single-axis framework that focuses solely on gender and a singular subjectivity to being a cleaning worker. Since constructed social categories underline intersecting systems of power, it is crucial to acknowledge the structures that firstly created them and those that still reinforce them. This way, instead of reifying social categories, the historically contingent power hierarchies that create and reinforce them are unveiled (Hill Collins 2015, 14). In other words, intersectionality as a framework must disclose not only the categories, but also *how* they come to life and *why* they intersect (Salem 2018, 408). Based on this, I believe that decoloniality as a complement to intersectionality is essential, constituting thus a decolonial intersectional framework.

The concept of coloniality, developed by Latin American scholars and based on the specificities of Portuguese and Spanish colonization of the Americas, makes particularly sense to my analysis since I am focusing on the Portuguese context. For Quijano (2007), race emerged as an organizing principle for a hierarchizing social categorization between superior and inferior peoples so as to legitimize colonialism, and resulted in a colonial

power matrix. To justify the political project of colonial rule, this new racial grammar demarcated differences between the colonizers and the colonized, with the latter being considered inferior, uncivilized, incapable of reason and self-determination (Moffette and Vadasaria 2016, 295). Simultaneously, race, as a new technology of exploitation, gave origin to capitalism, a new structure of global control of labor (Quijano and Ennis 2000, 536). In this sense, race and labor became inextricable to each other, with slavery being enforced to the colonized populations on the basis of their inferiority (Quijano and Ennis 2000, 538). Within this context, Portugal, starting from the 1400s, was at the center of the establishment and maintenance of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Arenas 2015, 353). Coloniality, viewed in this way, refers to the persisting global patterns of power, exploitation, and social domination that outlast formal colonialism and still define labor in a way that prioritizes the superiority of the colonizer (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243; Mendoza 2015, 15; Grosfoguel 2011, 11). Affecting a multitude of dimensions, it is visible, for example, in the division of labor between Europeans and the Others.

Thus, a decolonial framework assumes decolonization as an unfinished project, with the coloniality of power lingering even after the fall of the formal colonial administration, and still defining relations between the West and the Rest (Mendoza 2015, 14; Mignolo 2007; Lugones 2010). In this regard, intersectionality and decoloniality allow the recognition of how historical processes of Othering and the unequal distribution of power and resources, such as racism and colonialism, contribute to the construction of certain bodies as disposable and undeserving of protection (Flores-Garrido 2020, 6-7). For this reason, I have incorporated a contextual section within the introduction that explores the colonial and decolonizing contexts of Portugal, shedding light on how coloniality has manifested itself in the labor market. In my subsequent analytical chapters, I will explore the ways in which this power system is observable prior to and within the Covid-19 pandemic scenario, by demonstrating how racialized and migrant workers were disproportionately subjected to heightened levels of precarity through unstable working conditions.

Conclusion

The concept of precarity is essential to understand the working conditions of cleaners, as it helps identifying the specific unstable and insecure aspects of their profession. By

complementing it with a decolonial intersectional approach, I will be able to explore how different elements of precarity operate differently for certain groups of workers based on their identity and the systems of power that create and perpetuate inequalities. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, understanding the intersection between precarity and the industrial cleaning sector is crucial to comprehend how the preexisting working conditions of cleaners were further aggravated, placing them in a continuum of precarity. By examining how precarity differently affected diverse groups of workers during the pandemic, I will demonstrate who was disproportionately impacted and how exactly that occurred. Ultimately, this theoretical framework will allow for a nuanced understanding of the precarious working conditions faced by cleaners in the midst of a global health crisis.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews with industrial cleaning workers

To gather data for my research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 industrial cleaning workers who resided and were employed in firms based in the municipality of Seixal – a southern suburb of Lisbon, the capital city of Portugal. The choice to conduct interviews with industrial cleaning workers stemmed from a desire to adopt a feminist methodology that prioritized the lived experiences of individuals, as influenced by Haraway's (1991) concept of a "view from a body" and Conquergood's (2002) emphasis on the intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection found at ground level. Through centering the methodology on the accounts shared by these workers, it became possible to develop a grounded theory (Glasser and Strauss 1967) based on their embodied experiences. By drawing upon their firsthand knowledge, my aim was to unveil the intricacies of their precarious work, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of their realities.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most suitable method because they provided the necessary flexibility for each individual interview. The intention was to foster an open and conversational atmosphere rather than a rigid question-and-answer session. Many of the questions posed were thus open-ended, allowing for a fluid exploration of the interviewees' perspectives (Roulston 2018). Flexibility played a crucial role during the interviews, as the line of questioning was continuously adapted to align with the interviewees' engagement and responses. Considering my research topics, my interview guide included questions on aspects such as the interviewees' entry into the cleaning sector, their perceptions on the value of cleaning work, the composition and dynamics of their cleaning teams, their working conditions prior to the pandemic, the influence of Covid-19 on the sector, and their resistances to the changes brought about by the pandemic.

The recruitment of interviewees employed the snowball sampling method, beginning with a close acquaintance who is a cleaning worker. Our previous collaboration on an interview for a blog post examining the effects of Covid-19 in the sector facilitated this initial connection. From there, I expanded the sample by creating two additional snowball chains through two family members working in different workplaces. This approach was implemented to ensure a diverse range of participants and perspectives. By utilizing the

snowball sampling technique, particularly through individuals with whom I already had a rapport, I aimed to establish a sense of trust and credibility with interviewees, as they were introduced to me through a preexisting social network.

The interviews were conducted over a period spanning from January 17th to February 9th, 2023. Among the total of 19 interviews, 16 were carried out in-person, while the remaining 3 were conducted online through video calls on the messaging platform Whatsapp. For the in-person interviews, the sessions took place at the participants' workplaces, during their working hours, in a designated room approved by their respective managers. To ensure privacy, the doors of these rooms were closed during the interviews, allowing for a confidential setting. Each interview took place in a one-on-one setting and was conducted exclusively in Portuguese. I recorded the interviews using my phone and later transcribed them in Portuguese for analysis. The analysis process was conducted using Microsoft Word. Initially, I assigned codes to the content based on relevant topics that were not pre-established but emerged organically during the interviews. Subsequently, these codes were further grouped into cohesive themes, which served as the basis for the narrative development in the two analytical chapters. For instance, for the first analytical chapter, some of the most important codes were “multiple jobs”, “overwork”, “minimum wage”, “risk allowance”, “resignation”, “lack of teamwork”, “self-appreciation”, “invisibility”, “disrespect”, “servitude”, and “xenophobic/racist discrimination”, whereas for chapter two they were “more workload”, “emotional reaction”, “new products”, “protection material”, “direct exposure to Covid”, “overwork”, “lack of a space for social distancing”, “lack of training”, “health problems”, “balance of professional and personal life”, “misappreciation”, and “salary bonus”. While I did not translate the interviews in their entirety into English, I translated the quotes from the interviews included in the analytical chapters from Portuguese to English, ensuring accurate representation of the interviewees' perspectives.

The region of Seixal

The focus on the municipality of Seixal was decided due to several reasons. Even though the colonial wars ended with the Carnation Revolution of 1974, the effects of the 13-year-long conflicts persisted. For instance, as a consequence of the war-promoted destruction in the former colonized territories, Portugal received a migration wave like it had never

before (Dias 2011, 29). Between 1974 and 1980 the foreign population in the country increased from 32,000 to 58,000, 48% being African citizens, from which 98% came from former African colonies (Góis et al. 2018, 70). When settled in Portugal, with the great majority establishing in the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon, the new coming migrants were faced with racism, labor precarity, the denial of citizenship, and were thus forced to the edges of cities by social and economic exclusion (Sousa and Guterres 2018). Consequently, they resorted to informal and self-built settlements in the periphery of the city, which resulted in a drastic boom of slums (Ascensão 2013, 418). Those territories quickly became segregated from the rest of their regions, being perceived as “problematic”, “critical”, or of “priority intervention” (Taviani 2019). Subsequently, an imaginary of incivility, violence, criminality, delinquency, and filthiness – in other words, a reinforcement of the colonial Otherness – was created around them. Hence, they became disconcerting symbols of postcolonial Portugal. Seixal was and still is one of them.

Having been born and raised in Seixal, throughout my whole life I was not only surrounded by such territories, but also influenced by the prevailing prejudiced perceptions about them. However, growing up and gaining political awareness, I started to recognize a pattern: racial capitalism employs the same people it subverts and alienates from those neighborhoods to perform the most precarious jobs in society – namely, those that involve cleaning (Taviani 2019). Thus, since the scope of my study required a focus on a specific area, I decided to choose Seixal based on my familiarity with the region, the particularities that make it representative of the periphery of Lisbon, and as a way of shedding light to what is happening in my own context.

The particular group of *trabalhadoras* who clean

In Portuguese, the term used for a group of women workers is *trabalhadoras*. However, if a single man is included amongst them, the word changes immediately to the masculine form *trabalhadores*. This was the case with my research sample, where out of the nineteen cleaning workers interviewed, only one was a man, while the other eighteen were women. The gender distribution of my sample is therefore consistent with the prevalent gender segregation observed in the cleaning industry, not only in Portugal, where approximately 90% of the workforce is constituted by women, but also globally (RTP 2020). Interestingly, the age range of the interviewees varied from 31 to 67 years old, with the

majority (seven) being in their 50s, followed by five in their 30s, four in their 60s, and three in their 40s. In line with the literature on the topic (Seifert and Messing 2006), this indicates that while the cleaning sector may be predominantly female, there is significant age diversity amongst its workers, with people performing cleaning work at different stages of their lives.

The interviewees displayed a wide range of educational attainment, with their education levels spanning from 3rd grade to Bachelor's Degree. However, only one worker had obtained a university degree, while all the other eighteen had discontinued their formal education at the school level. It is worth noting that the Portuguese national school system encompasses grades from 1st to 12th. The most attained educational level among the interviewees was 12th grade, which was achieved by five individuals, followed by 9th grade, which was attained by four workers. Notably, the individuals in the sample with the lowest attainment levels, having completed education up to 3rd grade, were migrant women from Senegal and Cape Verde, and the oldest interviewee, who was 67 years old, finished her school education at the 4th grade. Overall, the sample aligns with the existing literature, illustrating that the cleaning workforce is predominantly comprised of individuals with limited education and few marketable skills (Cruz and Abrantes 2013).

Regarding countries of origin, among the nineteen interviewees, five had migrated from Venezuela, Senegal, Brazil, Angola, and Cape Verde, while the remaining fourteen were born in Portugal. Worth pointing is that three of these countries – Brazil, Angola, and Cape Verde – were former Portuguese colonies. In this sense, the sample aligns with previous studies that demonstrate the prevalence of migrant women from former African colonies and Latin America in precarious jobs in Portugal, such as cleaning (Pereira 2014; Padilla and Ortiz 2012; Neves et al. 2014).

Concerning household composition, there were diverse arrangements amongst the interviewees. The most common situation, comprising of five workers, was being a single mother with children of age. This was followed by four interviewees living with their husband and no children, three with their husband and underage children, three with their husband and children of age, two being single mothers with underage children, and two living on their own. As a whole, the various household compositions of the interviewees underscore the intricate relationship between family dynamics and employment choices. For instance, the responsibilities of childcare and financial pressures are among the significant factors that may affect individuals' decisions to work in the cleaning sector.

In terms of workplace settings, all of the interviewees were employed in institutions associated with the public sector, despite this not being an intentional criterion in my recruitment process. More specifically, eleven participants worked in a Municipal Government Building, five were employed in a Job Center, and three worked in a Professional Training Center. However, it is important to highlight that the nature of their employment contracts exhibited significant variations, as not all of them were classified as public workers. This aspect will be thoroughly examined and discussed in detail in the analytical chapters, shedding light on the nuanced relationship between employment contracts and working conditions in the cleaning sector.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the precarious working conditions experienced by cleaners, it is crucial to consider the intersectional aspects of their identities. This is important because precarity is not a uniform experience and is influenced by various social categories. That is, precarity within cleaning is experienced differently by different people. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the diverse experiences within my sample, taking into account interviewees' gender, ethnicity, migrant status, educational backgrounds, and household composition, and relating those to working conditions. For this reason, Appendix 1 contains a comprehensive overview of the sociodemographic background of each interviewee; Appendix 2 offers detailed information regarding the interviewees' entry into the sector; and Appendix 3 provides insights into the work location, employment contract, and multiple jobs of interviewees.

Positionality and reflexivity

My positionality shaped my interest in the subject, my research methods, interpretations, and knowledge production. By critically reflecting on my own positionality and the power dynamics at play, I aim to approach the research with sensitivity and an awareness of how these factors may shape the outcomes of the study. For instance, as a researcher, my work inherently reflects my own biases and subjectivity, as the process involves understanding another world through the lens of my own experiences and perspectives (McGranahan 2018, 4). Therefore, the knowledge I produce is situated within the context of my own subjectivity and the social and political positions I occupy at this particular moment (Sultana 2007, 382). In this sense, it is important to acknowledge that the choice of my research topic is influenced by my political values and my close proximity to working-

class causes and movements. The personal connection I have with the reality of cleaning workers is also significant, as the mother of one of my long-term closest friends is a cleaner who entered the sector after migrating from Venezuela to Portugal. Through hearing her experiences over the course of years, including during the Covid-19 pandemic, I have gained firsthand insights into the sector. This intimate knowledge played a pivotal role in my decision to pursue research in this area. Therefore, unlike neoliberal apolitical perspectives that tend to prioritize flawed notions of objectivity, I am fully aware that my research involves deliberate decisions to emphasize the voices and experiences of workers and that this approach inevitably introduces a level of partiality into my work. However, I believe that this partiality contributes to the authenticity and depth of my research (Davis and Craven 2011, 197-198), as it allows for a more nuanced understanding of the realities faced by cleaning workers.

Similarly, my positionality also impacted the way I engaged with my research participants and the manner in which they interacted with me (Sultana 2007, 376). In contrast to the majority of my interviewees, I hold a different background and positionality. I am a white woman hailing from a lower-middle-class background who has had the privilege of pursuing higher education up to a master's level, including the opportunity to study abroad on two occasions. While I have experienced precarious employment in the past, I have not encountered the same level of financial hardship as those who earn the minimum wage for full-time positions. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that despite being from the same region, differences in social class and educational opportunities remain significant markers of distinction between myself and my interviewees (Sultana 2007, 375). In this sense, I am aware that my role within the research process was complex and multifaceted. According to Sultana (2007, 377), I could simultaneously occupy the positions of an insider, outsider, both, or neither in the eyes of the interviewees. Recognizing the emotional toll involved in this continuous negotiation, I followed Rager's (2005, 25) recommendation to maintain a journal where I recorded my feelings and thoughts after each interview. This practice served as a means for further reflection and helped me navigate the complexities of my role as a researcher within the dynamics of power and relationships with the interviewees. As an example, during the initial stages of the research process, I documented my observations regarding the potential influence of the snowball sampling method on the interviewees' narratives. That is, as two snowball samples were initiated through two family members who worked as administratives in

the same workplaces as the cleaners I interviewed, it became apparent that this dynamic contributed to a sense of hesitation among the participants when sharing certain stories. They may have chosen to withhold experiences that could potentially impact my perception of my family members, especially if they were part of the group of co-workers whom the cleaning workers believed mistreated them. Consequently, their narratives may have been filtered due to this awareness.

Given the original centrality of the concept of everyday resistance (Scott 1985) in my research, it is even more crucial to acknowledge and critically assess my own positionality in terms of identity and its influence on the responses provided by my participants. This acknowledgment is particularly noteworthy as everyday resistance encompasses forms of resistance that defy conventional definitions, as they manifest through subtle, often concealed acts of resistance, commonly referred to as “invisible politics” (ibid.). In this regard, the study of everyday resistance poses a distinct challenge for researchers due to the covert nature of these acts and their tendency to lack explicit political articulation, as emphasized by Johansson and Vinthagen (2020, 5).

In my research, while my objective was to investigate both the effects of the pandemic on the precarious working conditions of cleaning workers and their resistance to these conditions, the topic of resistance did not emerge prominently during the interviews, despite specific questions being formulated on the subject. Several factors may have contributed to this. Firstly, my positionality and close connection to the family members who are also co-workers of the interviewees could have created a sense of apprehension or fear in disclosing acts of resistance in their workplaces. Secondly, the nature of resistance and agency can be challenging to uncover within the context of a precarious trapped workforce, as individuals may not readily share their acts of resistance due to the potential consequences they might face. Thirdly, the nature of my research design, which involved a single interview with each participant within a specific timeframe, may have hindered the development of a deeper understanding of resistance dynamics. That is, effective everyday resistance often necessitates concealment, making it challenging for interviewees to openly share such experiences with someone they have just met. Fourthly, the interviews were conducted within the participants’ workplaces and although measures were taken to ensure privacy, it is conceivable that some interviewees may have experienced a degree of hesitation in openly discussing acts of resistance in that setting. It is important to highlight that the absence of identified acts of everyday resistance

towards employers in relation to Covid-19 in the interviews should not be interpreted as evidence of their nonexistence. It is possible that such resistance exists but was not explicitly discussed during the interviews. Therefore, I will refrain from making definitive claims about the presence or absence of these acts based on the current data. Nonetheless, in the forthcoming first analytical chapter, I will explore and examine specific instances where cleaners demonstrated resistance against invisibility, disrespect, and servitude from colleagues and customers prior to the pandemic. By focusing on pre-pandemic examples, I aim to shed light on the broader context of resistance within the cleaning sector and provide insights into the dynamics of power and agency among cleaners.

Research ethics

Considering the nature of my research topic, the potential risks and dangers for the interviewees were minimal. The participants in the interviews were adult workers, and the topics discussed were not particularly sensitive. Prior to the beginning of the interviews, I followed a careful process to obtain oral consent from the participants. I provided them with a detailed explanation of who I am, my contact details, the purpose of my research, how their participation would contribute to it, how and where the obtained information would be used, who would have access to it, and in what language it would be written. Additionally, I emphasized their right to withdraw their consent at any point until the submission of the thesis. In terms of recording the interviews, I sought permission from the participants and assured them that the audio recordings would remain in my private custody exclusively for transcription and analysis purposes. Furthermore, I committed to deleting all audio files at the conclusion of the research process. To protect the anonymity of the participants, I took measures to anonymize the data by using fictitious names and removing or altering any identifying information. It is worth emphasizing that participation in the research was voluntary, and no financial remuneration was provided to the participants for their involvement.

Limitations

Given the scope of my thesis, I acknowledge that my research focuses solely on the region of Seixal and does not encompass the entire country of Portugal. It is important to recognize that Seixal has its own unique characteristics and is not representative of the entire national scenario within the cleaning sector. Consequently, my thesis should not be considered as drawing conclusions about the entire country or the entire field. Instead, its purpose is to shed light on the specific context experienced by the interviewed cleaners in one of the peripheries of Lisbon.

Behind the scenes of industrial cleaning: Uncovering the precarious working conditions preceding the Covid-19 pandemic

Introduction

If instead of working as an equalizer, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated preexisting inequalities by particularly impacting vulnerable precarious groups (Bluedorn et al. 2021; Monteiro and Jalali 2022), it is then vital to identify those preceding disparities. In the case of industrial cleaning workers, to understand what they were exposed while in the frontlines of the fight against the deadly virus, one must firstly comprehend the antecedent conditions that characterized the sector. Only by contextualizing the pandemic as occurring within a continuum of precarity it is possible to argue that what happened to cleaning workers during the outbreak was not an isolated event. For this reason, this chapter will highlight, based on an intersectional analysis that emphasizes the diversity of experiences, the precarious working conditions that the interviewed workers experienced prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. In other words, it will demonstrate the embodied aspects of industrial cleaning within my sample, as well as its material dimensions. Grasping the interplay between these two elements is crucial because the complex dynamics of the sector cannot be fully understood by analyzing the *who* in isolation from the *how*. This way, a more comprehensive overview of cleaning will be attained.

In the first subsection, I will illustrate that the interviewed cleaning workers can be interpreted as a trapped workforce (Coyle 1985) who work in the sector out of financial need, rather than by choice. I will also demonstrate how this situation is influenced by various intersectional aspects of workers' identities, such as age, attainment level, migrant status, and household composition. My argument will be that this context places workers in a setting of forced flexibility (Ollus 2016), where their lack of bargaining power forces them to accept jobs on any terms, thereby rendering them more susceptible to precarious working conditions.

In the second subsection, I will present the consequences of being a trapped workforce, by examining the specific precarity aspects experienced by the interviewed cleaners. Through several examples, I will show that these workers are at the intersection of various neoliberal labor market trends, resulting in insecure working conditions and low wages that undermine labor standards. Furthermore, I will explain how employment status

differentiate workers, and how the concepts of intersectionality and coloniality are key frameworks for comprehending the gendered, colonial, and racialized divisions that exist within the industrial cleaning sector, leading to further precarity for certain workers.

In the third subsection, I will underline the intersection of precarity with cleaners' experiences of invisibility, disrespect, and servitude from their colleagues and customers. Specifically, I will examine the contrasting perception between how, on the one hand, cleaning personnel dignify their work and how, on the other hand, others devalue and mistreat them and their functions. However, despite being a trapped workforce with limited bargaining power with their employers, I will demonstrate how cleaners confront this domain of precarity, actively subverting power dynamics through acts of everyday resistance which assert their agency and dignity.

As a whole, in this chapter I will argue that the cleaning workers I interviewed represent a trapped workforce within the sector, compelled to work due to financial hardships and the intersectional aspects of their identities. This compulsion results in a forced flexibility that leaves them with little bargaining power, leading them to accept jobs on precarious terms. As a consequence, they are exposed to severe precarious working conditions within the industrial cleaning sector, leaving them in highly insecure positions within the labor market. However, there are gendered, colonial, and racialized divisions within these experiences, and understanding them requires the application of intersectionality and coloniality as frameworks. Moreover, cleaners' experiences of invisibility, disrespect, and servitude from colleagues and customers who undervalue their labor contribute to another dimension of precarity. Nonetheless, despite their limited options for bargaining with employers regarding their precarious situation, cleaners actively engage in everyday resistance against the stigmatization they face from colleagues and customers.

A trapped workforce

In Portugal, when someone is going through a financially difficult time, it is common to express determination to overcome it by saying "I will make it, even if I have to go do cleaning work". Cleaning is not only viewed as an undesirable job; it is also considered the lowest point one can reach. In this sense, it is unsurprising that all but two of the interviewees affirmed that cleaning was not their desired profession. Rather, the main drivers that led the interviewees to work in the industrial cleaning sector were

unemployment and its resulting financial hardship, previous exposure to aggravated precarious working conditions, and past positions in other types of cleaning.

The most common scenario for entering the field was due to dire financial needs resulting from unemployment and an inability to secure work elsewhere, which was the case for ten interviewees. Workers with low education levels, older workers who lose jobs, and those who have dependents can find themselves in particularly difficult circumstances, with limited options available to them. This is visible in the account of Carmo, who recalled feeling desperate and hopeless when she lost her job at the age of 50 while being a single mother with a minor daughter, believing that she would never be able to find another profession. The effects of crises, such as the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, can further exacerbate this situation. Anabela, Carmo, Heloísa, Mariana, and Tânia serve as examples of how the cleaning sector becomes a viable option for securing employment during times of high unemployment. For these interviewees, finding any available work was necessary to support themselves and their families due to their desperate financial situations. For instance, Mariana lost her previous job during the Covid-19 pandemic while living with her parents and her minor son. Likewise, Tânia experienced job loss during the 2008 financial crisis and joined cleaning as a last resource. As a single mother responsible for two children, she explained that while cleaning is not her long-term career aspiration, she now feels compelled to remain in the sector in order to support her underage sons. In essence, her family responsibilities prevent her from leaving the cleaning profession.

Moreover, migrant status interacts with unemployment to shape individuals' experiences (Herod and Aguiar 2006c; Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006; Cabral and Duarte 2011; Lopes 2011; Wall et al. 2008). In the context of Portugal, the integration of migrants – particularly those from former African colonies, Eastern Europe, and Latin America – into the labor market is characterized by precarity, with their overrepresentation in socially undervalued and underpaid positions (Dias 2011, 37). In this process, a gendered pattern is visible, as men are often directed towards construction work, while women are predominantly confined to cleaning, domestic, and care services (Dias 2011, 38). This situation is exemplified by Maria's story, where she was forced to migrate from Venezuela to Portugal without a guaranteed job, a family support system, and without knowledge of the country's language. Part-time cleaning was therefore one of the few options that did not require knowledge of Portuguese and that offered flexibility to take

care of her two young children, as she did not have anyone in the country whom she could entrust with that responsibility.

The second most frequent setting to join the sector involved six interviewees who had previously experienced varied forms of precarious employment and were actively seeking better job opportunities. In this instance, even though cleaning was not necessarily their original ambition, it constituted the first option that became available to them. For instance, Fátima left agricultural work in a rural area of Portugal to perform cleaning in the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon, although she later found the profession more difficult than anticipated. Dora worked as a beautician without a formal work contract and was living in a constant state of uncertainty regarding her monthly wage. Graça quit her job at a nursing home due to mistrust in her bosses regarding her salary payment, whereas Lídia struggled to find time to be with her children while intensively working in restaurants without stable and long-term contracts. In these cases, the existence of a work contract in cleaning with a guaranteed payment at the end of the month, even if just the national minimum wage, is sufficient to justify the change of professions. Thus, the interviewees who had experienced other forms of precarious employment perceived the precarity of cleaning as relatively more stable and secure than their previous work conditions.

This scenario is particularly common among those who have joined cleaning as public sector workers, which provides them with permanent contracts. For example, Paula worked as a kindergarten teacher without a formal employment contract and during the pandemic she decided to search for a stable position working for the state. This was also the case for Tomás, who was employed in a sales division within the private sector and decided to apply for cleaning as a means to enter the public sector, hoping to eventually shift to other positions. For them, cleaning is a temporary solution in the pursuit of better employment conditions within the public sector.

Lastly, three workers stated that they transitioned to the industrial cleaning sector after working in other cleaning areas, such as domestic or street cleaning. Cláudia, a single mother who used to work in street cleaning, found industrial cleaning to be a safer employment option since it did not require enduring miscellaneous weather conditions. Bintu, a migrant from Senegal who lives on her own, moved from domestic cleaning to industrial cleaning after her former employer passed away. When she became unemployed while being 50 years old, she was desperate to quickly find another job due

to the necessity of having forty years of paid social security taxes in Portugal to qualify for retirement. Due to her familiarity with the required tasks and her belief that her third-grade education would limit her employment prospects elsewhere, she decided to continue working in the cleaning sector. In a similar manner, Edna, from Cape Verde and who also completed the third grade, transitioned from domestic to industrial cleaning as she felt that she had no qualifications for other types of jobs. These examples illustrate that workers in the cleaning sector often have transferable skills that allow them to move between different types of cleaning jobs.

Overall, the vast majority of the interviewees did not actively choose cleaning as a profession, but were rather driven to it due to financial circumstances beyond their control. Namely, they were pushed to accept cleaning positions because of their desperation after experiencing unemployment or previously working in worse precarious conditions. The various examples provided throughout the subsection demonstrate that the workers' choices were particularly influenced by intersectional aspects of their identities, such as age, attainment level, migrant status, and household composition. Hence, my research findings align with Coyle's (1985) theorization of cleaning workers as a trapped workforce. That is, my sample can be interpreted as a trapped workforce since they often feel compelled to work in the sector out of necessity rather than by choice. This creates a situation of forced flexibility (Ollus 2016), where workers have no bargaining power and are forced to accept jobs on any terms, leaving them more vulnerable to precarious working conditions. In fact, while all the interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with their current working conditions, they also demonstrated a certain level of resignation towards their employment situation. That is, despite acknowledging that their working conditions are not commensurate with the value of their work, cleaning workers feel a sense of disempowerment to advocate for a different career path due to financial pressures and limited options for alternative career paths. As a result, they persist in their cleaning jobs to guarantee a steady income at the end of each month.

The specific precarious aspects of cleaning

Within this subsection, my focus will be to analyze the consequences of the trapped workforce (Coyle 1985) status of the interviewed sample. In particular, I will delve into

the tangible aspects of precarity faced by my sample of cleaning workers, resulting from their forced flexibility (Ollus 2016) and lack of bargaining power in the labor market.

All my interviewees worked in institutions belonging to the public sector, even though that was not a deliberate choice on my part. Specifically, eleven worked in a Municipal Government Building, five in a Job Center, and three in a Professional Training Center. However, the nature of their employment contracts varied significantly, which had an impact on their working conditions. Namely, ten out of the eleven workers in the Municipal Government Building were directly employed by the state, while the remaining worker at that location and the eight employees in the Job Center and Professional Training Center were outsourced. This meant that they were considered private sector workers with significant inferior welfare benefits from those in the public sector. For instance, Anabela, an outsourced worker responsible for cleaning the Municipal Government Building, worked the same 7-hour shift as her ten public sector colleagues employed there, but her contract was considered part-time because the private sector standard for a full-time wage is 8 hours, in contrast to 7 in the public sector. As a result, she earned a lower salary than her colleagues who were receiving the national minimum wage, which is a standard minimum amount set by the state for monthly wages in full-time contracts.

Payment of salaries is another instance where this exacerbated precarity is visible for cleaners who are outsourced. That is, unlike public workers, outsourced workers often face more significant difficulties in receiving their wages on time and in the correct amount. This creates an exacerbated sense of precarity in their lives, as they are left unsure about their financial stability and ability to make ends meet. Through the interviews, outsourced cleaners recounted instances where they had to turn to their union representative to file a complaint and ensure that they receive the correct payment of wages. For example, Fátima's – a part-time worker at the Job Center – account of having to take legal action against a company that consistently delayed and accumulated unpaid salaries is a testament to the precarity of their situation. When companies fail to pay their employees, outsourced workers have to resort to legal action, which can be a stressful and time-consuming process.

“They are not the best employers. We had companies here that took a long time to pay us our wages. Me and two colleagues had to take one of them to court in order to receive late monthly wages. They never paid us on time, and they were starting to accumulate

unpaid several months of our salaries. When we won the case, the company left this workplace.” (Fátima)

Within the dichotomy between public and outsourced workers, coloniality appears to play a substantial role. Amongst the seven outsourced workers I interviewed, five were women who were racialized migrants, whereas all public workers were Portuguese-born and white. These five women had migrated from Venezuela, Senegal, Brazil, Angola, and Cape Verde. Notably, three of these countries – Brazil, Angola, and Cape Verde – were former colonies of Portugal. Viewed in this way, all the racialized and migrant women in my sample were employed through outsourcing. Moreover, all those outsourced held part-time positions, while those directly employed by the state had full-time contracts. All in all, these differences imply lower wages and fewer benefits for a group of people whose majority in my sample is constituted by migrant and racialized women. Therefore, as expounded by the literature on the position of migrant women in the Portuguese labor market (Cabral and Duarte 2011; Lopes 2011; Wall et al. 2008), my sample demonstrates that not only are these women assigned to undervalued industries such as cleaning, but that they also experience more precarious working conditions compared to their colleagues. That is, racialized women, particularly those who are migrants or from a migrant background, are positioned at the forefront of the precariat, occupying the lowest rungs of occupational hierarchies (Hewison 2016, 436; Standing 2011; Bradley 2016, 76; Rutherford 2008). In this sense, neoliberal trends such as outsourcing reinforce the racialization and coloniality of the workplace, with the most precarious positions and working conditions being ascribed to the colonial and racialized “Other” (Herod and Aguiar 2006c; Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006). Therefore, neoliberal labor market structures exploit the intersectional identities of these cleaning workers, resulting in an even more precarious integration into the labor market.

Part-time contracts have become increasingly prevalent in the cleaning industry, often forcing workers to take on multiple jobs to make ends meet (Lebeer and Martinez 2012). In my sample, nine interviewees were employed part-time while ten held full-time positions. As an illustration, employees at the Job Center are only given three-hour shifts, causing four out of five of them to take on multiple jobs within the cleaning industry to cover their expenses. However, even if they combine sources of income, interviewees reported that their earnings are insufficient to sustain themselves. Furthermore, this situation places significant constraints over the structure of the workers’ everyday lives, as they have to juggle multiple jobs with irregular hours and split shifts, while traveling

by public transportation. That is precisely the case of Bintu, a migrant woman from Senegal who lives on her own and works part-time at the Job Center. Despite the difficulties of managing two daily cleaning jobs in different cities that require her to wake up every day before 5am, she revealed that she does not even earn the national minimum wage .

“I have two different cleaning jobs, one in the morning in Lisbon and another in the afternoon at this Job Center. I begin working in the first job at 6am and leave at 9am. Here at the Center I begin at 4 pm and leave at 7 pm. But it seems I earn almost nothing from these jobs. Together, they do not even make it to national minimum wage. I earn 265€ from working in the Center, and basically the same from my other job.” (Bintu)

Not only part-time workers, but even those employed in full-time positions often have to take on additional jobs. Despite being compelled by financial needs to work in the cleaning sector, the wages earned by workers are inadequate to provide for themselves and their families with a single job. This is a consequence of cleaning being classified as an unskilled profession under the Portuguese National Qualifications Framework, meaning that full-time workers in the sector only earn the national minimum wage – which was 635€ in 2020, 665€ in 2021, 705€ in 2022, and 760€ in 2023 – without any risk allowance. For instance, among the ten individuals who held full-time positions, four of them had multiple jobs, working in both domestic and building cleaning. Namely, they juggled between two to three jobs at the same time. The four workers, two of whom were single mothers, had children to support, and they highlighted that with the current cost of living in Portugal, the minimum wage is insufficient to make ends meet, particularly when you have dependents. In a similar manner, those who work full-time and do not have multiple jobs often find themselves having to work overtime to earn extra income. Tânia, a single mother with two underage sons, describes the dilemma she faces – on the one hand, she needs to work extra to support her children financially, but on the other hand, working overtime means she does not have enough time to care for them, thus making it difficult to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Nevertheless, Tânia is still forced to work six days a week to ensure a monthly payment of nearly 900€.

“We are underpaid for our work. And most of us do several extra hours to bring more money home. For example, if one of our colleagues misses work, I accept working longer hours to replace them on their shift. Those of us, like me, who have young children need to work longer to provide for them, but at the same time we can’t take all the extra hours because we have to pick up our kids from school and take care of them. But most of us still end up working 6 days a week to try to bring home nearly 900€.” (Tânia)

Regardless of the type of contract cleaners might have, the lack of unity and communication amongst them is a reported pervasive issue that leads to frequent conflicts and divisions within teams. Based on what they shared during the interviews, workers frequently accuse each other of receiving preferential treatment and there is a general lack of communication. The interviewees suggest that these conflicts may stem from differences in employment status, backgrounds, and experiences, which are prevalent in a sector as diverse as cleaning, where workers come from various types of employment, age groups, countries of origin, and professional backgrounds. As an example, Cláudia expresses a feeling of isolation and a lack of team spirit due to the past conflictual behavior of some of her colleagues. In this regard, her preference for working alone reflects a desire to avoid confrontations.

“There is no team spirit. There are young girls who join cleaning and think they are superior, that they are better than the rest. That’s why I come to work, I greet people when I arrive in the common room, but I immediately pick my cleaning stroller and go work somewhere else. I made a fool of myself trying to help people at the beginning, and now I don’t help anyone anymore.” (Cláudia)

Similarly, Seifert and Messing (2006) note that the division between directly employed and outsourced employees, combined with the resulting economic insecurity and differences in employment status, can reduce solidarity among workers and lead to conflict. Likewise, Herod and Aguiar (2006c) defend that outsourcing practices result in hierarchical divisions between “core” and “peripheral” workers in the same workplace. In this sense, outsourcing, as a neoliberal feature of the cleaning workplace, can reinforce an individualistic work environment defined by the lack of solidarity between workers. As a result, the workplace is viewed as merely a place to work, rather than a setting for building meaningful connections. According to the interviewees, help is only offered when explicitly requested by managers, although workers believe that more support and unity among colleagues would make their work easier. This is particularly evident in Heloísa’s account, a part-time outsourced worker at the Professional Training Center, who expresses her disappointment at the lack of support among her colleagues, emphasizing that they are all women and should be helping each other. Her words suggest that this lack of solidarity among workers is particularly disheartening for women who may face additional barriers and discrimination in the workplace.

“I don’t get along with all my cleaning colleagues. It is very complicated. It’s like they’re constantly comparing themselves and their work. Either because of nationality or skin color. (...) There is no unity and support between us. And we are all women, which makes it even more sad, since we should support each other.” (Heloísa)

Even though the daily tasks of industrial cleaning workers vary depending on the specific needs of the building they work in, the interviewees shared a set of common tasks that they all performed. These included sweeping, mopping, and vacuuming floors, cleaning and tidying surfaces, disposing of trash, and sanitizing restrooms. According to workers, the nature of these duties require repetition and can become tedious as they need to be performed multiple times a day to maintain hygiene standards. However, the accounts provided by the interviewees revealed a noticeable gender division of labor. That is, the women participants mentioned being assigned to repetitive responsibilities, while Tomás, the sole man in the sample, acknowledged being entrusted with tasks that demand technical expertise and physical strength, such as equipment operation, maintenance, and handling heavier objects. Tomás expressed his perception that heavier tasks were consistently expected of him as a man, and even his women colleagues shared the same sentiment. His statement serves as a testament to the existence of gendered expectations and unequal treatment within the cleaning workforce. It underscores how certain tasks and responsibilities are allocated based on gender, reinforcing gender norms and resulting in differential treatment among workers.

“They always call me to go to the roof of the building to change filters, or even to clean the lake. I feel that many more heavy tasks are expected of me as a man than from my female colleagues. Even my female colleagues say the same. I really feel that they always call me to carry heavier things.” (Tomás)

Nonetheless, the use of specific cleaning products is necessary for all cleaning personnel to perform their tasks effectively. Although these products are essential for their job, some interviewees mentioned that sometimes it is workers’ responsibility to obtain them. For instance, Tânia, a full-time public worker employed at the Municipal Government Building, notes that occasionally there is a lack of essential materials such as bleach and detergent, leaving workers to bring these products from home or purchase them at their own expense. This not only represents an added financial burden on workers but also highlights a failure on the part of the employer to provide basic necessary resources for workers to perform their duties effectively. Her experience also reveals a lack of communication and transparency between management and workers regarding the availability and procurement of cleaning materials. On the whole, Tânia perceives that this absence of employer’s assistance implies that cleaners are working under minimal conditions.

“Our working material is terrible. Sometimes we don’t have neither bleach nor detergent, and we have to bring those products from home or from the supermarket in order to be

able to perform our functions. This means that when there is a lack of something, it is up to our responsibility, our pockets, and our conscience to fix it. And that takes a lot of time of our lives. (...) A lot of my colleagues do this. (...) We don't know who buys the material. They don't talk to us about it, so we can't complain about our products.” (Tânia)

Moreover, the nature of industrial cleaning work involves exposure to strong and potentially hazardous chemicals and substances, which poses a significant risk to the safety of cleaning workers and can lead to adverse health effects such as skin irritation and respiratory problems. Despite this, all the interviewees reported that they do not receive any risk allowance for the hazards involved in their work, as some workers in other professions in Portugal do. In fact, all of the interviewed workers expressed the view that their low wages do not reflect the value of their labor given the risks they face while performing their duties. As an example, Tomás, the only man in the sample and a full-time public employee at the Municipal Government Building, experienced the adverse effects of these chemicals firsthand when he developed a severe case of atopic eczema within the first three months of starting his cleaning job. He explains that the products were too strong and concentrated, causing him to bleed from his hands and legs. The severity of his condition forced him to seek medical attention, and he was eventually prescribed medication and was only allowed to do dry cleaning tasks like mopping. Tomás also reveals the fear of job loss that can prevent workers from reporting health issues, as he only reported his condition after the probation period of his contract, indicating that he did not want to risk losing his job in the public sector. His story highlights a common issue of job insecurity in the cleaning industry, which can be exacerbated by the lack of support and protections for workers.

“In the first 3 months of doing cleaning work, I developed an allergy to the detergents we use. I went to the doctor in our building and he said I couldn't handle the cleaning products, because they were too strong, too concentrated, and I have very severe atopic eczema. In fact, at the time I was bleeding from my legs and hands. (...) I only reported this health problem after the probation period in my contract so as not to risk losing my job in the public sector. But it was really difficult, because there was a constant burning sensation in my hands. Even when washing my hands with water and without soap, they burned.” (Tomás)

To summarize, the experiences shared by the industrial cleaning workers I interviewed for my research demonstrate the specific precarious aspects of their working conditions and how they are located at the intersection of various neoliberal labor market trends. For instance, despite the fact that they all worked for public institutions, there were significant differences between those directly employed by the state and outsourced workers. Namely, workers employed through outsourcing had significantly more precarious

contracts, wages, and working conditions, as well as inferior welfare benefits. Within this precarious framework, coloniality played a significant role, as all the racialized and migrant workers in the sample were employed through outsourcing. Additionally, the prevalence of forced part-time contracts and low wages, even in full-time positions, highlights the issue of job insecurity, which results in the need for workers to take on additional jobs or work overtime to make up for their insufficient income. Another issue that cleaning workers commonly face is a lack of teamwork and communication that leads to frequent conflicts and divisions within teams, with workers frequently facing the responsibility of acquiring products essential to their job. There is also a clear gendered division of labor, where women are often assigned repetitive tasks while the only man in the sample is given more technical or physically demanding tasks. Lastly, cleaning involves the exposure of workers to hazardous products, which poses significant risks to their safety and can result in adverse health effects. Despite the hazardous nature of their work, cleaners are not provided with a risk allowance, and the fear of job loss can discourage workers from reporting any health issues they may experience, further exacerbating the risks they face.

Resisting the intersections of precarity with invisibility, disrespect, and servitude

Throughout the interviews, all the cleaning workers expressed a strong sense of pride in their work and acknowledged its importance for society. Specifically, they firmly believe that cleaning plays a critical role in ensuring that workplaces, and society in general, are well-maintained and that the environment is clean and healthy for everyone. Overall, the central message conveyed by the interviewees was that their labor is vital, and therefore, they deserve improved working conditions that match the importance of the essential tasks they perform. While highlighting the precarious working conditions they endure, they also voiced their frustration at the lack of respect and recognition they receive from others who consider their work unskilled and insignificant. Namely, the interviewees reported experiences of invisibility, disrespect, and servitude from customers and colleagues. Viewed in this way, there is a stark contrast between cleaners' perception of their work and how others treat it. In this sense, the precarious working conditions they face intersect with invisibility, disrespect, and servitude, creating another experienced dimension of precarity.

However, as Michel Foucault (1978) once said, “where there is power, there is resistance” (95). In this entanglement of precarity, the cleaners’ resistance to allowing their professional identity and their work to be disregarded as simply “dirty work” (Rabelo and Mahalingam 2018) can be interpreted as a manifestation of everyday resistance, a concept initially introduced by James Scott (1985) and further explored by scholars like Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen (2020). According to the authors, everyday resistance goes beyond traditional notions of resistance and challenges conventional definitions by revealing the informal and often unnoticed aspects of resistance. This concept aligns with Scott’s (1985) idea of *infrapolitics* or *invisible politics*, which highlights the subtle and covert ways in which people resist dominant power structures. Unlike overt and organized forms of resistance, such as demonstration and strikes, everyday resistance operates on a smaller scale, often at an individual or localized level, and can be easily overlooked or dismissed by those in power (Johansson and Vinthagen 2020, 3).

Considering cleaning workers’ status as a trapped workforce (Coyle 1985), their ability to directly rebel against their working conditions is constrained due to their limited bargaining power with their employers. Nevertheless, cleaners engage in other forms of resistance and of asserting their agency and dignity in interactions with colleagues and customers. Specifically, the interviewed cleaners demonstrate a form of resistance by rejecting others’ interpretations of their identity and work. They assert the value and dignity of their profession, actively recognizing its significance and refusing to be reduced to servers who perform unskilled work. Moreover, when encountered with disrespect and mistreatment, there are instances of confrontation between cleaners and customers or co-workers who perpetuate such attitudes. Thus, by standing up against unequal power relations in their everyday lives, they actively destabilize power. They are aware that their voices may be disregarded and their work may be undervalued, yet they refuse to be complicit in such a narrative. Through their persistent assertion of cleaners’ importance in workplaces, they reject and resist the stigmatization imposed upon them.

One compelling example that highlights the cleaners’ rejection of stigmatization is Lúdia’s account. As a full-time public worker at the Municipal Government Building, Lúdia not only carries out her primary job but also takes on two additional part-time cleaning jobs to make ends meet. Her experience encapsulates the frustration experienced by cleaning workers who firmly believe in the essential nature of their work, even when it goes unnoticed and unappreciated by others. She questions the hierarchy between

professions and emphasizes the collective effort required for society to function effectively. In this regard, her reference to wearing a uniform to perform cleaning duties could be interpreted as a critique of the way in which some individuals are marginalized or stigmatized due to their occupation. Specifically, the use of the word “garbage” to describe the cleaning personnel suggests that some people view those in cleaning as being inferior and disposable. Nonetheless, Lída refuses to be defined by the dirt she cleans – or to be classified as a “dirty worker”, as Rabelo and Mahalingam (2018) put it. Instead, she asserts the indispensable role of cleaning work and highlights its significance for the functioning of society as a whole. Hence, Lída’s perspective challenges the devaluation and underappreciation of cleaning labor, asserting that without it, the operation of society would be compromised.

“We all work for the same society, even if you are up the hierarchy or if you are at a lower position. Are we considered less just because we have to wear a uniform? Since we do cleaning, are we garbage? If we didn’t do this work, what would be left of people? Their desks would be all dirty, and so would be their restrooms. Too bad people don’t think about it.” (Lída)

Cleaners’ experience of invisibility while performing their duties serves as a crucial aspect that fuels their everyday resistance. Namely, despite being physically present and actively conducting their labor near colleagues and customers, the interviewed cleaners reported a pervasive sense of being unseen and unacknowledged by those around them. According to them, this lack of recognition is manifested in various ways, such as neglecting to greet and thank cleaners, avoiding eye contact, or disregarding cleaning signs, which can result in their work being disrupted or ruined. Similarly to what Vergès (2019) describes, my sample of cleaners declared experiencing an erasure of their presence and work by others. The interviewed cleaners suggest that this lack of recognition and dismissal is linked to assumptions that they lack education or literacy, reflecting a belief system that deems them inherently inferior. In this context, the dynamics of power and strong hierarchical structures among different groups of workers come into play, perpetuating the division between those deemed skilled and those who are not. As an example, Carmo, an outsourced part-time worker at the Job Center, explains that even when cleaners are actively performing their responsibilities close to colleagues and customers, people may still stare at them without any acknowledgement or appreciation for how they benefit from cleaning. Her experience highlights the dissonance between the physical presence of cleaners and the lack of recognition they receive from others. In Carmo’s specific case, her sense of invisibility appears to have

been reinforced by past experiences of attempting to greet people without receiving a response. This frustration leads to a shift in her approach, realizing that it is not worthwhile to extend greetings because they will go unnoticed.

“I feel very invisible in my work. There are people who pass by us and do not see us. At first I still greeted them, but now I understand it’s not worth it, because they won’t see us anyway. And this happens even when we’re cleaning people’s desks with them staring at us!” (Carmo)

On the other hand, when cleaners are acknowledged and seen, they can be met with disrespect from others. The interviewees noted that disrespect takes various forms, including mistreatment, aggressivity, and disdain from others, which can have a demoralizing effect on them. From their accounts, mistreatment entails being spoken to in a mean way, whereas aggressivity means encountering violence from customers, leading cleaners to lodge complaints with their supervisors. Furthermore, they often feel demeaned and treated as inferior, reinforcing the sense of subalternity that is already present in their work. According to the interviewees, restrooms are significant areas where disrespect is evident. They are among the most frequently used spaces in a workplace, and therefore require frequent cleaning and maintenance. There, cleaners often have to work in confined and uncomfortable spaces while dealing with unpleasant smells and hazardous waste. Nonetheless, Tânia notes that people often interrupt and delay their work, asking to use the restrooms that are being cleaned at that moment, which shows a lack of consideration for the cleaners’ time and labor. In contrast, Tânia mentions that she has to plan her work around others’ schedules, so as not to disturb them, highlighting the cleaners’ need to be considerate of others while not receiving the same in return. This discrepancy further accentuates the power dynamics and the systemic devaluation of cleaning workers.

“We’re cleaning a bathroom, and we usually clean 2 or 3 at the same time, and someone comes and asks if they can take a quick pee. We clean 38 bathrooms, and people ask if they can go pee in the ones that are precisely being cleaned at that moment. They interrupt and delay our work, which I think is disrespectful. Whereas in my morning shift, I have to finish my cleaning duties before people arrive in our workplace so as not to disturb them, because I can’t be using the vacuum cleaner while they are working.” (Tânia)

The interviewees noted that there is often an expectation that cleaners must accept this kind of mistreatment in silence, as if it is a normal part of the job. This attitude is problematic because it reinforces the idea that cleaners are disposable and that their well-being is not a priority. But instead of accepting mistreatment without resistance, cleaners engage in acts of everyday resistance in response to such disrespect. This resistance takes

the form of assertively addressing instances of mistreatment, filing complaints, or asserting their boundaries to demand respect. By refusing to accept mistreatment as the norm, cleaners challenge the power dynamics that perpetuate their subordination.

For racialized and migrant cleaners in the sample, who all happen to be employed through outsourcing and in part-time contracts, the disrespect can also materialize in instances of racist and xenophobic discrimination, including insults and derogatory comments. Such discrimination was not limited to interactions with customers, as some cleaning workers also experienced it from their colleagues, even if in a more subtle way. While others, including their supervisors, may suggest that they should ignore such treatment, cleaning workers refuse to let such discrimination go unaddressed. As they value their work and their own self-worth, they resist by not allowing anyone to treat them with disrespect and confronting those who do. For instance, Maria, who is from Venezuela and is now naturalized as a Portuguese citizen, shared an incident where a student at a Professional Training Center began hurling insults at her when she refused to perform tasks outside of her job scope. These comments included telling her to “go back to her country” and making unfounded accusations that she was in Portugal to steal Portuguese women’s jobs and husbands. Despite being told by witnesses to ignore the situation, she persisted in speaking up, stating that the situation could not be dismissed, and reported the incident to her supervisor, who supported her and took action against the student. As a result of Maria’s complaint, the person who made the xenophobic remarks was eventually transferred to another center.

Nonetheless, Maria’s experience underscores the widespread problem of disrespect and discrimination that cleaning workers face, particularly those who are migrants and have to endure structural racism and xenophobia. Despite being naturalized as a Portuguese citizen, Maria’s skin color and accent made others perceive her as a foreigner who did not belong in the country, as evidenced by derogatory comments like “go back to her country”. These discriminatory attitudes are deeply rooted in Portugal’s colonial legacy, which created a model of domination of certain nations and peoples, by attributing hierarchies based on race (Quijano and Ennis 2000, 538; Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243). This racial grammar justified the political project of colonialism and demarcated differences between colonizers and colonized, with the latter being considered inferior, uncivilized, and incapable of self-determination (Moffette and Vadasaria 2016, 295). In this sense, Maria’s account highlights the operation of coloniality, which refers to the

enduring structures of power, exploitation, and social domination that persist even after the formal end of colonial rule (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243; Mendoza 2015, 15; Grosfoguel 2011, 11). The comments Maria faced, accusing her of taking jobs and husbands from Portuguese women, exemplify the persistence of coloniality, as they perpetuate notions of competition and perceived threats that sow division among different national groups. However, Maria's refusal to tolerate discrimination and report the incident demonstrates her agency and resistance against systemic racism and disrespect. By asserting her self-worth and demanding accountability, Maria challenges the power dynamics that sustain coloniality and confronts the structural racism and xenophobia prevalent in Portuguese society.

"I am at my workplace to work, not to be offended. My work is as valuable as any doctor's. If a doctor wants a clean environment to work, they need someone like me to do it. We are as worthy as they are, we are all human beings." (Maria)

The interviewees also described that cleaning workers frequently face the expectation of being personal servants for their colleagues and customers. They revealed that they are frequently asked to perform tasks that fall outside their designated cleaning duties, such as watering plants, making coffee or tea, or washing dishes – which suggests a tenuous line between domestic and industrial cleaning. For them, this added burden, on top of their already challenging cleaning work, further reinforces the already existing power imbalances within workplace hierarchies and creates a sense of servitude. According to cleaners' accounts, this occurs because they are not seen or acknowledged as colleagues or co-workers. Instead, they are viewed as servants whose primary purpose is to clean up after others. As a consequence, some of the cleaners' co-workers hold the belief that cleaning workers are at their disposal and can be asked to perform any task, taking advantage of the established power dynamic in the workplace. However, in response to this marginalization, they take a firm stance by establishing clear boundaries regarding their responsibilities. They assert what they are specifically paid to do and what falls outside of their scope. Importantly, they refuse to exceed these boundaries and engage in tasks that are not part of their job description. Therefore, their refusal to perform tasks beyond their responsibilities serves as a form of everyday resistance.

Heloísa, a Brazilian part-time worker at the Professional Training Center, provides a powerful example of this dehumanizing behavior. She recounts a story where colleagues entered the bathroom while she was working and expected her to flush someone else's waste. This incident can be analyzed within the framework of coloniality, particularly in

the context of Portugal's colonization of Brazil for over three centuries. During this period, race and labor became intertwined, with the Portuguese subjecting the colonized populations to slavery and perpetuating the belief in the inferiority of Brazilians (Quijano and Ennis, 2000). Thus, Heloísa's experience sheds light on the enduring colonial expectations that a Brazilian worker should serve the Portuguese, thereby reflecting the persisting power dynamics and hierarchies established during colonial times. However, by refusing to comply with such expectations and declining to act as a servant, she actively undermines these dominant power relations. Heloísa asserts her agency and challenges the dehumanizing treatment that cleaning workers often endure.

“People think that cleaning workers have to do everything, that we are servants. And we are not! I've had cases of people coming to the bathroom when I'm there cleaning and asking me to flush other people's pee. It's the contempt, the lack of respect, they act like they are in their own houses and that they can leave everything any way because a cleaning worker will always clean it for them. They treat us like maids.” (Heloísa)

To conclude, the interviewed cleaning workers' experiences of invisibility, disrespect, and servitude are another dimension of precarity that they are confronted with in their workplaces. Despite the importance of their labor in maintaining clean and healthy workplaces, cleaners report being subjected to discriminating treatment by their colleagues and customers due to the perception of their work as low-skilled and unimportant. However, they engage in forms of everyday resistance and assert their agency and dignity in their interactions with colleagues and customers. They refuse to accept others' interpretations of their identity and work, asserting the value and significance of their profession. For instance, when faced with disrespect and mistreatment, they often confront those who perpetuate such attitudes, subverting power dynamics. Despite these actions appearing mundane, they hold significant meaning as they disrupt established norms and expectations. Cleaning workers actively destabilize power by standing up against unequal power relations in their everyday lives, refusing to be complicit in a narrative that undervalues their work and dismisses their voices.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to depict the precarious working conditions that cleaning workers endured in the sector even prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the broader context of the thesis, the objective is to emphasize that the precarity experienced during the pandemic – which will be developed on the following chapter – is not a

standalone issue, but rather closely connected to pre-existing working conditions. Overall, through an intersectional analysis that emphasized the diversity of precarious experiences, this chapter set the scene to contextualize the pandemic as occurring within a continuum of precarity.

The key argument of this chapter is that the cleaning workers interviewed constitute a trapped workforce, who are forced to work in the sector due to financial hardship and certain intersectional aspects of their identities, resulting in a lack of bargaining power that renders them more susceptible to precarious working conditions. Specifically, workers were pushed to accept cleaning positions out of desperation after experiencing unemployment or working in even worse precarious conditions before. As a consequence, they are exposed to severe precarious working conditions in the industrial cleaning sector that put them in very insecure positions in the labor market. Namely, they are located at the intersection of various neoliberal market trends. These include racial, gender, and colonial divisions of labor; differences between directly employed and outsourced workers, with workers employed through outsourcing having significantly more precarious contracts, wages, and working conditions, as well as inferior welfare benefits; prevalence of part-time contracts; the normalization of multiple jobs and overwork; lack of unity and communication within teams; responsibility for obtaining essential products for their functions; use of hazardous chemicals without proper compensation; and fear of job loss discouraging reporting of health issues.

Despite being a trapped workforce with limited bargaining power with their employers, cleaners confront invisibility, disrespect, and servitude from colleagues and customers, actively subverting power dynamics. By doing so, they engage in everyday resistance as a form of asserting their agency and dignity. They refuse to allow their professional identity and work to be devalued as “dirty work”, instead emphasizing the value and significance of their profession. Through confrontation, they disrupt established norms and power structures. Therefore, in spite of the potential dismissal of their voices, they refuse to be complicit and actively resist the stigmatization imposed on them as cleaning workers.

The plight of cleaners amidst increased workload, lack of protection, and diminished recognition during the Covid-19 pandemic

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the precarious working conditions that cleaning workers faced even before the outbreak of Covid-19. Now, I will delve into how these already precarious conditions were further exacerbated during the pandemic. Building upon the notion that the pandemic unfolded within a backdrop of a continuum of precarity, this chapter will shed light on the specific aspects that continued to perpetuate and aggravate the precarious challenges faced by cleaning workers.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the critical importance of the cleaning profession, as effective cleaning and sanitation practices emerged as key strategies in preventing the spread of the virus. Thus, unlike many professionals who could transition to remote work, cleaning workers were unable to perform their duties from the safety of their homes. Instead, they were required to remain in public spaces, facing heightened risks and exposure to potential hazards. In this sense, their frontline role in the fight against the virus underscored the essential nature of their work in sustaining the functioning of society amidst the “new normal”.

Considering this, in the first subsection, attention will be directed towards the heightened workload and amplified responsibilities experienced by cleaners during the pandemic. The shortage of staff and the absence of training offered by employers will be emphasized, as these factors contributed to the intensification of their workload. Consequently, cleaners found themselves compelled to educate themselves through the internet and television, and even assumed the additional responsibility of training new colleagues. The confluence of these factors resulted in the creation of a physically and mentally exhausting work environment, making it challenging for cleaners to achieve a balance between their professional and personal lives.

Moving on to the second subsection, the lack of safe working conditions will be addressed. This includes the absence of protective equipment, with a notable disparity between public workers and outsourced workers in terms of access to such equipment. Additionally, cleaners were not adequately informed about the risks of direct contact with Covid-19 and were not provided with suitable spaces to practice social distancing. Based

on these factors, I will argue that this disregard for their well-being, safety, and protection reflects a perception of cleaners as disposable and mere commodities, obligated to protect others while putting their own lives at risk.

The third subsection will emphasize the absence of appreciation and recognition for cleaners' essential work. Stigmatization, the failure to recognize them as essential or frontline workers, and the lack of performance bonuses compared to other frontline workers, such as healthcare professionals, will be discussed. After presenting these issues, I will contend that the confluence of heightened workload, inadequate protection, lack of appreciation, and recognition further worsened the already precarious employment circumstances for cleaners throughout the pandemic. However, as a trapped workforce, with limited alternative job opportunities amidst widespread job losses and layoffs, they were compelled to persist in their work despite the unsafe conditions. Their financial need to sustain themselves and their families became the paramount driving force behind their willingness to endure these risks.

The overall argument of this chapter will be that the convergence of increased workload, inadequate protection, insufficient appreciation, and limited recognition throughout the pandemic has amplified the pre-existing precarious working conditions faced by cleaning workers. However, their sustained engagement in this profession is primarily driven by the necessity to secure income for themselves and their families. Additionally, various intersecting factors, including older age, migrant status, low education levels, and caretaking responsibilities, further compound their vulnerability, particularly during periods of economic downturn when job opportunities become scarce. Consequently, they find themselves compelled to persist in their employment, perpetuating a continuum of precarity that characterizes their work experiences.

Cleaning responsibilities in the so-called “new normal”

On March 2, 2020, the first case of Covid-19 was detected in Portugal. One week after the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 as a pandemic, and two days after the first Covid-19 death in Portugal, on March 18 the first lockdown in the country began. To curb the spread of the pandemic, the Portuguese Government imposed restrictions on public movement and the adoption of the teleworking regime as mandatory whenever the professional functions allowed it. Individuals were only allowed to leave their homes for

essential purposes, including carrying out necessary tasks and functions such as engaging in professional activities that could not be performed via telework. Industrial cleaning work, due to its nature, fell into this category.

In view of the concern surrounding the pandemic, the Portuguese Directorate-General for Health (DGS) identified several cleaning measures to be implemented both at an organizational and individual level. To prevent the spread of the virus, DGS advised that all surfaces be treated as potential sources of contagion and therefore required additional hygiene measures. In particular, cleaning professionals were instructed to be well-informed about the products to be used and to take necessary precautions when using them. DGS also emphasized the importance of cleaners using appropriate protective equipment such as impermeable uniforms, face masks, gloves resistant to disinfectants, and suitable footwear. Additionally, the Portuguese Directorate-General for Employment and Labor Relations (DGERT) imposed that employers provide cleaning workers with adequate personal protective equipment suited to the challenges faced during pandemic times.

Due to the significant importance of maintaining high hygiene standards during the pandemic, industrial cleaning workers were given the crucial responsibility of preventing the transmission of the virus and ensuring the functioning of society during the so-called “new normal”. Consequently, their already essential professional role became even more critical. As the pandemic made it evident that cleaning was a key factor in stopping the spread of the disease, industrial cleaning workers were charged with the responsibility of being in the frontlines of the fight against the virus. Therefore, unlike other professions whose workers could perform their responsibilities from home, cleaners were required to remain in the public space. They could not stop cleaning. For instance, in my sample, all cleaning workers continued to carry out their duties throughout the entire pandemic, including during the lockdowns. However, this does not mean that they were not afraid of contracting the virus or that working under those new conditions was accepted without difficulty. Not knowing exactly what they were combatting, an atmosphere of tension prevailed amongst them – which was further compounded by the experience of facing unequal treatment in comparison to other workers. As an example, Tânia, a full-time worker at the Municipal Government Building, recalls that during the first week of the lockdown, the Municipal Government instructed all workers to stay at home except for the cleaning staff. She felt discriminated against and treated as an unequal, being left

alone in the building for a whole week without any work to do while she could have been at home looking after her two underage sons who were out of school. Tânia believes it was unfair that the government made this decision without considering the individual circumstances of workers, such as those with dependent children or elderly parents to care for.

“The most difficult thing during the period of Covid-19 was the inequality and discrimination cleaners faced. I remember that in the first week of the lockdown, when we still did not know anything about the virus, the Municipal Government sent everyone home except us. Everything was closing, including schools, and I stayed alone for a whole week in the Government building without doing anything, when I could be at home with my two children. But they would not let me.” (Tânia)

Nonetheless, industrial cleaning workers eventually understood that their job was essential and that they had to keep working to prevent the spread of the virus. They realized that cleaning was not going anywhere and that they needed to adapt to the new situation, even if they did not have all the information they wanted. In fact, despite the decrees issued by DGS and DGERT, which mandated that employers provide training to employees on the proper use of new cleaning products and protective equipment, none of the interviewed cleaners received such training, nor did they receive any Covid-specific safety and hygiene manuals. According to DGS and DGERT, the employer was responsible for communicating the Covid-19 Contingency Plan to workers, providing them with accurate and transparent information about Covid-19, and instructing them on the specific procedures to be followed. However, in my sample, it was generally agreed that this did not happen, and cleaners had to figure out how to perform their new job duties on their own by relying on information from television and the internet.

Such was the case of Tomás, the only man in the sample and a full-time public worker in the Municipal Government Building, who joined cleaning during the first year of the pandemic. Directly employed by the Portuguese State during a state emergency period, he explains that he was only given minimal instruction by one of his managers on how to replace toilet paper in a restroom and was left to figure out the rest of his cleaning duties on his own. This lack of training and guidance from his employer put Tomás in a difficult situation, as he had to rely on his women colleagues for help. His account demonstrates that with the lack of training provided by employers, women cleaners had to learn their job duties on their own and then pass on their knowledge to their new male colleague. This extra responsibility placed on women cleaners could be seen as a new burden, as they had to take on the role of trainers in addition to their regular cleaning duties. This

situation highlights the assumption that cleaning is traditionally a woman's job, which has led to the belief that it requires no specialized skills, and that women are inherently qualified for it. This perception is a result of the carry-over of the assumption that cleaning is a natural responsibility for women in their domestic roles to the waged workforce, as noted by scholars such as Seifert and Messing (2006) and Recio and Godino (2011).

“I joined cleaning during Covid and I did not receive any training. When I joined, a manager took me to a restroom, told me how to replace the toilet paper, and left. That is all they taught me. So I had to ask my colleagues for help and then I tried to recreate their way of clean. Everything I know was taught by them.” (Tomás)

Although the interviewed cleaners were frustrated with the lack of proper training and guidance from their employers during the pandemic, they eventually acknowledged that they had to learn and understand how to perform these new duties on their own to ensure their and others' safety in the workplace. As a result, cleaners had to establish new routines and put in a significant effort to learn and adjust to new cleaning products and techniques to effectively prevent the transmission of Covid-19. For instance, the interviewees evoked having to start using disinfectants to sanitize surfaces and hand sanitizers to keep their hands – or the gloves on top of them – clean at all times. They also had to use specific products to clean high-touch surfaces such as computer keyboards, mice, desks, and door handles, which are known to harbor a high concentration of germs. According to my sample, the use of bleach, while not specific to Covid, became significantly more prevalent during this period. Moreover, those employed in the Municipal Government Building were tasked with using an Ozone generator machine. Even though these cleaners were told by their supervisors that these machines would purify and filter the air in case the Covid-19 virus was present, there was no scientific proof to that claim. According to the most reliable scientific evidence currently accessible, the use of these machines poses various health hazards to individuals (EPA 2022). Furthermore, applying ozone to indoor air does not effectively eliminate viruses, provided that the concentrations used do not surpass public health standards (ibid.). Despite this, workers were repeatedly called upon to disinfect environments with this machine, and its fumes were so strong that it made them feel dizzy, disoriented, and with strong headaches afterwards. In fact, the machine was so potent that cleaners had to remove flowers from the room before using it, or they would die. Dora, one of the Municipal Government Building workers, expressed the exhaustion and discomfort

cleaners endured due to constantly using the machine and the stronger, more aggressive cleaning products required for Covid-19.

“We were constantly being called upon to disinfect rooms with the Ozone machine. It was really tiring, I got to the end of the day with strong headaches because of it and all specific products for Covid, which were stronger and more aggressive.” (Dora)

Considering the heightened importance placed on cleaning and the new responsibilities attributed to them, the interviewed cleaners unanimously agreed that their workload brutally increased during the pandemic. The cleaning activities during this period were more frequent, widespread, and intense than before, as a result of the increased attention to detail and care required to prevent the spread of Covid-19. In fact, the interviewees consistently referred to the period before the pandemic as a way of highlighting how their responsibilities had augmented during Covid. They explained that prior to the pandemic, they were able to arrive at work and clean at a more leisurely pace without worrying about disinfecting everything before their colleagues arrived. With the arrival of Covid, they had to completely alter their approach to work by prioritizing disinfection and cleaning before their colleagues came in. As a result, their work environment became much more intense and rushed. Before, they did not have to clean surfaces, such as desks, everyday. With the virus spreading, they started to clean it multiple times a day. Previously, they were able to work closely with their colleagues. With the onset of the pandemic, they had to maintain social distancing, which meant working alone and maintaining distance from each other, even during meal breaks.

The contrast between the “before” and “after” Covid-period showed the significant intensification of their cleaning responsibilities during the pandemic. Their workload more than doubled and the interviewees provided several examples to illustrate how that was noticeable in their daily work. High-touch surfaces, such as handrails, light switches, door handles, and elevator buttons, had to be cleaned at least every hour. Restrooms had to be cleaned immediately after each use. Floors had to be washed frequently to avoid contamination, as they were constantly being walked on. To prevent the transmission of the virus, cleaners believed they had to dispose of the water used to clean a particular area before moving on to another section. They were required to use hand sanitizer constantly, both on surfaces and on themselves. After completing their tasks, they had to firstly disinfect their gloves and then their hands. At the Professional Training Center, workers were responsible for cleaning training rooms immediately after students and teachers left and before they entered again. This involved disinfecting tables, chairs, computers,

keyboards, mice, and even pens. Because this was a public-facing service, workers reported that some students would go overboard and demand more cleaning and disinfection, even after it had already been done multiple times.

Given the uncertainty of what items or surfaces could be contaminated with Covid, cleaners had to remain vigilant and focused on their tasks at all times to prevent the spread of the virus. Any negligence or distraction could be detrimental to their and others' health. To eradicate any potential bacteria and ensure a safe and clean environment, cleaners worked tirelessly, often spending many hours on their feet, walking back and forth between different areas of buildings. In this sense, their work was physically and mentally exhausting. Particularly during the early stages of the pandemic when the characteristics and the mode of transmission of the virus were not yet fully understood, the interviewed cleaning workers reported feeling incredibly frightened and anxious. This fear led to a heightened level of vigilance when it came to cleaning, with some workers engaging in a frenzy cleaning. They were so afraid of touching contaminated surfaces that they describe cleaning everything thoroughly and repeatedly, often to the point of exhaustion. Anabela, a part-time outsourced worker at the Municipal Government Building, revealed that the uncertainty of not knowing if she would survive the pandemic in good health was causing her to break down and cry while working. Her intense fear of contracting Covid-19 also led to a rigorous cleaning routine that had physical consequences, as she began to experience joint problems during the pandemic. Anabela admitted that she sometimes wanted to rush through her work and did not always follow safety protocols, prioritizing speed over her own well-being.

“There were days when I cried a lot in our workplace’s outdoor area. It was a painful period. We didn’t know if we were going to survive it in good health. (...) During Covid, I started to have joint problems, because our workload was too much. Sometimes we wanted to do the work faster and we did not follow all the protocols. We wanted to hurry up and we stopped thinking about our own well-being.” (Anabela)

In fact, panic was a recurring topic throughout all interviews. Cleaning workers reported experiencing high levels of stress and fear as they witnessed a growing number of people becoming infected with the virus. They would come home after a long day’s work only to see empty streets and news of overcrowded hospitals and increasing numbers of deaths. According to them, the constant bombardment of news about the pandemic and its impact was overwhelming and contributed to their trauma. They knew that working on the front line was a huge risk and there was always a possibility of taking the virus home and

infecting their loved ones. For those living with family members with health conditions such as cancer or older parents or grandparents, the fear of spreading the virus and potentially putting their loved ones at risk was particularly challenging. As a result, workers had to refrain from physical touch, leading to a sense of emotional distance and a lack of affection in their lives. This, in turn, contributed to the development of paranoia during this period. Such was the case of Mariana, a full-time public worker at the Municipal Government Building who lived with her parents and underaged son. She felt the need to constantly disinfect everything at home with bleach and sanitizer, just like she did at work. In this regard, the fear and anxiety she experienced at work seemed to have followed her home.

“At home, I was always paranoid about disinfecting everything. When I got home, I would immediately take off my sneakers and all my clothes right at the apartment’s entrance and I would take a shower straight away. I was always disinfecting everything with bleach. I became paranoid with cleaning.” (Mariana)

However, despite being burdened with additional responsibilities, cleaners recall facing a severe shortage of staff to meet the increased workload, leading to the need for extra hours of work, which left them exhausted and drained. With the advent of the Covid-19 vaccine, some of the cleaners employed at the Municipal Government Building were assigned to work at Vaccination Centers, where they had to work overtime on several occasions due to the heavy workload. For example, Cláudia, a full-time worker and single mother employed at the Municipal Government Building, remembers working continuously from Monday to Monday for weeks.

This requirement to overwork had a significant impact on workers with children, as they had to balance their professional responsibilities with their parental duties, which became increasingly difficult as the pandemic continued. For instance, Mariana, a single mother and full-time worker with a 9-year old son, shared the challenges she faced during the shift to online schooling. During this period, she had to take on the additional responsibility of monitoring her son during his online classes in the morning to ensure he was attentive, followed by helping him with homework before she could go to work. Despite feeling exhausted after work, she still had to check if her son had any more homework, and then take pictures of the completed work to send to his teachers. Mariana found this period to be extremely stressful, as it consumed all her time and left no space for personal activities. Her routine was monotonous and tiring, consisting solely of

cleaning and assisting her son with schoolwork. She was unable to engage in any activities that brought her pleasure or relaxation due to the lack of time.

“This is all I did during the pandemic: my own cleaning work and online school with my son. I barely had any time left to do anything I wanted, such as watch a movie or listen to music. I did not have any time for myself. The routine was always the same. This was very stressful.” (Mariana)

The Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges for cleaning workers. In my sample, all interviewees reported a significant increase in their workload, which was marked by new responsibilities through a more frequent and intense cleaning, as well as the use of new hazardous products. As a result, cleaners experienced overwork, struggling to balance their professional responsibilities with their personal lives. To meet these new demands, they had to adapt themselves. Cleaning workers had to learn about new disinfectants, personal protective equipment, and safety protocols to keep themselves and others safe. However, this was not an easy process. Interviewees highlighted the absence of clear instructions and guidance from their employers, forcing them to shoulder the responsibility of acquiring new skills on their own. Moreover, they had to pass on this knowledge to their new colleagues, further increasing their workload. In addition to the challenges posed by the new cleaning requirements, cleaners also had to cope with the stress and fear of contracting the virus themselves. Many recalled feeling vulnerable and exposed to the virus, given their increased exposure to public spaces and the risk of contamination. This also led to increased anxiety about potentially infecting their families and loved ones.

Working under no protection in a life-threatening scenario

During the early days of the first lockdown in Portugal, a popular initiative began spreading through Whatsapp: at 10pm of a designated day, the population of the country would take to their windows to applaud health workers who were facing increased workloads due to the Covid-19 pandemic (DN 2020). And people did – with some singing, cheering, and even shedding tears. While this act of appreciation was rightfully directed towards health professionals, it highlights the absence of other essential workers, including cleaners, from the public narrative regarding who was combatting the virus. This omission sets the stage for the issues to be described in this subsection. While the previous subsection emphasized the increased workload and responsibilities for cleaners

due to the critical role of cleaning in preventing the spread of Covid, this subsection will illustrate that despite the importance of their work during this period, cleaners did not receive safe working conditions. Instead, as they were relegated to realms of death and contagion without the adequate protection, their preexisting precarious working conditions were aggravated, resulting in a continuum of precarity.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Portuguese Directorate-General for Employment and Labor Relations (DGERT) mandated that employers supply cleaning staff with appropriate personal protective gear that was suitable for addressing the challenges posed by the virus. However, in regards to the availability of personal protective equipment, in my sample there was a striking discrepancy between the experiences of public workers and outsourced employees. Specifically, public workers reported that they were provided with all the necessary protective gear, whereas outsourced workers faced serious difficulties in obtaining adequate protection.

On the one hand, public workers at the Municipal Government Building shared that their managers consistently demonstrated concern about the availability of protective gear and ensured that the cleaning staff were always well-equipped. They were supplied with a range of protective equipment, including uniforms, masks, gloves, hair caps, and plastic shoe covers. Additionally, when they were assigned to work at Vaccination Centers, they were given full-body protective medical suits, which were the same as those worn by their healthcare colleagues. The state-employed cleaners recalled that they could directly request any additional protective gear they needed from their supervisors, who advised them to wear two masks and two pairs of gloves. In fact, cleaners employed by the state received a new box of masks for each member of their team at the beginning of every month. Taking into account all the measures and support provided, the testimonies of these workers, such as Cláudia, demonstrate that they felt adequately safeguarded by their employer, even when they had to directly work with the public.

“We had access to all kinds of protective material, we just had to ask our supervisor. Every month each one of us received a box of masks, and we also had gloves. We felt very protected in that sense. The Municipal Government was always ready to support us.”
(Cláudia)

On the other hand, outsourced workers at the Professional Training Center and Job Center had radically different experiences. In their case, the triangular relationship created by outsourcing between employer, employee, and company contractor (Lebeer and Martinez 2012) led to ambiguity regarding the provision of personal protective equipment for

workers. As a result, there was confusion over who bore that responsibility, which left workers without the necessary protection. Consequently, they had to either buy their own gear to perform their duties safely or rely on colleagues who were public workers to obtain the necessary protection. For example, Fátima, employed part-time at the Job Center, reported that a public worker in an administrative position provided the outsourced cleaners with a disinfectant bottle, which they took from the Center's supplies. This was done to help the cleaning staff since their outsourcing firm failed to provide them with the necessary cleaning materials specific to Covid.

Additionally, Maria, Heloísa, and Pilar, the interviewees working at the Professional Training Center who are all migrant and racialized women, stated that they never received a single mask from their outsourcing firm since the pandemic began. Instead, they were provided with a face visor, which cost two euros and was deducted from their monthly salary. However, health experts did not consider face visors as adequate substitutes for masks in protecting individuals from the virus (The Associated Press 2020). In fact, the Center refused to accept the use of face visors as a substitute for masks. When the cleaners complained about the face visor and requested masks, the outsourcing firm responded by stating that they had already provided them with a face visor that could be disinfected at the beginning and end of their shifts. After raising the issue with the director of the institution where they performed their cleaning services, the cleaners were told that the Center could only offer them masks on exceptional occasions, such as when their own mask was damaged or broken, as the responsibility of providing masks was ultimately on the outsourcing firm that directly employed them. However, cleaners noted that students attending classes at the Center and outsourced workers in the Center's canteen were provided with masks, which made them feel discriminated against.

The outsourced cleaners persisted in their attempts to resolve the issue, approaching both the outsourcing firm and the Professional Training Center, but were met with a constant passing of responsibility from one entity to the other. In an attempt to gain clarification, they sought the help of their trade union representative. The trade union clarified to the cleaners that, despite their work at a State institution, they were not considered public workers, and thus, the responsibility for providing them with masks fell on the outsourcing firm. Nonetheless, when they presented this information to the firm, they still maintained their stance and argued that the provision of a face visor was sufficient.

Heloísa, a Brazilian worker who was frustrated by the lack of support and a solution from the trade union, ultimately left the union as a result of this situation.

“Even the face visor, we had to pay the firm for it! Two euros and something. And we never used it because the director of the Center did not accept it. The Center never provided us with masks, although they did to students. I even left the union because of this mask issue, as they did not do anything to help us. The outsourcing company held the Center responsible, and the Center held the company responsible. And there we were in the middle, needing masks to protect ourselves.” (Heloísa)

Eventually, the cleaners working at this institution realized that they would have to purchase their own masks in order to feel protected while carrying out their duties. However, during the early days of the pandemic, the price of surgical masks was very high before it was regulated by the Government. This presented a significant financial burden for the employees. Additionally, the DGS guidelines recommended that masks be changed every four hours, which meant that workers at the Professional Training Center needed to use at least two masks per day while on the job. To deal with this problem, most employees opted to purchase fabric masks that could be used for a longer period of time and washed periodically, as they could not afford to use two surgical masks each day.

These accounts highlight how the precarious employment conditions that many cleaning workers already faced were further exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly for outsourced workers in lower positions within the labor market. It is evident that employers were quick to shift the responsibility and risk of employment onto cleaners, despite the life-threatening nature of the situation. This is not a new phenomenon, as research by Ramírez et al. (2021) and Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) have previously demonstrated how under precarious employment conditions, employers tend to exploit workers and place the burden of employment protection on them, rather than taking responsibility themselves. The workers in this case were employed through outsourcing, which meant that their employer was not the institution where they performed their cleaning duties, but rather a third-party firm. The lack of clarity regarding the entity responsible for ensuring the protection of the workers was exploited by the outsourcing firms, which neglected the health and security of its employees by leaving them without the necessary protective gear. As a result, workers were forced to shoulder the financial burden of purchasing their own protective equipment or depend on the generosity of public workers who had access to it.

Once again, it is important to note that the majority of these outsourced workers are racialized and migrant women, in contrast to public workers who are all Portuguese and white. Therefore, in this scenario, coloniality manifests through the stark contrast between the racialized and migrant women working as outsourced cleaners with no access to protection during the pandemic, and the Portuguese and white public workers who felt completely protected. This disparity reflects the historical colonial patterns of exploitation in the labor market, which have been perpetuated by enduring colonial structures (Cabral and Duarte 2011; Lopes 2011; Wall et al. 2008). That is, racialized women, particularly those who are migrants or from a migrant background, are consistently positioned at the forefront of the precariat, occupying the lowest positions within occupational hierarchies (Hewison 2016, 436; Standing 2011; Bradley 2016, 76; Rutherford 2008). This positioning within the labor market is not coincidental but rather a result of the interplay between neoliberal trends and the reinforcement of racialization and coloniality in the workplace. Thus, outsourcing practices contribute to the perpetuation of racialized and colonial dynamics, with the most precarious positions and working conditions systematically assigned to the colonial and racialized “Other” (Herod and Aguiar 2006c; Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006). Meanwhile, the public workers who are Portuguese and white benefitted from more secure employment and access to protective measures during the pandemic. This disparity highlights the enduring effects of colonial power dynamics, where racial hierarchies continue to shape employment conditions (Dias 2011, 37).

The lack of protective equipment is not the only life-threatening situation that cleaners faced. Although the previous examples exclusively happened to outsourcing workers, it was common for both public workers and outsourced workers to have direct contact with Covid without being warned. For instance, public workers employed at the Municipal Government Building reported incidents where they had to handle positive Covid tests found in regular trash cans while cleaning the medical center. According to safety protocols, such tests should have been disposed of as biohazardous waste in a designated container to prevent the potential spread of the virus. When this first happened, they immediately expressed concern to their managers about the potential risks involved in handling these tests without proper precautions, even while wearing a mask. Despite making repeated complaints, it took several weeks for the situation to be resolved, and other workers experienced similar incidents in the meantime. Lúcia, one of these workers,

observed that her colleagues working in the medical center seemed to hold the belief that the cleaning staff, being in a lower position, were expected to endure any hazardous situation without raising any concerns. This attitude implied a lack of consideration for the well-being and safety of cleaners, and suggested a disregard for their right to voice concerns or complaints about their precarious working conditions.

“The colleagues from the medical center mistreated us in this situation. But for them, we are just cleaning workers, so we have to subject ourselves to everything without complaining.” (Lidia)

Outsourced cleaners working at the Professional Training Center reported that they were asked to clean classrooms by students or teachers who had tested positive for Covid-19 while in the room, subsequently left, and immediately asked the workers to clean it without informing them about the presence of the virus. Cleaners would not be warned to take extra precautions, the room would not be aired out, and they were not even given a couple of hours to wait before cleaning it. Sometimes, cleaners would only find this out through students who warned them that someone who tested positive had been in the room and that they should not enter immediately. Later, the cleaners learned that in such situations, a specialized external disinfection worker with the appropriate disinfection products was required to come and clean the room. Consequently, cleaners began refusing to clean those infected rooms when they were asked to do so. According to Pilar, one of these workers, this type of situation happened multiple times without their awareness, and they felt that the facts were purposely hidden from them.

“We would go in those rooms without knowing what we were facing. And I felt they were actively hiding the presence of Covid from cleaners so that we would not complain about it or refuse to do it.” (Pilar)

Both public and outsourced cleaners also reported that their workplaces did not provide sufficient space for social distancing during their breaks or for changing before and after their shifts. Instead, they were confined to small, windowless rooms where they were expected to change and eat, despite the rooms being very stuffy and unable to maintain the recommended 2-meter distance. Workers at the Professional Training Center, such as Maria, specifically stated that they only received a larger, ventilated space after they had all contracted Covid-19 and had to go home.

“It was only when all the cleaners caught Covid in our workplace and we all had to go home that the Center got us another room, bigger and airier with enough space to maintain social distancing.” (Maria)

Given the absence of proper personal protective equipment, the workers' direct exposure to the virus without being informed, and the absence of a secure area to ensure social distancing, the exacerbated precarious working conditions cleaners faced during the pandemic can be interpreted through a necropolitical lens. According to Achille Mbembe (2003), necropolitics refers to the politics of death – that is, “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (27). For the author (Mbembe 2003, 12), the framework analyzes the practical conditions under which the power to kill, let live, or expose to death is exercised. In this sense, necropolitics is not just about killing but also the sovereign's decision on those who can be left to die. In other words, it can refer to how some citizens can be slowly injured almost to the point of death.

Essentially, necropolitics is a framework that highlights how sovereign powers assign varying degrees of value to different human lives (Verghese 2021). In the logic of necropolitics, those who are closer to dominant power structures are deemed more valuable, while those who are further away have less worth, making their existence more precarious (ibid.). Mbembe (2003) argues that those who are distanced from the dominant norms of society are trapped in a “death-world” (40). This is a form of social existence in which populations are forced to live under conditions that render them as “living dead” – fundamentally existing in a state of precarity. This precarious existence is characterized by a calculation of life that values one person's survival at the expense of another's death, or as Mbembe (2003) puts it, “the calculus of life passes through the death of the Other” (18).

In this context, the interviewed cleaners' experiences in the frontlines against the virus can be analyzed as an example of the ways in which the powers of the Portuguese State, responsible for public workers at the Municipal Government Building, and of the outsourcing firms who employed cleaners at the Job Center and Professional Training Center were used to expose workers to the risk of illness and death during the pandemic, without providing adequate protection or support. The lack of consideration for the safety and well-being of these workers indicates how their lives were deemed disposable, as they were left to work in unsafe conditions without the necessary resources to protect themselves. According to Sanchez and Kai (2022), the institutional powers that employ essential workers, such as cleaners, position their bodies as interchangeable with their labor, rendering them disposable and unworthy of protection or safety. In other words, because cleaning jobs are often seen as unskilled and undervalued, the workers' bodies

are also treated as easily replaceable. As a result, the lives of cleaning workers are seen as having no value beyond their labor, making them easily replaceable by other workers who can fulfill the same skillset. Over the course of the pandemic, their bodies were thus commodities positioned to protect others and keep the economy running in the so-called “new normal”, while risking their own lives. This reinforces the idea that the value of life is not universal, but rather determined by the power dynamics in place, which in this case consider cleaning a devalued and low-skilled profession.

To summarize, during the pandemic, cleaners faced worsened working conditions, as they were sent to high-risk areas without sufficient protection. Outsourced cleaners, in particular, lacked necessary protective gear and were forced to purchase their own or rely on the generosity of others. Both public and outsourced cleaners reported direct contact with Covid-19 without warning, and insufficient social distancing measures. This disregard for their safety, seen through a necropolitical lens, reveals a devaluation of cleaning workers’ lives and a prioritization of certain professions.

A trapped workforce combatting a deadly virus within a continuum of precarity

In this subsection, I will complement the documented experiences of an increased workload and inadequate protection with the reported lack of appreciation and recognition among cleaning workers. By examining these three aspects of their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, I will argue that despite facing working conditions that increased their exposure to the virus, cleaning workers, being a trapped workforce, were left with no viable alternative but to persist in their work, even in unsafe environments. That is, the combination of financial necessity and intersectional factors such as older age, low education levels, migrant status, and caregiving responsibilities compels cleaning workers to remain in the sector out of obligation rather than choice. These socioeconomic factors create a scenario of forced flexibility where their bargaining power with employers is severely limited due to their financial desperation. Consequently, they are compelled to accept precarious working conditions as a means of sustaining their livelihoods.

According to cleaning workers, others did not recognize the amount of work and effort required for cleaning to be done more frequently and under riskier conditions. To some of these colleagues, cleaning under such circumstances was merely a duty and an

expectation, as that was what they were being paid to do. Lídia, a full-time public worker at the Municipal Government Building, stated that colleagues in her workplace treated cleaners in an even more poorly and disrespectfully manner than they did before the pandemic. She described how during that period, people seemed to distance themselves from cleaners, as if they were carriers of the virus whose transmission they were working to combat. Thus, Lídia's testimony highlights the stigmatization of cleaners that stems from the association of their work with the dirt they remove, as discussed by Seifert and Messing (2006). With the emergence of Covid-19, the labor that cleaning workers performed to combat the virus seemed to taint their bodies, and the negative perception associated with the virus was projected onto them. As Rabelo and Mahalingam (2018) explain, this process turns cleaning workers into "dirty workers" in the eyes of others, as their work is deemed "dirty". In other words, the very labor that cleaners performed to protect others became even more a source of stigma and devaluation, further contributing to the precarity of their work. In this context, it is important to recognize that the association of cleaning work with dirt and the stigmatization faced by cleaning workers can be influenced by gendered expectations and biases. That is, women who work as cleaners may face additional scrutiny and devaluation due to societal norms that associate cleanliness and sanitation with femininity. Therefore, the experience of being labeled as "dirty workers" may have distinct implications for women compared to men engaged in manual labor, as societal expectations often place greater emphasis on men to perform physically demanding tasks. Nonetheless, Lídia implied that this behavior was unfair and unjust, especially given that cleaners were performing a vital service to keep public spaces clean and safe during the pandemic.

"Before, people were already not very humble with us, and during Covid they distanced themselves even more from us. It seemed that we had some kind of illness, even though Covid was something that was happening all over the world. It looked like they were a little afraid or disgusted with us. They should had been a little more understandable."
(Lídia)

As per the interviewees' accounts, the employer's attitude further demonstrated a lack of recognition for cleaning workers as essential employees during the pandemic. This was evident in their failure to implement necessary measures to address the understaffing and overburdening workload that these workers had to endure. For instance, the workers at the Municipal Government Building expressed a sense of being undervalued by their local government, as they were not acknowledged as frontline workers, but rather perceived as "back line workers". One example was the absence of their pictures on a sign in the main

government building that displayed images of “essential workers”, including some who were able to telework during the entire pandemic, but did not include any images of cleaners. Furthermore, while the President thanked all employees for their efforts during the pandemic in a collective event with them, there was no targeted message for cleaners, who claimed to be some of the hardest working individuals. Additionally, although they received a diploma from the President thanking them for their work during the pandemic, it was given to every other worker in the institution. This disregard took a toll on their well-being, as exemplified by Cláudia’s statement, who emphasized the emotional distress caused by the absence of acknowledgment and appreciation for their work.

“No one saw us as frontline workers. No one said anything to us, they didn’t even say thank you. But we were at the forefront, we were the ones who worked the hardest, but we were seen as the backline workers. That really hurt me.” (Cláudia)

Moreover, the interviewees reported feeling overlooked and undervalued compared to other frontline workers such as healthcare professionals, who received widespread recognition for their essential work during the pandemic. For instance, they mentioned the performance award attributed by the Portuguese Government to health professionals from the National Health Service who were on the frontline of the fight against Covid-19. This payment consisted of a performance bonus equivalent to 50% of the base salary of the workers and an increase in vacation days. In contrast, the interviewed cleaners never received a Covid-19 bonus as a part of employee encouragement. According to them, that issue was never brought up by employers, even though workers felt they deserved it due to their grueling and exhausting work. For them, this was further evidence that despite being essential workers, cleaners’ efforts were mostly overlooked, rendering them invisible in the public eye. This lack of recognition highlights the underlying hierarchy of value placed on certain professions, with healthcare workers often deemed more important and deserving of praise than other essential workers, such as cleaners, despite the vital role all of them played in keeping society functioning during the pandemic.

The experiences of these cleaning workers, encompassing increased workload, inadequate protection, and a lack of recognition and appreciation, collectively illustrate the exacerbation of their already precarious employment conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, employers failed to take responsibility for protecting the health and safety of their cleaners. Instead, they shifted the burden of risk and responsibility onto these workers, who were required to work under unsafe conditions

without proper protective equipment or support. Thus, in spite of the importance of cleaning during the “new normal” and the life-threatening nature of the period, cleaners’ lives were treated as disposable. However, they had little choice but to continue working despite the risks. In the interviews many of the cleaners openly acknowledged that their need for income was the main factor that pushed them to keep working, even though they were scared for their own and their loved ones’ health and safety. Taking sick leave or refusing to work in unsafe conditions was not an option, as they could not afford to lose their jobs and face the possibility of unemployment in a time of economic crisis and job losses. This is a direct consequence of cleaning workers being a trapped workforce (Coyle 1985), meaning that they have no choice but to work, even in unsafe conditions where they risk contracting the virus. That is, due to financial need and various intersectional aspects of their identities, such as age, education level, migrant status, and household composition, they are forced into a situation of forced flexibility (Ollus 2016), with no bargaining power to negotiate better working conditions with employers. As a result, they are more vulnerable to precarious working conditions, such as those they experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mariana, a single mother of a 11-year-old son working full-time as a public worker at the Municipal Government Building, provides a poignant example that illustrates this issue. Mariana explicitly states that she had no choice but to continue working despite the risks, as taking sick leave or refusing to work in unsafe conditions would have severe financial consequences for her and her family. Not only did she have the responsibility of providing for her 11-year-old son, but she also had the added pressure of supporting her mother and father with whom she lived. Especially compounded by her caring responsibilities, her experience reflects a common gendered narrative, emphasizing the challenging trade-off cleaning workers face between prioritizing financial stability and their own well-being.

“At that time I needed money, I needed to work and I had no possibility of taking sick leave because I had only been employed for a short time and I wasn’t going to get paid if I did it. I only endured these conditions because of the money.” (Mariana)

In another distressing example, Mariana found herself in a situation where she suspected she had contracted Covid-19 due to the presence of symptoms such as extreme fatigue and severe lung pain. Despite her deteriorating health, Mariana felt compelled to continue working, fearing that taking a sick leave would jeopardize her employment. Desperate to maintain her job and income, she attempted to alleviate her symptoms with medication, but they only worsened over time. Eventually, her condition deteriorated to the point

where she had to seek medical attention at a hospital for respiratory complications and a kidney infection caused by Covid-19. Similarly, Pilar, a single mother working part-time as an outsourced employee at the Professional Training Center, contracted Covid-19 while on the job. However, even while battling the virus and experiencing the physical and emotional toll it took on her, Pilar's overwhelming fear of losing her job persisted. This anxiety and the constant worry about job security exacerbated her mental health, leading to depression-like symptoms. Pilar struggled with disrupted sleep patterns and loss of appetite, as the weight of isolation and the looming possibility of unemployment weighed heavily on her while confined to her bedroom.

“While I had Covid and was isolating at home, I didn't sleep, I didn't eat. I was constantly crying due to a fear of losing my job. I was at the beginning of a depression because of this. It was very complicated.” (Pilar)

These firsthand accounts highlight the devastating consequences that being a trapped workforce, with the financial vulnerability it implies, can have on cleaning workers' well-being. The stories of Mariana and Pilar demonstrate the difficult choices they faced, prioritizing their employment over their own health and safety. Both their cases highlight the cruel reality of precarity, where workers are forced to choose between their health and an income. As Bordieu (1998) and Butler (2015) have pointed out, workers in precarious situations are limited in their collective action options, which leads to precarity being interpreted as a form of social and political control and regulation against them. In other words, precarity is not just a condition, but an everyday existence characterized by vulnerability, unpredictability, and insecurity (Ramírez et al. 2021). In this light, the experiences of the interviewed cleaning workers reflect the continuum of precarity to which they were subjected during the pandemic due to preexisting structural inequalities. With low wages and a lack of job security, they were already struggling to make ends meet before the pandemic. Amidst widespread job losses and lay-offs during this period, the pandemic intensified the precarity of their lives, and they were forced to face the risks and dangers of the pandemic while still trying to provide for themselves and their families.

In this sense, the experiences of cleaning workers during the pandemic highlight stark class differences between them and white-collared women who quit their jobs at alarming rates due to a lack of childcare (Bateman and Ross 2020). While much of the literature on Covid-19 focuses on the experiences of these white-collared women, cleaning workers, as blue-collared workers, faced a very different reality. Despite also having childcare needs, they could not afford to quit their jobs as they relied on their income to

provide for their families, especially considering the limited availability of school and childcare options during lockdowns. Moreover, while white-collared women had the privilege of working from home, blue-collared workers, including cleaning workers, were compelled to continue performing manual tasks without adequate protection, placing them at higher risk of infection (Bateman and Ross 2020). These class-based disparities reflect the broader structural inequalities that shape the lives of working-class individuals (Mamede, Pereira, and Simões 2020), particularly those who are racialized, migrants, or have other intersecting identities that compound their precarity. Simultaneously, the Covid-19 crisis has also shed light on the gendered division of labor and highlighted the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on women. That is, the pandemic has exposed the gendered segregation in essential jobs, with women making up the majority of frontline workers, such as cleaners, who faced higher risks of infection while sacrificing their health for economic security (European Institute for Gender Equality 2021). Thus, the pandemic has highlighted not only the precarious existence of workers but also the gender and class-based inequalities and disparities in the labor market.

The experiences of these cleaning workers, encompassing increased workload, inadequate protection, and a lack of recognition and appreciation, collectively illustrate the exacerbation of their already precarious employment conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, considering the cleaners' status as a trapped workforce, their financial vulnerability and lack of bargaining power left them with little choice but to prioritize their income over their health and well-being, perpetuating a continuum of precarity. Moreover, the class and gender disparities highlighted by the pandemic underscore the broader social and economic inequities faced by blue-collared, essential, frontline workers such as cleaners.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly amplified the workload for cleaners, who faced new responsibilities and had to perform their tasks more frequently, extensively, and intensely. However, none of the nineteen interviewed cleaners reported receiving any training from their employers on updated cleaning regulations and procedures to combat the virus. As a result, they had to rely on information from the internet and television to navigate their new duties and even train new colleagues, further increasing their workload. Thus, this

period of intense work was physically and mentally exhausting, given the proximity to the virus and the need to overwork due to staff shortages.

Despite the inherent risks involved in combating a deadly virus in the frontlines, cleaners did not receive the necessary protection. On the opposite, they were exposed to unsafe working conditions. Notably, there was a stark discrepancy between public and outsourced workers in terms of access to protective equipment, with outsourced workers often having to purchase their own or rely on the generosity of public workers. Furthermore, cleaners were not adequately informed about direct contact with Covid-19, and there was a lack of provision for proper social distancing measures in their workspaces. These circumstances highlight the undervaluing of cleaners' safety and well-being, treating them as disposable commodities tasked with protecting others while risking their own lives.

Additionally, cleaners did not experience an increased sense of appreciation and recognition for their crucial work during the pandemic. Instead, they faced further stigmatization, were not recognized as essential or frontline workers, and did not receive performance bonuses like other frontline workers, such as healthcare professionals. In this sense, the combination of heightened workload, lack of protection, recognition, and appreciation exacerbated the already precarious working conditions for cleaners during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, due to their status as a trapped workforce, they had little choice but to continue working despite the risks involved. Their need for income to support themselves and their families, particularly in the face of an economic crisis with widespread job losses, made it impossible for them to afford losing their jobs during the pandemic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has examined the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the precarious working conditions of Portugal's intersectional industrial cleaning workforce. Through conducting 19 semi-structured interviews with cleaning workers based in Seixal, a municipality in the southern suburb of Lisbon, Portugal's capital city, I aimed to explore two contrasting hypotheses: the revaluation of essential work and improved working conditions for cleaners, versus the exacerbation of precarious conditions for this workforce.

Drawing upon the findings obtained through the interviews, I argued that a continuum of precarity persisted for cleaning workers during the pandemic. Even prior to the outbreak of the virus, the interviewed cleaners were a trapped workforce within the sector due to financial hardships and the intersecting aspects of their identities. This forced flexibility resulted in limited bargaining power, leaving cleaners with little choice but to accept jobs on precarious terms. As a consequence, they experienced severe precarious working conditions, making them highly vulnerable and insecure in the labor market. During the pandemic, the combination of increased workloads, lack of protection, appreciation, and recognition further intensified the pre-existing precarity faced by cleaning workers. Their continued employment in the profession was primarily driven by the imperative to secure income for themselves and their families. In this sense, various intersecting factors, including older age, migrant status, low education levels, and responsibilities for dependents, further deepened their entrapment within these precarious work environments. Particularly during a period of an economic crisis, when alternative job opportunities were scarce, these intersecting factors amplified their vulnerability and made it even more challenging to escape the cycle of precarious work.

The examination of cleaning work from an intersectional lens has provided insights into the dynamics of gender, race, nationality, and class within the cleaning sector. Notably, the findings are consistent with the prevailing gender segregation observed in the Portuguese industry, where approximately 90% of cleaning workers are women, marking the highest proportion of female representation in the sector across Europe (RTP 2020). Within the research sample, the majority of interviewees, eighteen out of nineteen, were women, further reflecting this gendered distribution. This gender proportion had notable implications for the division of labor both prior to and during the pandemic, as highlighted

by the accounts provided by the interviewees. The women participants consistently reported being assigned to repetitive responsibilities and tasks traditionally associated with “women’s work”. In contrast, the sole male participant acknowledged being entrusted with tasks that required technical expertise, physical strength, and the operation of equipment. The Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated these gendered dynamics, placing additional burdens on women cleaners. As the demand for cleanliness and hygiene increased, women found themselves shouldering additional responsibilities. They had to learn their job duties independently and took on the added role of training their new male colleague. This extra burden placed on women cleaners can be seen as an extension of their existing caregiving and domestic roles, further reinforcing traditional gender expectations. Moreover, with the closure of schools and the heightened emphasis on cleanliness in public spaces, the workload and demands on cleaning staff intensified. Women cleaners, in particular, had to juggle increased professional responsibilities along with their ongoing caregiving and domestic duties in the unpaid sphere.

Moreover, the findings reveal that outsourced cleaning workers, who in my sample were predominantly racialized and migrant women, face significantly more precarious contracts, wages, working conditions, and inferior welfare benefits compared to public workers, who were all Portuguese-born and white. For instance, outsourced workers lacked access to essential protective equipment during the pandemic. This disparity reflects the historical patterns of exploitation perpetuated by enduring colonial structures. That is, the positioning of racialized and migrant women at the forefront of the precariat within the cleaning sector is not coincidental but rather a result of the interplay between neoliberal trends, racialization, and coloniality in the workplace. Outsourcing practices further contribute to the perpetuation of racialized and colonial dynamics, with the most precarious positions systematically assigned to the colonial and racialized “Other” (Herod and Aguiar 2006c; Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006).

During the conclusion of this thesis, it is also crucial to address the limitations inherent to this research. Firstly, the topic of everyday resistance, which was intended to be explored, did not prominently emerge during the interviews, potentially due to factors such as my positionality, the covert nature of resistance within a trapped workforce, and the limitations of the research design. Therefore, definitive claims about the presence or absence of acts of everyday resistance among cleaning workers cannot be made based on the current data. However, it is important to recognize that the absence of identified acts

of everyday resistance in relation to Covid-19 during the interviews does not imply their nonexistence. It is possible that acts of everyday resistance exist but were not explicitly discussed. Thus, further research is needed to delve deeper into the dynamics of resistance within the cleaning sector.

Secondly, as this work focuses exclusively on the region of Seixal, it does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the entire country of Portugal or the entire field of industrial cleaning. The findings and conclusions drawn from this research should not be generalized beyond the specific context of Seixal. Instead, they offer valuable insights into the experiences of the interviewed cleaners in that particular area. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the precarious working conditions of Portugal's intersectional industrial cleaning workforce, a more extensive study or a PhD research project with a broader scope and a larger sample size would be necessary. Such research would allow for a more representative analysis of the cleaning sector across different regions and provide a deeper exploration of the complexities of precarity and the intersecting factors at play.

By shedding light on the precarious working conditions faced by cleaning workers and their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, this thesis contributes to the existing literature on precarious work, intersectionality, and the impact of the pandemic on occupational sectors predominantly employing women in precarious positions. It emphasizes the need for improved working conditions, social protections, and recognition for cleaning workers, as well as the importance of considering the intersecting factors that compound their precarity. The findings of this research thus provide valuable insights that can shape policy discussions and interventions focused on tackling the challenges encountered by cleaning workers and fostering a more equitable work environment. By understanding the intersecting factors of gender, race, nationality, and class within the precarity lived in the cleaning sector, policymakers can develop targeted strategies to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of these workers.

Appendix 1: Sociodemographic data of the interviewees

Name	Gender	Age	Attainment level	Origin country	Household composition
Anabela	Woman	55	6th grade	Portugal	Her, husband, and 22-year-old son
Bintu	Woman	57	3rd grade	Senegal	On her own
Carmo	Woman	64	12th grade	Portugal	Her and 22-year-old daughter
Cláudia	Woman	61	6th grade	Portugal	Her and 18+ year-old daughter
Dália	Woman	50	6th grade	Portugal	Her, husband, and two underaged daughters
Dora	Woman	37	9th grade	Portugal	Her, 20-year-old son, and 14-year-old son
Edna	Woman	55	3rd grade	Cape Verde	Her, 31-year-old son, and 23-year-old daughter
Fátima	Woman	64	5th grade	Portugal	Her and husband
Graça	Woman	51	4th grade	Portugal	Her and husband
Heloísa	Woman	47	12th grade	Brazil	Her and husband
Lídia	Woman	43	9th grade	Portugal	Her, husband, and underaged son
Manuela	Woman	57	9th grade	Portugal	Her, husband, and 18+ year-old son
Maria	Woman	53	12th grade	Venezuela	Her, husband, and two sons with 20+ years
Mariana	Woman	31	12th grade	Portugal	Her, mother, father, and 11-year-old son
Natalina	Woman	67	4th grade	Portugal	Her and husband
Paula	Woman	33	Bachelor's Degree in Basic Education	Portugal	Her, husband, and underaged son
Pilar	Woman	49	8th grade	Angola	Her and two 18+ daughters
Tânia	Woman	33	9th grade	Portugal	Her and two underage sons
Tomás	Man	33	12th grade	Portugal	On his own

Appendix 2: The interviewees' entry into the sector

Name	Date of and reason for joining the industrial cleaning sector
Anabela	2020, 3 years ago. During a job search while unemployed, she found a cleaning job offer
Bintu	2016, 7 years ago. Following the passing of her previous employer, she transitioned to the industrial sector after working as a domestic cleaner for several years
Carmo	2010, 13 years ago. After working as an administrative worker for a company that closed down during the 2008 financial crisis, she faced difficulty in finding another job due to being 50 years old. Cleaning was the only option available to her
Cláudia	2019, 4 years ago. She switched from street cleaning to industrial cleaning for the same municipality, as she preferred not to endure various weather conditions while working on the streets
Dália	2006, 17 years ago. During a job search while unemployed, she found a cleaning job offer
Dora	2016, 7 years ago. Previously having worked as a beautician, she decided to pursue a job that provided greater job security and stability, including a formal employment contract
Edna	2003, 20 years ago. She worked as a domestic cleaner for some months and then decided to switch to industrial cleaning
Fátima	1978, 45 years ago. In an attempt to avoid agricultural work, she left a rural area and relocated to her brother's house in the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon. Being new to the area and not knowing anyone else, cleaning became her first job option to gain some independence
Graça	2008, 15 years ago. She worked in a nursing home, but quit due to mistrust in the bosses regarding her salary payment and employment conditions
Heloísa	2020, 3 years ago. During a job search while unemployed, she found a cleaning job offer
Lídia	2022, 1 year ago. After experience job insecurity due to the absence of stable and long-term employment contracts in her previous positions in restaurants, a friend advised her to apply for cleaning work
Manuela	2016, 6 years ago. During a job search while unemployed, she found a cleaning job offer

Maria	2001, 22 years ago. During a job search while unemployed, she found a cleaning job offer
Mariana	2020, 3 years ago. During a job search while unemployed, she found a cleaning job offer
Natalina	2001, 22 years ago. During a job search while unemployed, she found a cleaning job offer
Paula	2022, 7 months ago. After working as a kindergarten teacher in schools with very unstable working conditions and without a formal employment contract, she decided to search for positions within the public sector. She found a cleaning job offer and applied for it
Pilar	2003, 20 years ago. During a job search while unemployed, she found a cleaning job offer
Tânia	2008, 15 years ago. During a job search while unemployed, she found a cleaning job offer
Tomás	2022, 1 year ago. Decided to quit his job in sales for a private company so that he could work closer to home and in the public sector. Applied for different positions but was only accepted for cleaning

Appendix 3: Work location, employment contract and multiple jobs of the interviewees

Name	Workplace	Employment contract	Multiple jobs
Anabela	Municipal Government Building	Part-time of 7 hours. Outsourced. Shifts	No
Bintu	Job Center	Part-time of 3 hours. Outsourced. Fixed hours	Yes, two jobs. In the morning she cleans a Job Center in Lisbon and in the afternoon a Job Center in the region of Seixal
Carmo	Job Center	Part-time of 3 hours. Outsourced. Fixed hours	Yes, two jobs. She works as a domestic cleaner in the morning and at the Job Center in the afternoon
Cláudia	Municipal Government Building	Full-time of 7 hours. Directly employed. Shifts	Yes, two jobs. She cleans a boxing gym in a schedule weekly adapted to her shifts at the Municipal Government Building
Dália	Municipal Government Building	Full-time of 7 hours. Directly employed. Shifts	No
Dora	Municipal Government Building	Full-time of 7 hours. Directly employed. Shifts	Yes, three jobs. In complement to the Municipal Government Building, she works as a domestic cleaner in two houses
Edna	Job Center	Part-time of 3 hours. Outsourced. Fixed hours	Yes, two jobs. In the morning she cleans a private building and in the afternoon works at the Job Center
Fátima	Job Center	Part-time of 3 hours. Outsourced. Fixed hours	Yes, two jobs. She works as a domestic cleaner in the morning and at the Job Center in the afternoon

Graça	Job Center	Part-time of 3 hours. Outsourced. Fixed hours	No
Heloísa	Professional Training Center	Part-time of 7 hours. Outsourced. Fixed hours	No
Lídia	Municipal Government Building	Full-time of 7 hours. Directly employed. Shifts	Yes, three jobs. In complement to the Municipal Government Building, she works as a domestic cleaner in a private house and cleans a firm's office
Manuela	Municipal Government Building	Full-time of 7 hours. Directly employed. Shifts	Yes, three jobs. In complement to the Municipal Government Building, she cleans two private buildings
Maria	Professional Training Center	Part-time of 7 hours. Outsourced. Fixed hours	No
Mariana	Municipal Government Building	Full-time of 7 hours. Directly employed. Shifts	No
Natalina	Municipal Government Building	Full-time of 7 hours. Directly employed. Shifts	No
Paula	Municipal Government Building	Full-time of 7 hours. Directly employed. Shifts	No
Pilar	Professional Training Center	Part-time of 7 hours. Outsourced. Fixed hours	No
Tânia	Municipal Government Building	Full-time of 7 hours. Directly employed. Shifts	No
Tomás	Municipal Government Building	Full-time of 7 hours. Directly employed. Shift	No

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