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## **Maids and housekeepers at luxury hotels: life stories in hotels of Buenos Aires, Argentina**

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**Abstract:** The tourism industry evinces a high turnover of staff which needs further hard training and organisation. Broadly speaking, the service quality seems to be directly proportional to excessive working hours, which are accompanied by less-paid wages and hard working conditions. This paper interrogates furtherly on the (real) motivations of maid and housekeepers who are professionally educated to serve high purchasing power tourists. The research focuses on the needs, socio-economic background of maid and housekeepers as well as the pro and cons of their daily tasks. Based on the life story and story-telling and as the main method of study, we conduct exploratory research -sampled by 8 in-depth interviews-. The research takes place -following the snowball technique- in luxury hotels geographically situated in Buenos Aires city in the second semester of 2019. The current investigation aims at discussing the interconnection of individual contexts with the labour relations in the industry of tourism and hospitality.

**Keywords:** housekeepers; women; feminism; luxury hotels; Buenos Aires city, labour exploitation; tourist experience; ethnography; story life.

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## 1 Introduction

Luxury hotels not only are commonly associated with higher purchasing powers, at least if we compare this segment with other tourist areas but also they offer more personalised and high-quality service (Kim and Kim, 2005; Sherman, 2007). Luxury hotels are space of consumption, emulation and bourgeois tourism which mediates between a global discourse centered on including while excluding the host (Fleiss, 2015). Above all, the discourse of tourism consumption is a narrative based on the inter-class or inter-genre domination (Contreras, 2015). At (luxury) hotels inter-class asymmetries are exacerbated through the mediation of the tourist gaze (Neill et al., 2016). These commercial establishments are re-furnished according to an elegant and exclusive style which seems to be disposed to meet all client's requirements. As Sherman (2007) puts it, top managers believe that one of the aspects that distinguish luxury hotels is not luxury itself, but their exclusive design adjoined to comfortable rooms and high-quality amenities. To some extent, guests, who often decide to lodge at luxury hotels, have a specific psychological profile that needs to be oriented to self-pleasure maximisation (Cetin and Walls, 2016). Although treated in the literature this point needs to be discussed. These clients are in quest of a novel situation looking for a unique and exceptional experience (Sherman, 2007). Tavares and Fraiz Brea (2020), guests valorise hotel cleaning, the original decoration, as well as the amenities such as swimming pool. What is equally important, as Sherman adds (2007), quality service should be based on personalised attention, conflict and complaint resolution, which leads to client's satisfaction. In this context, house-keepers and cleaning staff, who are debarred from the front stage, play a crucial role in adjusting their reality to guest's fantasies. Voluntarily or not, this asymmetrical relationship generates a subordinated role respecting to customers (Walls et al., 2011). They often carry cleaning trolleys with different compartments and bags to pick up the trash at hotel rooms (Kensbock et al., 2013). Following Tomazzoni and Correa Zanette (2013), the roles and responsibilities of Maintenance Department should be divided into four clear-cut areas:

- 1 maintenance services
- 2 laundry and clothing storage checkroom
- 3 hydraulic and electrical operations
- 4 house-keepers who are in charge of cleaning the guest's room.

As the previous argument is given, the specialised literature has widely focused on the role of housekeeping as an emerging field of study which helps to enhance the quality

service in the hotel sector. Room attendants are often subject to excessive working hours and bad working conditions. Because of this, Knox (2011, p.5) reminds that

“this is the work that room attendants perform, cleaning and replenishing amenities within rooms. The attendants’ main tasks include changing bed linen, vacuuming and cleaning carpets and bathrooms, and restocking amenities such as towels, soaps, shampoo/conditioner and tea/coffee. The work is physically demanding and repetitive and it is very detailed in upper market hotels” (Knox, 2008b, p.5).

As noted above, numerous publications have paid attention to the role of house-keeping in hotel sector (Hartmann, 1981; Martin, 1998; Katz, 2001; Salazar Parreñas, 2001; Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Alcorso, 2003; Aksu, 2005; McDowell et al., 2007). Over the recent years, scholars agree on the urgency to review those gender or power asymmetries between house-keepers and top-managers as well as the archetype of patriarchal order sometimes persists in the organisational culture of tourist resorts (Raghubalan and Raghubalan, 2007; Eriksson and Li, 2008; Guégnard and Mériot, 2008; Knox, 2008a, 2008b; Tugores, 2008; Otis, 2009; Aksu et al., 2010; Harris, 2010; Premji and Krause, 2010; Harris et al., 2011). Complementarily, other studies centered efforts in studying the unfavourable working conditions of house-keepers at hotels (Pinar et al., 2011; Sherman, 2011; Oliveira and Ambrósio, 2013; Fouad et al., 2013; Chirmulay and Gupta, 2016; Hsieh et al., 2016; Sanon Rosemberg et al., 2018). Although the literature abounds shedding light on the role of house-keepers in the tourism industry, no less true is that there is little evidence or information about the working conditions of house-keepers in luxury hotels. In fact, this happens because of two main problems. On one hand, luxury hotels are exclusive while fieldworkers have no access to house-keepers. On another, and this is an original hypothesis from where this research starts from, house-keepers are subject to a climate of hostility or working in precarious conditions. When this occurs, fieldworkers went through several difficulties at the time contacting house-keepers without a formal invitation. At the same time, managers are reluctant to accept their housekeeping staff reveals further information about their work environment. Still further, in Argentina, there is an abundance of studies in the working conditions of cleaning service staff in companies or houses (Casellas and Holcomb, 2001), but there is no information about investigations conducted at hotels and resorts. Despite the above mentioned methodological limitations, the present research is moved by its originality and simplicity. In part, it is the first research oriented to reveal the working conditions of house-keepers in luxury hotels as well as their intersection with their organisational culture. Based on gender theory, it holds the thesis house-keepers are frequently silenced and relegated as bit-players in the operations of luxury hotels.

The goals of this research are threefold. At a first glimpse, we confront with the specialised literature which does not look at the problem of house-keeping staff in luxury hotels. As noted, luxury hotels are spaces inexpugnable to professional fieldworkers. Secondly, we lay the foundations towards a new understanding of the culture of housekeeping strictly associated with old colonial paradigms. In third, we provide evidence –based on a qualitative method- to reach interesting outcomes for the formation of future good practices policies. Argentina has been historically a pioneer country in the bestowing of labour rights to women as well as the sanction of legislation in the protection of women and children. In view of this, sociology has advanced a lot in

the study of migrant women and its induction to domestic work. For that reason, some of the cited studies and books are originally in Spanish. We endorse a short translation for readers who are not Spanish native speakers.

## 2 Preliminary debate

Historically, cleaning jobs in Argentina has been filled by the lowest classes or migrants coming from neighbour countries or any other migrant flux (Jelin, 1976). These women not only escape from poverty and unemployment in their respective countries but also are willing to accept flexibilised working conditions and wages. It is safe to add that the term flexibility or flexibilised, in this context, means *precariousness*. Some voices associate this precariousness to the legacy of colonialism which placed ‘the Non-Western Other’ and ‘the Women’ as inferior agents who must serve to the colonial lord (Hunt, 1990; Chakrabarty, 1993). As Pratt (2007) suggested, the imperial travellers looked to index new territories, customs and lands with the specific ends of re-educating the savages. The indigenous women were seen as a child-like ‘Other’ who may be civilised in contact with the European lords. This encounter was subject to a culture of submission which has durable effects in the tourism industry (Palmer, 1994; Ballengee-Morris, 2002; Bandyopadhyay, 2011). To some extent, the culture of services (probably cleaning jobs) associates directly to the colonial legacy. The first point of entry in this debate seems to be linked to the migrant women who leave their homes, which are former colonies, to work (as house-keepers, or in domestic work) at the global North or former imperial centers (Jackson, 2010). Secondly, it is important not to lose the sight of the fact that the urgency of getting a stable job moves many migrant women to accept the pattern of business as usual on mistreatment or situation of gender inequality. In this respect, *domestic work*, which is carried out against payment currently falling in the spheres of the black economy, is culturally ignored by society because it is headed by (uneducated or unskilled) women. While considered as an easy task, people strongly believe that women are socialised to cook and look children at home. Likewise, men are educated to be aggressive (if not stronger and competitive). Sociologists acknowledge that domestic work was the doorstep to legitimate the international division of labour just emerged after the WWII end (Constable, 2016). In this vein, Harris et al. (2011) signal to the needs of understanding how domestic work is usually undermined as inferior, affordable only for migrants or less paid respecting to other jobs in a society dominated by sexism, whereas with a basis in the case of Sydney, Alcorso (2003) calls the attention on the firm position of migrants who were rapidly located to work in the tourism industry. This evidence is replicated in other studies with a focus in London (McDowell et al., 2007), the US (Katz, 2001) without mentioning the fact that Mexican migrants are recruited as housekeepers in the US as the research conducted by Karjanen (2008) infers. It is safe to say that migration and tourism seem to be inextricably intertwined (O’Reilly, 2003; Lindquist, 2009; Thrane, 2008). From its inception, the hotel industry has been a fertile ground for thousands of migrants (women) in quest of economic stable condition to prosper (Gentry, 2007; Ladkin, 2011) or social upward (Szivas et al., 2003; Kensbock et al., 2016).

**Figure 1** Sofitel luxury hotel (see online version for colours)

Source: Self Elaboration

Unlike other countries, in Argentina, a whole portion of women migrants –who come from Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru) look for domestic services in luxury hotels the reality is quite different (Maguid, 2011). To date, there seems not to be migrant women working in the housekeeping department. Having said this, the main goal of this research aims at describing the daily life of housekeepers who are contracted by luxury hotels in Buenos Aires city (echoing Otis (2009) back-house-positions). Previous statistical reports reveal that almost 20% of employers in a hotel occupies in maintenance or housekeeping department (Chirmulay and Gupta, 2016; Winchenbach et al., 2019; Moreno Alarcón and Cole, 2019). Last but not least, Van Rheede and Dekker (2016) use the term *hospitableness* to denote a new concept of *being welcome* which places the industry towards a more sustainable direction. Authors want to move on the concept of *host as a shepherd* which characterises the traditional hotel to *host as a servant*. While the former signals to the responsibility of hosts by guest's security, the latter refers to the duties of the guest during their sojourn. The idea of genuine hospitableness sounds vital to expand the current understanding of host-guest relations. Van Rheede and Dekker (2016) alert that in the hospitality industry the notion of genuine hospitableness is not correctly understood. The term very well inscribes to the level of underlying assumption and

values oriented to enhance service skills, all them subordinated to the guest's desires. Hence, the connotation of hospitality and services are based on a long-dormant colonial imprint that transcends all host guests relationships.

### **3 Motivations to reduce the dust using a feather duster**

For some reason, cleaning jobs are not undervalued in a whole portion of developed economies. Women who look for these jobs are young, unskilled and without financial resources. Therefore, they are exploited or urged to work in undesirable conditions (Doherty and Manfredi, 2001; Andrews, 2013). Here two assumptions can be done. On one hand, maids working for a family have been historically relegated to a peripheral position or underpaid simply because the job was not considered seriously (Cothran and Combrink, 1999). Even if young women often see in the hospitality industry a good opportunity to get a better labour situation, unfortunately they fail to pursue successfully an academic career (Airey and Frontistis, 1997). What seems more important, some voices have claimed that these jobs were underestimated in view of the fact it is subject to the domestic domain, a field very well reserved for women (Powell and Watson, 2006; Harris, 2009). On another, these feminised spaces reaffirm stereotypes and prejudices systematically orchestrated by the patriarchal order to keep the control (Wearing and Wearing, 1996). This moot point opened the doors to the rise of a new feminist platform which interrogated furtherly on the current inequalities of both genders in the private sphere. The inequalities and asymmetries among classes that sociologists studied decades earlier set the pace to a climate of gender disparity as never before (Whiteford, 2014). Of course, the tourism industry is not an exception. It is important to add that the cleaning services, as well as the domestic work, are fully reserved for women. Almost 75% of housekeepers working at homes move as undeclared work. Per reports of the Ministry of Finance, 17.2% of all women workers (in Argentina) perform in cleaning jobs as maids or housekeepers. Still, almost 77.100 women (13%) who work in these conditions live in Buenos Aires city or metropolitan area (Ministry of Finance, 2016). Despite the advances in improving their working conditions over the recent decades, some experts agree, the main problem lies in the impossibilities of governments to regulate the domestic work which remains in the black economy. Until 2013, the situation of these female workers was marked by a current decree-law extremely restrictive in terms of rights. The old laws treat this group of women as "servants", and the current law considers them "workers" (Reyneri, 1998). The expansion of capitalism –far from solving the problem of domestic work- aggravated it. It creates more informal work leading women to a labour precarisation. Paradoxically, since the mid of twentieth century, some factors as the rise of tertiary sector associated to the arrival of mid-class women to formal work leaves lower classes to a marginal situation or doomed to the black economy (Wright, 2006; Lem, 2018). This raises a more than an interesting question: is this observation replicated in the luxury hotels?

Working for a luxury hotel is not the same than working for a house. Any labour position at a hotel gives further status to house-keepers as well as more formal opportunities to prosper in their careers, at least regarding with other sectors (Sherman, 2007; Walls et al., 2011). Luxury hotels are a question of status for many historically-relegated migrant workers (Dion and Borraz, 2017). To put the same in bluntly, house-keepers -as marginalised women- are re-situated (if not legalised) in a new status even if

following the rules of the patriarchal society. As debated, this order coincides with the second labour division which cements the central authority of the patriarchal order over women (Bagguley, 1991; Veijola and Valtonen, 2007). Some scholars have called the attention on the commonalities between housekeepers at hotels and domestic maids which need further investigation (Janta et al., 2011; Eriksson and Li, 2008). Doubtless, the wages of women are less remunerated than men. As Kensbock et al. (2013) eloquently observes, housekeeper luxury hotel jobs are better paid (in comparison to other jobs) even if once these workers are consulted there is a clear but repressed sentiment of discontent, remaining in secrecy to the fieldworker. A plausible answer to this is based on their psychological frustrations to be considered the lowest group in the decision-making process within hotels. Housekeepers perceive themselves as near-invisible through non-acknowledgement by hotel management and other staff due to their position at the lowest level of the operational hierarchy (Hakim, 2004). To what extent they look for getting these types of jobs is one of the main questions that move the present research.

As the previous backdrop, the psychological contract, which marks the implicit set of rules and norms in the employment relationship, redefines the success or failure of managerial performance in companies (Lub et al., 2011). Harris (2010) found that successful cooperation between housekeepers and managers not only is possible at luxury hotels but undoubtedly this leads staff members towards a healthy working climate where creativity and cooperation prevail. However, unfortunately these results are not conclusive. Instead, Oliveira and Ambrósio (2013) lament that housekeepers not only are subject to conditions of exploitation but they suffer sexual harassment. Per these specialists, housekeepers are culturally isolated from the rest of the organisational structure while sometimes they are afraid to denounce their chiefs. Centered on Portuguese cases, they hold the thesis that luxury hotels show many limitations and security issues to incorporate housekeepers as a key-player of the industry. In consonance with this, Hsieh et al. (2016, 2013) conduct an interesting investigation regarding the role of Hotel housekeepers in the US. Per their outcomes, Latina Hotel housekeeper comes from low socio-economic classes, most probably unfamiliar with the English language. This linguistic barrier represents a serious problem to get for better jobs. Like the other studies, researchers show that they are placed at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy. Most of them are harassed or simply mistreated without mentioning many of the interviewed women declared to be pressed to work excessive hours or cleaning the room in a short period. These results are conducive with earlier findings published Hsieh et al. (2016), Hsieh et al. (2017), and Simoni (2016). The problem of housekeeper mistreating has been silenced over years. Recently, some scholars have discussed the reasons housekeepers are relegated, discriminated and relegated to peripheral position in the hospitality industry (Gregg and Johnson, 1990; Guégnard and Mériot, 2008; Brownell, 1994; Ineson et al., 2013). By this way, Aksu (2005) understands that each employee should be dully motivated for achieving the best performance for its position in which case, gender, ideology, even class play a leading role in the training towards efficiency. For this reason, it is vital to expand the current understanding of the factor that motivates housekeepers at hotels. In consonance with this, Okumus et al. (2010) obtained interesting results showing that in 5-star Turkish Hotels, formal training and education ignited higher levels of interest for the task while enjoyment was a key factor to enhance commitment with the tourist organisation. In these terms, such a study reveals that the lack of time for individual interaction (friends or relatives) adjoined to low-wages,

excessive working hours and limitations to get firm promotion in the career are serious obstacles to have a full professional career.

**Figure 2** Sofitel luxury hotel hall (see online version for colours)



*Source:* Self-Elaboration

In parallel, Chirmulay and Gupta (2016) speak us the satisfaction of housekeepers depend mainly upon the following aspects: salary, monetary incentives or rewards, longer lunch breaks, less working hours, and support from Human Relation Department (only to name a few). Finally, for Linder (1998), the good working condition seems to be a broader concept sometimes very difficult to approach. Rather, he toys with the belief that being praised when the job is done, as well as just promotion occupies a central position in the employee motivation. Other complementary works suggest that the complexity of



motivation should be widely narrowed to the interplay of flexibility which oscillates from less flexible working hours or less interaction with guests to faster promotions (Singh and Amandeep, 2017).

#### 4 Methodological discussions

To meet the goals enumerated in the introductory section, we have conducted exploratory research in a little sample of 8 housekeepers who work regularly in luxury hotels geographically situated in Buenos Aires city. We have followed the strict protocols of in-depth interviews alternating with auto-ethnography at the hotels. Ethnography should be understood as a qualitative method organised in the systematic study of human group centered on the idea of 'being there' living with natives. In the modern tourism industry, ethnography occupies a central position unraveling social issues which remains inexpugnable to the fieldworker's scrutiny such as theme associated to racism, discrimination, criminality or simply labour exploitation (Korstanje, 2018). Ethnography reveals information otherwise would remain covered in the dust of oblivion (Amoamo, 2018; Stokowski, 2018). Based on life story technique, we followed the snowball method. The yielded results cannot be extrapolated to broader universes and should be evaluated only within the selected sample. All hotels, given the policies of confidentiality explained in the earlier sections, as well as the limitations to access to housekeepers at luxury hotels, showed serious reluctance to share statistical information. Hence, the real names of hotels as well as housekeepers are kept in secrecy or have been altered. Although originally we get some reliable key informants at the Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union, the information was neglected. The conceptual approach aims to the theory of gender as it was developed in Butler (2011) and Butler et al. (2000). The paper starts from the premise that gender not only is culturally formed but also politically manipulated to keep the status quo. Norms and rules, disposed by men, -echoing Guidotti-Hernández (2011)- exert the underlying unspeakable violence against women as a vulnerable gender. Far from being objective entities, nationality, gender or race represent ideological and stereotyped pieces of a dominant discourse oriented to dominate the *Other* who exhibits a risk for the patriarchal society. Methodologically speaking, reality only can be digested through the lens of subjectivity, so for these interviewed housekeepers, the reality seems to be what they remind, not necessarily as the factual things are. For this, memory is crucial to understand their biography and how it is mutually constituted in their respective environment. As stated, we opted for the technique of life story to unravel the contradictory or repressed emotions interviewees had. Sometimes people are unfamiliar with the inner-world or likely lie to protect their status quo. Thus, life story was the selected technique to work (Atkinson, 1998; Bluck and Habermas, 2000). Three main axes organise the research: the motivations behind housekeepers, their daily problems in inter-department relations and the future professional expectances. These conceptual axes are shaped by for clear-cut variables: *job satisfaction, relations with the working colleagues, guest relationship* (public sphere), and *relationship with herself (auto perception), and with the inner circle (private sphere)*. All selected housekeepers not only are in close contact with their guest but also they have surely advocated their client's satisfaction. We focused on the following three main topics.

First and foremost, we focused on how the interviewee gets the job and what are their motivations for the years to come. Secondly, we asked furtherly on their relationships with male colleagues as well as how they perceive their wages respecting to men. Thirdly, the interviews were oriented to understand their relations with guests. Finally, we centred efforts in understanding their inmate life, their connection with children and husbands. The information was complemented by several informal interviews achieved through the website or by phone. Evoking the seminal studies authored by Krippendorff (2018), the content analysis was used as the main method to interpret the resulting findings.

## 5 Research findings

At first look, it is noteworthy to mention that the housekeeping managers we consulted were all women. This point is in line with the study done by Rollins (1985), who held that women often looked to get jobs dedicated to domestic work. In this token, in consonance with Butler (2011) and Adib and Guerrier (2003), all consulted housekeeper were women as well. The eight interviewees were Argentineans ranging from 25 to 50 years old. While six were working to the Housekeeping department at the time of the interview, the other two were placed in other positions.

### 5.1 *Psychological motivations*

The interviewed women manifested overtly that they were in quest of a formal job, and this was the reason behind their decision to work at a luxury hotel. A formal job means not only stable working hours but also higher wages and other working benefits. Although they showed to have a motivation linked to profit motives, no less true was that they were not previously trained in the task to perform. Mary (57 years old) tells us,

“I went to a job interview recommended by a friend and to my surprise, I got the job immediately without any formal requirements or previous education. The establishment gave me full training for me to deal with clients, following the strict protocols of the hotel, as well as in the course of actions before emergencies as fires or disasters. I loved this training because they were delivered by experts.”

The above-noted excerpt coincides with other testimonies such as Yanel (32 years old) who said, “*I have never imagined working as a housekeeper if you ask me. I was enough time looking for a job, I left my resume in various databases. When I have been contacted by the Hotel, I accepted because the pay was great*”. Karina (31 years old) acknowledges that she accepted the job given her two daughters, and the higher wages luxury hotels pay in contrast to other hotels. Lastly, Perla (37 years old) has developed an ambiguous position. At a first glimpse, she widely recognises the pay is better and this was the key factor to decide to move to this new job, however, as she alerts, “*hopefully I would not like working in this all my life*”.

Over the decades, the domestic environment served as a fertile ground to educate future housekeepers. Needless to say, this expertise was not taught at universities or the tourism-related syllabuses. In the threshold of time, this lack of formality led invariably to a pejorative image of housekeeping as a serious profession. To some extent, a much deeper sentiment of sexism, which historically straddled all spheres of the tourism industry, situated women as naturally inherited to the home and domestic work. To the

formal knowledge, which is taught at higher educational establishments, it is important to add an informal knowledge –like housekeeping– which is pressed (if not marginalised) towards the periphery of the industry (Brownell, 1994). This happens because knowledge production is orchestrated according to a fixed hierarchy of professions which is culturally conditioned. Those professions that are usually better paid (such as lawyers or engineers) not necessarily are more important for society than others as a housekeeper, doctor, policeman or fight fighter, rather they are over-valorised because they protect the interests of the ruling elite (Eriksson and Li, 2008). Therefore, we have found that the training is explicitly given by the establishments in all interviewed housekeepers. In consonance with Hochschild (1983) who coins the term engineering of private feelings, housekeepers are socially introduced through the articulation of a protocol which regulates the interaction with guests. This process of training implies a much wider professionalisation of emotions that controls the self, a process which was extensively described by Hochschild (1983) in his works. In sum, the evidence –to here– validates the hypothesis that the process of training legitimates the articulation of disciplinary mechanisms which situates the candidates into a specific job –with rights and duties- but always subject to males’ discipline. From that moment onwards, each establishment intrudes in the intimacy of the candidates moulding their expectancies, hopes and fears. As Katz (2001) observed, hotels often treat housekeepers as children who urgently need further education and socialisation. Though this cosmology, they are strongly subordinated to a marginal situation within the company. Two of the interviewees manifested their decision not to keep at the hotel –doing this- all their lives. By paraphrasing Tucker and Boonabaana (2011), the training process only resolves part of the problem. In what position the candidate will be placed, but at a closer look, it fails to develop the necessary conditions for the candidate commits with the task –at least in the long-run. In the training areas of hotels only a small portion of workers dominate or keep proficiency in English or any other foreign language. This seems to be particularly troublesome for house-keeping staff which is often circumscribed not to interact with the guest. Other hotel positions access to a privileged situation with higher wages or less working hours because of their closeness to the guest. The next section debates the potential conflicts of interests, risks or climate of discontent that involves daily to housekeepers at luxury hotels in Buenos Aires city.

## 5.2 *Labour conflicts and risks*

Housekeepers at luxury hotels are subject to a climate of depersonalisation as well as great competence while they are pushed to situations of psychological distress, discontent and conflict. Seven of the interviewees said overtly that they are daily pressed to shorten the average of time housekeeping spent per room.

*“I am strongly pressed to clean as many rooms as I can in shorter periods. But this implicit rule applies for all us”* (Clara 35 years old). In this respect, risky tasks are accepted since these women do not want to confront with their respective managers. Paula (27 years old) acknowledges that *“if you accept a risky task –as cleaning a window at height using a ladder, you opt to run a risk. My co-workers sometimes did it, but beyond this decision lies the needs of complacency (respecting to managers)”*. Per Andy (23 years old), rooms should be cleaned following strict and faster timeframes. Any glitch or any detail may very well affect the well functioning

of the hotel. *“Guests check out and in all the time, some delays disorganise the planned cleaning program. For that reason, our managers exert pressure for us to be efficient and faster”*. The same testimony gives Karina (31 years old) who tells us *“in rooms where there is a constant stream of different occupants, straightforward operations are a must.”*

Many of the risks these housekeepers face range from occupational accidents to higher probabilities of intoxication by constant exposition to cleaning products. As Perla (37 years old) reminds *“We run risks all the time, commonly to be sick. We are trained to follow security protocols to decrease the chances of getting a disease or serious illness. Our colleagues at the staff desk tell us what were the states of health of guests at the time of checking out or in”*.

Some seminal papers authored by Buchanan et al. (2010), Krause and Arias (2015) and Sanon (2014) show how Hotel Housekeepers are a vulnerable group of workers at risk for ill-health in view of the exposure of musculoskeletal, biological, chemical and psychosocial hazards which often managers fail to contain. Per the information gathered, interviewed housekeepers do not receive paper mask or other protective clothing to contain virus outbreaks as occurred in 2010 with Swine Flu or SARS. What is more important, Lee et al. (2014) highlight that employees working in the housekeeping and other departments also regularly shoulder physical burden linked to awkward posture, or forceful excretion without mentioning the emotional fatigue associated to labour characterised by competition or where the subject is working under great pressure. Here two assumptions should be done. On one hand, housekeepers strongly believe that they are worthier when they earn more money. This situation ushers them into exploitative jobs where they should work excessive hours. On another, housekeepers voluntarily start to work in jobs that place their security in jeopardy (Oxenbridge and Lindegaard Moensted, 2011).

Among the labour disputes at luxury hotels, the information reveals that housekeepers are automatically fired when they reject to change their weekly rest day or when someone announces her wedding. This is exactly the case of Andy and Mary. Though in different circumstances, both were legally abused and exploited in view of a flexibilised law which allows managers to make these decisions without workers union meddling. Andy lost her job because she manifested her wedding while Mary was fired because she rejected to change her rest day. *“They, managers, forced me to take vacation time in place of wedding leave. Since I did not accept the two weeks I was fired and duly compensated for the worked days. Another aspect that led them to make this decision was the possibility I will be pregnant at any future day”*.

Broadly speaking, consulted participants evinced to have a good relationship with their managers as well as with their guests. Some of them, as indicated above, said that the guest-housekeeper contact is occasional. Most certainly, these housekeepers internalised the working pressure as business-as-usual interposing they earn higher wages respecting other hotel housekeepers as a stick and carrot strategy ideally orchestrated by the patriarchal rule (Thompson and Holt, 2004). Table 1 summarises the risks enumerated by interviewees during the research. We evaluated the type of risk as well as its repetition in the housekeeper’s discourse.

**Table 1** Risky situations declared by participants

<i>Description of risk</i>	
Distress	7
Sickness (muscle-skeleton problems, infections, so forth.)	8
Physical or mental exhaustion	8
Dismissal	5
Sexual harassment	1

*Source:* Authors

In regards to the male colleagues and gender equality, we failed to come to the survey into fruition simply because all of them worked in the Maintenance Department. Hence, the questions oriented to *wage equality* were not done. Only two interviewees anticipated that men were recruited in housekeeping but that wages are equal between males and female workers. It is important to remind that the Hotel Housekeeping Department is mostly represented by women.

## 6 Labour expectation

As expected, interviewees do not want their daughters to follow the same legacy. They work hard today so that their daughters can study at university or earn a university graduate. Having said this, housekeepers see their job as a frustration only tolerable by the earned wages. In any case, they wish a better future for their offspring. This is understood taking into consideration the several frustrations housekeepers are going through today. To some extent, the social upward is a point to discuss here. Mary answered that her mother worked for long years as a domestic maid. In part, in she felt on top of the world when she was contracted at a luxury hotel in the past days, but now she wants her daughters to go to the university to have a better future. The case of Andy is pretty different because she earned a degree accredited as a librarian, but the lack of opportunities and the urgency to get a job pressed her to accept to work at this hotel. She dreams working as librarian someday and work hard today for her daughter have the chance to earn some academic degree in a no so later future.

It is interesting to hear Karina's story, who is the daughter of a public employee and a truck driver. Per her viewpoint, *"I want to go out from here... this has no future, I rather want to study and go university to experience more economic prosperity. I do not like to spend my days as a mere maid, or a housekeeper. I do not want this for my children.* However, not all testimonies are so eclectic. Yanel goes on to say *"if you ask me, I recommended two sisters and a friend for this job, but for my daughters, I feel the best option is going to university"*.

To here, we have discussed and presented the main topics derived from the interviewees as they gradually evolved. To cut the long story short, the evidence reaffirms the previously published works authored by Knox (2011) and Anthonisz (2014), who from different perspective argued convincingly that originally housekeepers tend to qualify their job as acceptable, but when the fieldworker goes further through a much deeper sphere of their inner-world (digging), this exhibits a demoralising job which is combined by repetitive protocols with less psychological enhancement.

## 7 Conclusions

The main goals of this research centred on the needs of unearthing a silenced sector from the dust of oblivion; so to speak, an assortment of female workers, who work hard and are invisible. They are often pressed to work excessive hours and are passively subject to the decision of higher groups allocated on the top of the hierarchical pyramid. Such a process of subordination leads housekeepers to follow mechanised protocols to deal with guests, as well as plays a marginal role in the cultural production of their subjectivities. In view of the evidence, this research concludes that one of the original motivations to be recruited as house-keepers depend on the urgency of getting a temporal job while other opportunity arises. The access of luxury hotels granted them better-paid wages, a Social Welfare Fund or payments to social security, paid holidays, and different leaves without mentioning the free training they often receive. Nonetheless, these palpable benefits are accompanied by problems such as cases of sexual harassment, gender inequality, working excessive hours or under extreme pressure or risky situations where they are in danger. Last but not least, their expectations seem to be at least clear. The interviewed housekeepers evaluate their job as something temporal and are not proud of their profession. Rather, they emphasise the needs their daughter take another path. It is of paramount importance to clarify that this exploratory research shows some methodological limitations and cannot be extrapolated to broader universes. The obtained outcomes are not statistical representative and should be complemented with future approaches.

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