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The Behind Closed Doors Study

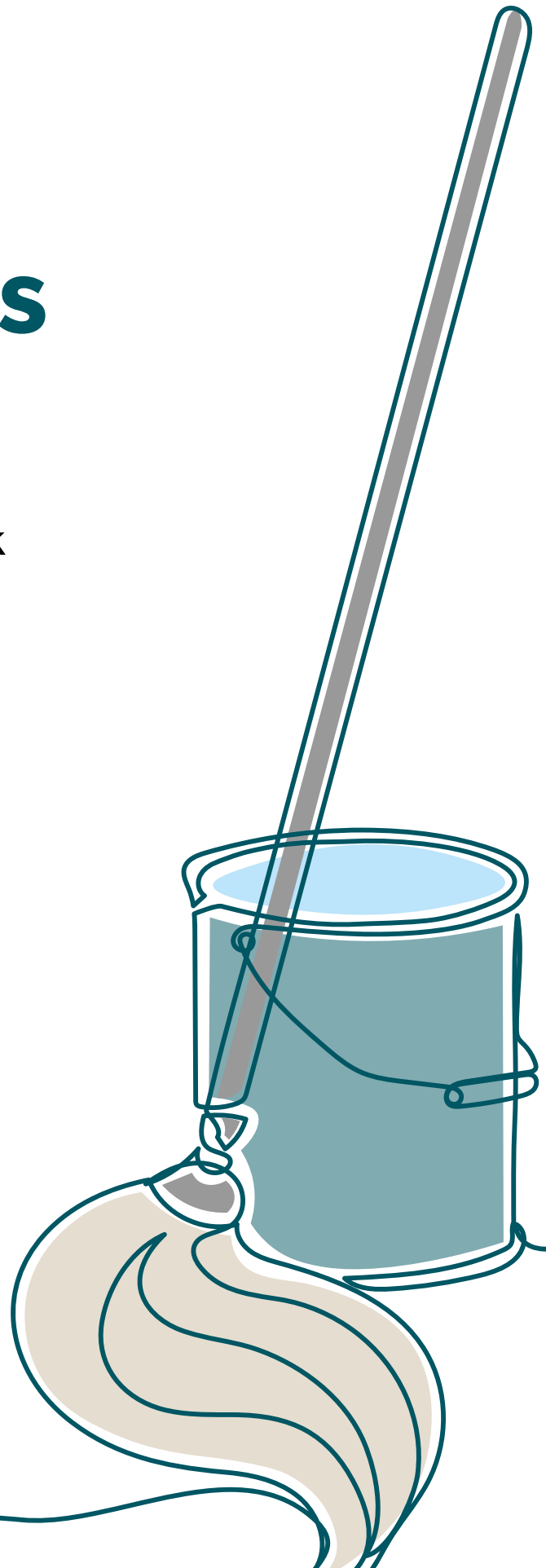
Making domestic cleaning work
visible and promoting its value
through research

Findings from a research study on the
experiences of domestic cleaners

Dr Nicola Chanamuto

University of Lincoln

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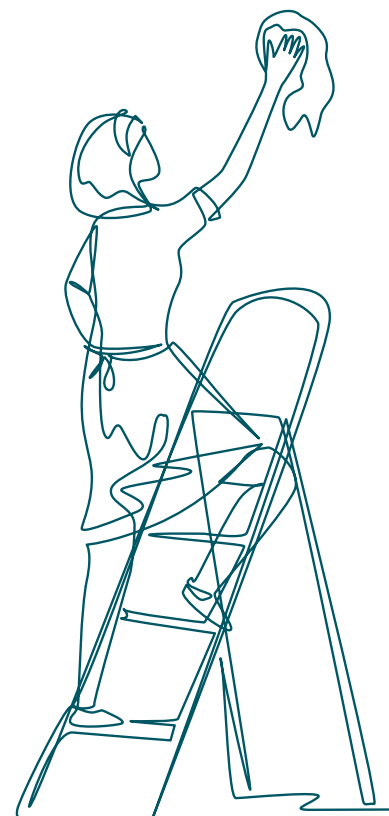
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Acknowledgements



The Behind Closed Doors study

This report presents key findings from the Behind Closed Doors study, a doctoral research study conducted at the University of Lincoln between 2018 and 2020.

The study responded to the challenge that while domestic cleaners play a central role in caring for clients and their homes, the complex realities of this work are not fully understood or acknowledged.

Cleaning involves a variety of different skills, including decision-making and discretion, and yet it is devalued in society. Cleaners should not be seen as low-skilled workers but should instead be recognised for the service they provide.

The purpose of the Behind Closed Doors study was to learn about the lives of a group of foreign-born women who had migrated to the UK and were working as domestic cleaners in Lincoln, a small city in the Midlands region. Most research on cleaning in the UK has taken place in big cities.

These women are part of a global workforce of over 75.6 million domestic workers. Many domestic workers worldwide are hidden and work cash-in-hand, with much of the sector unregulated. Research looking at domestic cleaners is important at a time when there is a focus in politics on reducing migration to the UK.

The Behind Closed Doors study looked at:

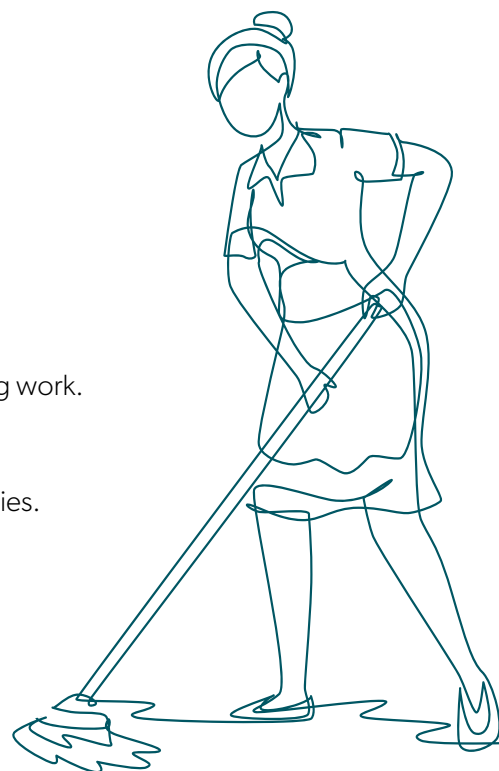
- How migrant women become involved in domestic cleaning work.
- What kind of opportunities and challenges are associated with cleaning work.
- What migrant women feel about cleaning.
- How migrant women balance their paid work with caring for their families.
- How cleaning itself involves caring for others.

Domestic cleaning as care

Cleaning work is a caring activity. Cleaners care for people, homes, and society in general. The work that cleaners do also supports people in achieving their social and economic activities. For example, domestic services make all other forms of work possible, by alleviating the burden of housework for individuals and families.

Reliance on domestic cleaning services also enables many people to live with dignity and independence, contributing to the care of older people within communities.

Although cleaners care for people and possessions, their contributions are often undervalued in society. Working behind closed doors, often without formal employment contracts, cleaners are largely hidden from public view. Given the lack of understanding of the physical and emotional demands of their work, cleaners are seldom recognised as skilled workers.



Reaching out to migrant women who clean

The findings are based on the accounts of 11 women, aged between 20 - 50 years old, with experience of domestic cleaning work. Most of the women had been resident in the UK for around 10 - 13 years at the time of the study.

Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and work history timelines, the study explored their experiences of work and family life. All the names in this report have been changed to protect participants' privacy.

Figure 1. Who are the women featured in this study?



Ewa, former cleaner now working for a charity, Polish



Helena, former cleaner now working in local government, Polish



Wanda, self-employed domestic cleaner, Hungarian



Cynthia, self-employed domestic cleaner, Nigerian



Grace, self-employed domestic cleaner and part-time carer, Nigerian



Berna, small cleaning business owner, Polish



Felicja, small cleaning business owner, Polish



Aurelia, cleaner for a small company, Polish



Roza, cleaner for a small company, Polish



Archara, self-employed cleaner, Thai



Danika, self-employed cleaner, Polish

The women's experiences do not necessarily represent those of all cleaners in the city, but they reveal both the opportunities and challenges associated with this work and how these change over time.

The women were of different nationalities, which means that the findings are not particular to one ethnic or national group.



Cleaning as part of the migratory journey

The women in this study had come to the UK for various reasons, including looking for work, seeking an adventure, moving with a partner, coming to study, or a combination of these factors. Some of the women had struggled to find suitable work in their country of origin, but they were also motivated to move by other factors (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Participants' reasons for coming to the UK



Most of the participants were educated to college or university level when they moved to the UK. When they were young, they had imagined themselves in professional occupations in their homeland, but this had not happened.

“

To be honest, looking back I had quite a comfortable life in Poland. My parents are very supportive of me, of my job. I didn't even have a student debt, we don't pay for university in Poland ... So to be honest, I had a good life ... How I felt doing [cleaning work], I've always tried to do my work as best as I could... and I always felt... I must admit, there is that like stigma attached, 'oh yeah, you could do better in life than just a cleaning'.”

Ewa, former self-employed cleaner



The women in this sample did not plan to work as cleaners but had taken up this work in the UK because of specific difficulties. These included being unable to find their desired job, barriers to accessing childcare to enable them to work longer hours, difficulties meeting English language requirements for certain jobs, or a lack of confidence in their English language ability.

They described feeling misunderstood by locally born people, who they believed might look down on them for doing cleaning work.

“

House cleaning is... people just talk to you, they look at you, like 'why is she doing this?'.”

Grace, self-employed cleaner

This study found that the women's work trajectories were not linear. Instead, their career pathways had been shaped by shocks (such as bereavement, relationship breakdown or unemployment), turning points (such as having children) and repetition (such as returning to previous employers).

Reasons for entering and leaving cleaning work

The participants in this study took up cleaning work for a variety of different reasons. Understanding why women who migrate to the UK subsequently take up cleaning work is important for facilitating effective support for this group.

The findings demonstrate that it is important not to stereotype foreign-born women or treat them as one homogenous group. Instead, understanding cleaners' migratory journeys and work histories across the life course helps us take a holistic view rather than a momentary snapshot.

Some of the women interviewed had since moved out of cleaning work or were planning to do so. However, cleaning was still described as a back-up strategy, even for those who had moved into professional jobs. This reflects their feelings of insecurity in the context of the local labour market.

“

...well, never say never, I would say! So [cleaning is] not something I would say, 'never ever'. Because it wouldn't be the kind of job that... I don't know how to say... If I had to, I don't know... I don't think I will, but if things happen, if I lost my job and lost all my income, it would probably be the quickest way and the easiest way to survive.”

Ewa, former self-employed cleaner

This research shows that, although they face hardships, cleaners do not see themselves as victims. The women in this study were often ambitious and able to find ways of making a success of their cleaning work, for example, by starting their own business.

“

I'm getting older, you know? In ten years' time I won't be able to run around like a headless chicken like I'm doing now, because ... I won't be able to sleep four hours a night and still function during the day in ten years' time ... I have to pay for everything for myself. So I have to establish something.”

Berna, cleaning business owner

These cleaners were aspirational and had hopes for the future. Their ambitions included: building a successful business or getting their dream job, moving to a new house, getting married, visiting relatives overseas and seeing their children do well at school. National studies show that these desires reflect those of the general population in the UK.

Doing cleaning work also enabled those women who were mothers to care for their children, in the absence of affordable and accessible childcare, which would have supported them to work in different jobs.

“

I have to find something that suits me. So I can pick them up from school. And with the company, bigger company, I really struggled with childcare. Because of the traffic – I've been a driver [of the agency company car] ... we, were stuck in the traffic. I had to ring my friend to pick my boys up from school, and they stayed at hers, and it wasn't alright.”

Roza, agency cleaner

If cleaning is only considered a 'dead end job', it will continue to be devalued in society. Instead, cleaning work should be rewarded with fair wages, reliable in terms of employers and contracts, and recognised as essential to our communities.

Cleaners should be supported to stay in cleaning work if they wish, which includes having opportunities to progress within the sector. However, they should also be supported to access alternative work.



Cleaners provide care in their communities

Cleaners see themselves as taking care of British society, but due to the hidden nature of their work, their contributions to local communities often go unnoticed and under-valued.

For older clients particularly, cleaners provide emotional as well as practical support. The women in this study connected with lonely and vulnerable clients through their work, although they were not social care workers. For those who are living alone or feeling isolated, a visit from a domestic cleaner can be a valuable connection to the wider community.

“

I thought in the beginning they just, you know, need a cleaner ... when I was there at first sometimes I thought maybe I shouldn't chat so much, but after I realised that's what they liked.”

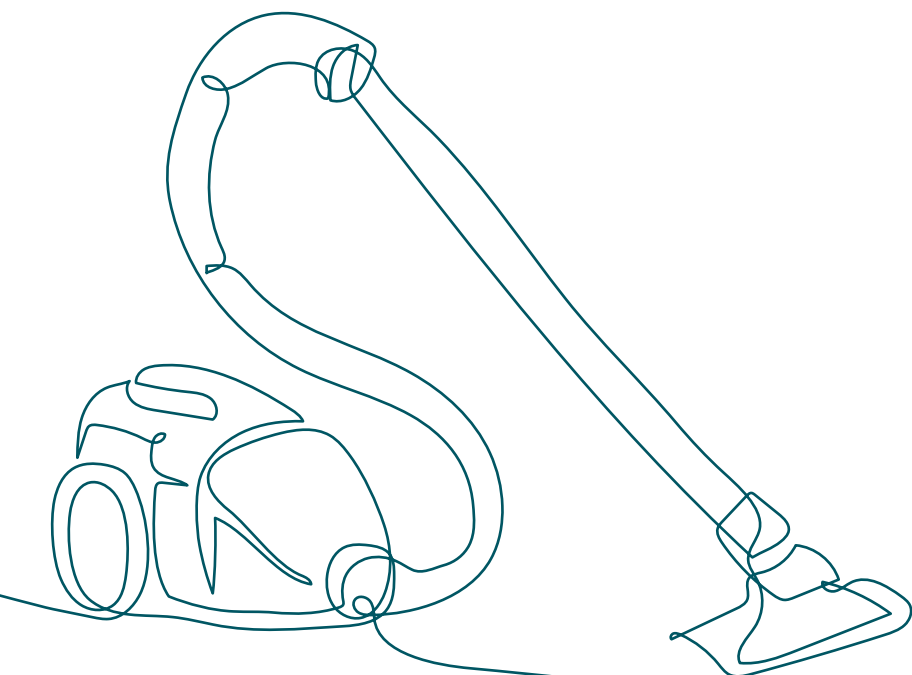
Wanda, self-employed cleaner

“

I've been to two ladies this morning, [who] I'm looking after ... I've got loads of old people now. So I feel like I'm looking after them. Because some of them really struggle with just everyday life. So I can make the beds for them, I can change the bedding. Things like that they cannot do ...

They are just... they try to share... they are very lonely ... So I'm going there for three hours every Friday, and I'm really talking around there. Because it's a very clean house, they just want to talk with me [laughs]. They ask me about my family, they ask me about living in Poland...”

Roza, agency cleaner



The social value of language learning

It is often assumed that domestic cleaners are physically and socially isolated and have few opportunities to practice their English language skills. However, some of the women in this study reported practising their English with clients and co-workers.

“

The most English I've ever learnt it was in [cleaning agency]. Because I spend loads and loads of time with [co-worker]. And she speak with a proper [local] accent [laughs]. Sometimes when she speak quick, she speak fast or she speak them short cuts, slang, I didn't understand at all! [Laughs] And she knew I didn't understand her, by the look of her face! [Laughs] And she start to speak proper English! And they were very curious about the Polish traditions, like Polish food. I always bring something so they can try.”

Roza, agency cleaner

Alongside providing flexible, free and accessible English language learning courses, we should also recognise the value of informal, conversational language practice between migrant-learners and native speakers. Rather than considering migrant women a drain on resources because of their language learning needs, we should recognise the role cleaners play in providing conversational company for older people.



Caring for cleaners themselves

Cleaners also need care. This can be provided through workplace protections, fair wages, and better regulation of the sector.

While cleaners of migrant backgrounds fulfill a valuable role in their local communities, they are not always valued themselves.

Migrant households have care needs, which may be different to those of non-migrant households.

Migrant women can face additional barriers to achieving their goals, including discrimination, language proficiency, immigration rules restricting the ability to work, and commitments related to transnational family life (families living across two or more countries).



While we know that clients hire cleaners because they are time-poor, the pressures on cleaners themselves are less well understood. The women in this study balanced their paid work with caring for their children and running their own households, which could be stressful.

Challenges for those who were mothers included the uncertain schedules of cleaning agencies which meant they could unexpectedly be kept late at work, inadequate local public transport systems making moving around the city difficult, the inability to afford formal childcare from their wages, and having to take last-minute jobs in the evenings or weekends (for example, end of tenancy cleans).

Cleaners are required to work around clients' needs and arrange their schedules accordingly, which can be challenging. In many cases, flexibility from employers and clients (for example, agencies allowing cleaners to adjust their working hours to suit their personal circumstances) made a significant difference to cleaners' ability to keep a job.

“

Housekeeping you have a lot of challenges because the clients, some of them will just talk to you anyhow, because they're paying you eight pounds or ten pounds to come and clean their house, per hour. They take advantage.”

Grace, self-employed cleaner

The importance of respecting cleaning as real work

Larger-scale campaigns are vital to ensure the regulation of cleaning agencies and prevent exploitation in the form of unreasonable workloads, illegal low wages and a lack of physical and human resources resulting in unsafe working conditions.

If we do not recognise domestic cleaning as 'real' work, we cannot ensure cleaners' safety.

Some challenges encountered by the cleaners in this study included: the non-payment or late payment of wages, unexpected changes to working hours, pressure to use chemicals without protective clothing, driving dangerous company cars, sexual harassment, racist treatment, unreasonable workloads which prevent a 'job well done', and specific physical health conditions caused by manual work. These issues were particularly felt by those working for cleaning agencies and those doing cash-in-hand casual work.

Work pathways

While it is important to see cleaning as care, it is nevertheless a form of employment. Caring about cleaners means acknowledging and addressing the societal and welfare conditions that contribute to their vulnerability.

Cleaning should not be seen as either a trap or a stepping stone to better work. The findings of this study suggest that the reality is more complex.

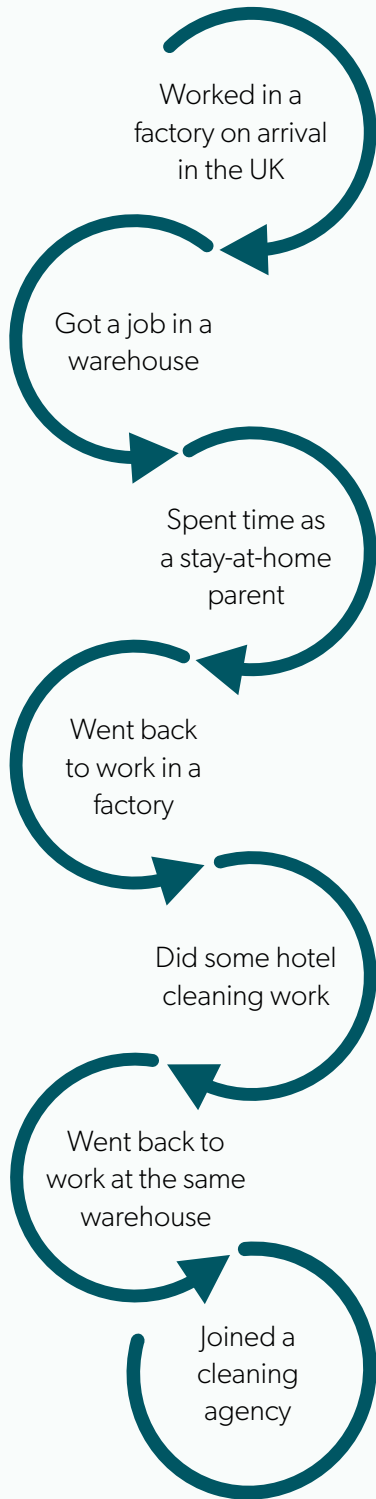
Women migrants may move in and out of cleaning work in response to shocks, milestones, and life events. They may feel stuck or may manage to navigate the labour market to achieve their goals.

For most of the women in this study, cleaning work was one of many jobs they had taken up since arriving in the UK. Some women felt that cleaning was better than their previous jobs, for example, working in a factory. For others, having to take up cleaning work was a shock and not something they had expected when they chose to migrate to the UK.

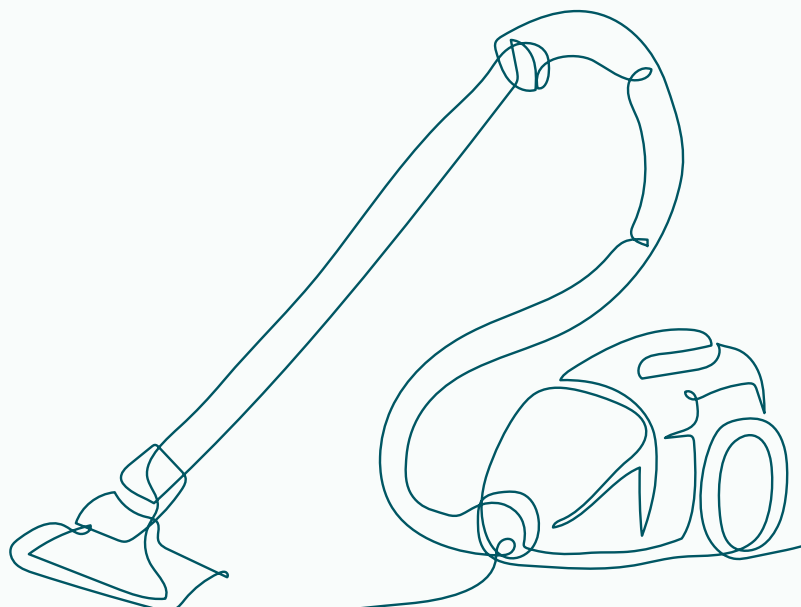
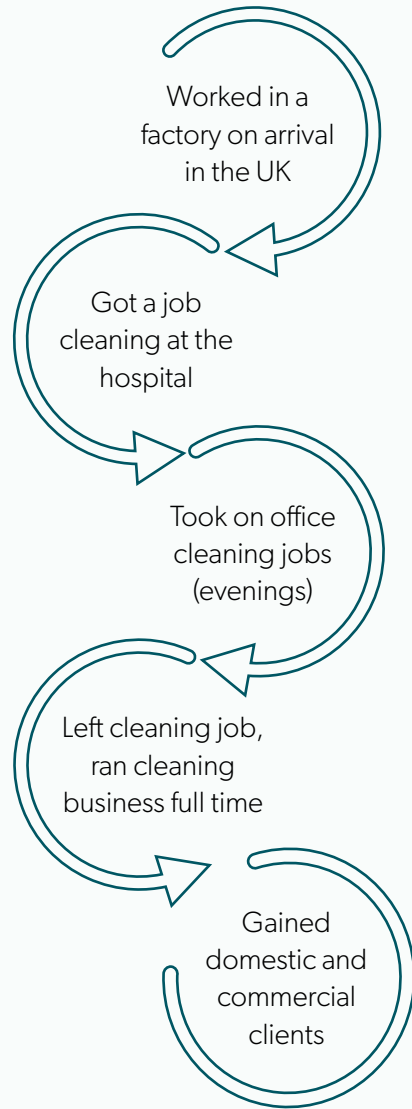


Figure 3. Examples of participants' work history

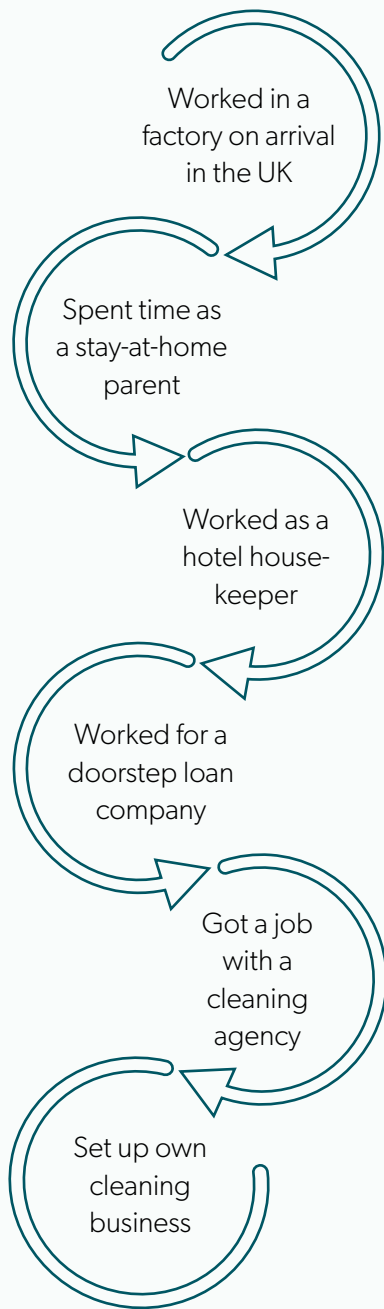
Roza's timeline:



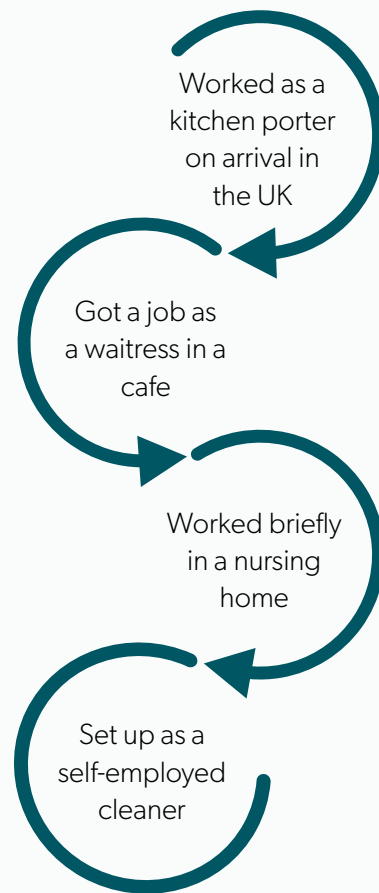
Berna's timeline:



Felicja's timeline:



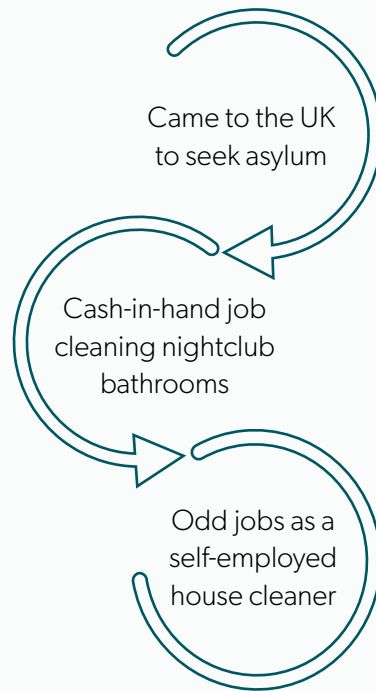
Wanda's timeline:



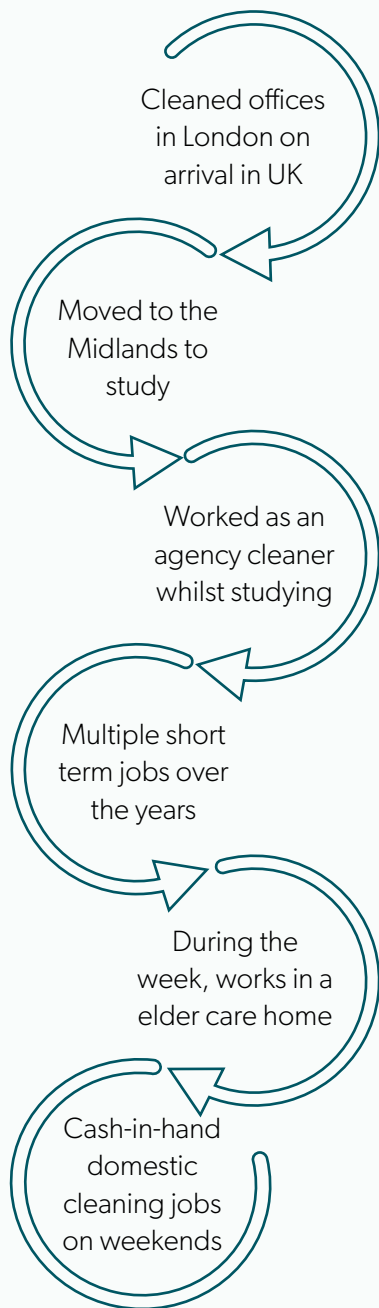
Aurelia's timeline:



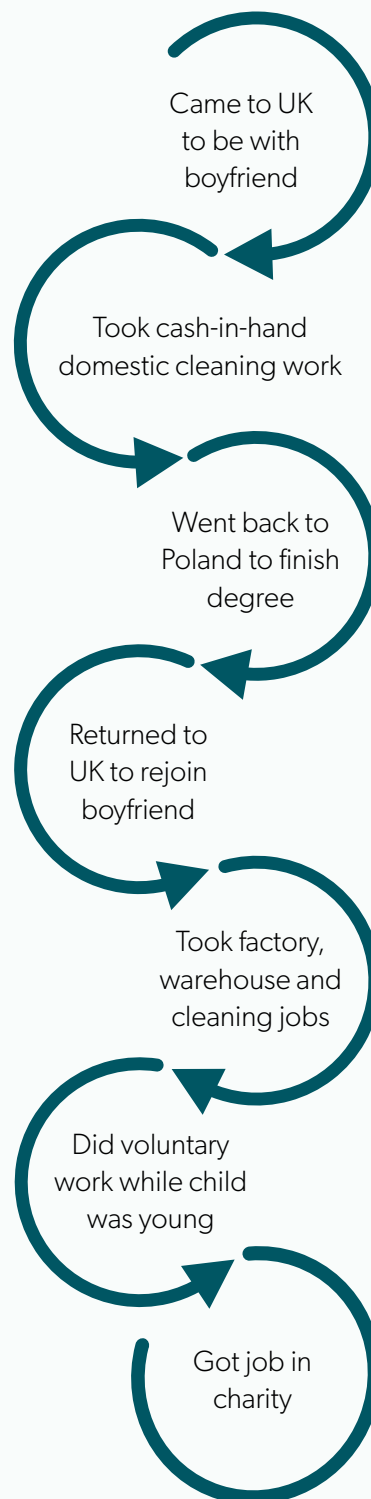
Cynthia's timeline:



Grace's timeline:



Ewa's timeline:



As the work histories (above) show, women arriving in the UK from other countries may move through a series of low-wage, insecure jobs. Only two of the 11 women in this sample had since gained professional jobs: one working for a charity and one in local government.

For those who wish to stay in cleaning, more can be done to create pathways for progression within the cleaning industry (for example through the development of formal qualifications).

While formal recognition of their skills was desirable to some women, others valued the informality of cleaning work. For the latter group, informal advice and support services are particularly important. This might involve flexible drop-in sessions or outreach through community-based groups such as supplementary language schools.

Goals and aspirations

Key barriers preventing the women achieving their goals included: time poverty and exhaustion due to working long hours in a physically demanding job, unaffordable childcare, difficulties speaking or understanding English, a lack of support for the conversion of foreign qualifications and an absence of opportunities for professional progression. Research shows that these factors especially affect women and that if addressed, would be beneficial to all women achieving their career aspirations.

Figure 4. Challenges to achieving career goals faced by cleaners:



Figure 5. Things that helped cleaners achieve their goals:



Being self-employed or owning a business helped some of the women to gain more control over their time and working conditions. Bespoke benefits advice, personal coaching and small business support could further enable these women to pursue their financial, personal, and practical goals.

The importance of public services

A range of public services enable or prevent women cleaners from being able to work and care for their families. For example, inadequate bus services or traffic problems can make it more difficult for cleaners to work in villages surrounding the city. Poor street lighting might make working at certain times less safe.

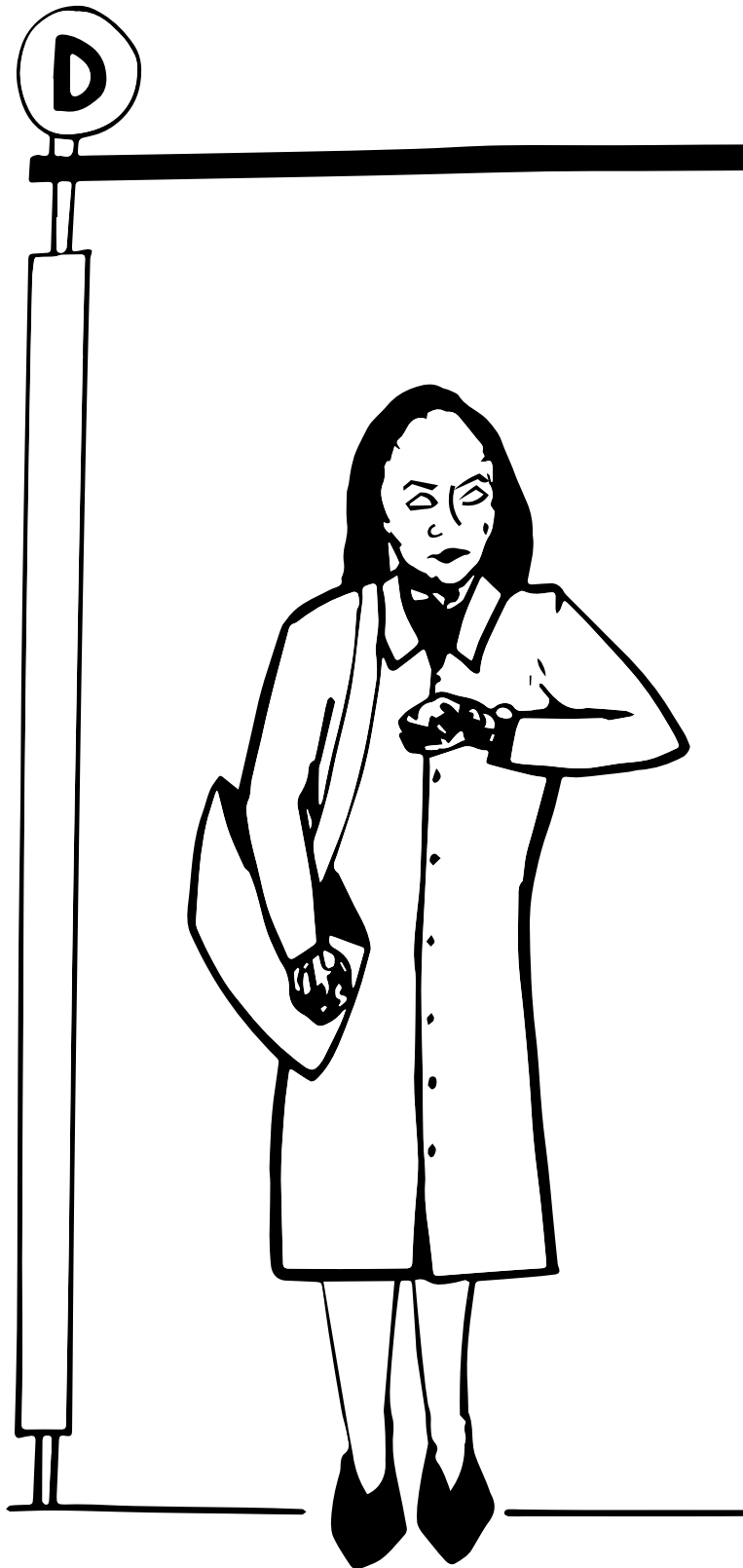
The location, accessibility and opening hours of public spaces such as schools, car garages, doctors' surgeries and pharmacies all affect how easily cleaners can balance their paid work and unpaid caring responsibilities.

A key concern for the cleaners was the lack of flexible, affordable childcare, which would enable them to work without worrying about their children.

“

[A woman] sent me a message on Facebook, who lives in [suburb], and she said 'can you do two hours?' and I said, 'er, sorry, no, I can't get to...', it's not worth it, it's my problem, but it takes half an hour to get there [on the bus], and half an hour to get back... Even if you have a car, it takes half an hour also.'"

Wanda, self-employed cleaner



Recommendations for change

The women who participated in this study struggled with the stigma and lack of value afforded to cleaning work. Despite this, they believed that without their services all other work would be impossible. Migrants' contributions to UK society often go unrecognised, and domestic cleaning is one such example.

The women in this study experienced racism in their daily lives, both from clients and strangers. This made them feel unwelcome in the city and in the UK generally.

Even though they had experienced hostility, these women had successfully settled and invested in their local communities. In many cases, they had formed

supportive and positive connections with people in their communities.

Based on this unique evidence about the lives of migrant women engaged in domestic cleaning, several recommendations are made about how their significant societal contributions can be better supported and sustained.

Local changes

Addressing the invisibility of migrant cleaners is vital, as is creating a local support infrastructure that is accessible for these otherwise marginalised women (including mothers).

Development of local support infrastructure for migrant communities could lead to better representation of the needs and contributions of various groups. This could take the form of increased financial and practical support for supplementary schools and grassroots community groups, or the growth of voluntary sector organisations based in the city.

By considering the experiences of a diverse sample, this study highlights variations in the migrant experience. Within any category of people, there are differences and similarities. This evidences the need for support tailored to specific communities, not only based on nationality but also according to employment type, length of stay and family composition.

Building trusting and respectful relationships is vital when seeking to understand the realities of different

people in the city. Those working in outreach and community engagement have an important role to play and should be representative of the population in all its diversity.

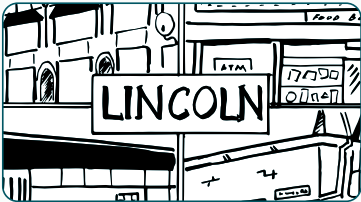
To raise the social value of cleaning work, hearing cleaners' voices is vital. This principle also underpins existing initiatives in the city, which seek to create spaces for migrant voices to be heard in creative ways, through photography, music and dance, for example. Formal consultation methods are not always suitable for those working long or antisocial hours.

The findings of this study are based on semi-structured interviews using a timeline tool. Creating timelines together can be a helpful way of understanding less-heard communities and could be supplemented with other creative visual methods.

Figure 6. Ways to make an impact locally:



Resource groups which serve and represent migrants in the city



Pursue an anti-racist agenda which educates, challenges and inspires



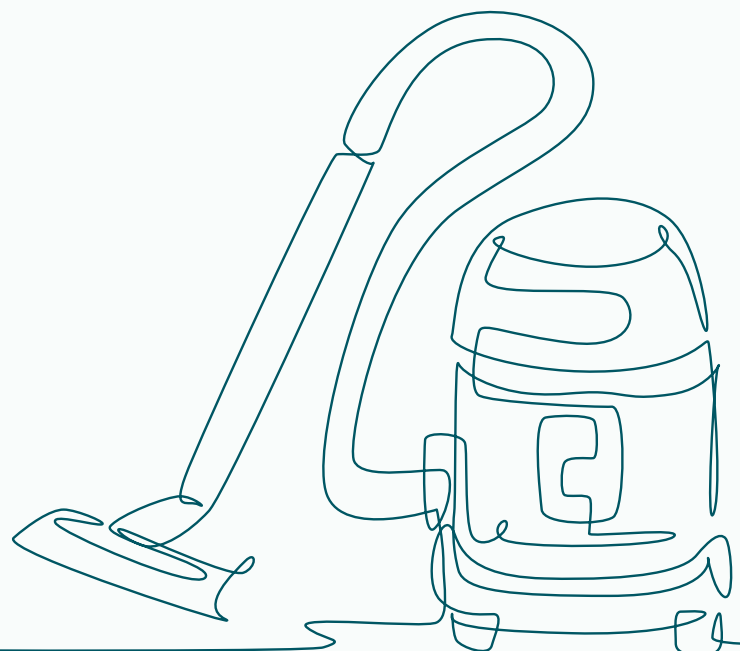
Acknowledge differences within and between migrant populations when planning services



Increase the diversity of decision-makers in public sector organisations



Find creative ways to hear and amplify cleaners' voices



National changes

Seeing cleaning as care is vital because it humanises the people doing this job, and gives us the opportunity to re-imagine how societies can better support their domestic cleaning workforce.

This research supports the campaigns of national and international advocacy organisations calling for greater dignity and better working conditions for live-out domestic workers. Such organisations have highlighted a lack of workplace protection and regulation, wage insecurity (which impacts access to social benefits) and specific physical health conditions experienced by cleaners. Recognising this is ever more important as anti-migration rhetoric intensifies at policy level.

Larger-scale campaigns are vital to lobby policy makers for regulation of cleaning agencies to prevent exploitation in the form of unreasonable workloads, illegal low wages and a lack of physical and human resources resulting in unsafe working conditions.

For some of the women in this study, the informal nature of cleaning work was a key benefit. Others, however, would have appreciated a route to qualification. An accredited qualification, also extended to those working in private homes, could lead to greater recognition of cleaners' skills and allow them to negotiate with employers.

Valuing cleaning work

Since this research took place, the global Covid-19 pandemic has turned a spotlight on the cleaning and hygiene industry, prompting debates about the value of this work and the treatment of those who perform it.

Many of the participants in this study were directly affected by the sudden drop in demand for domestic cleaning services during the early stages of the pandemic, in some cases, losing their entire income overnight. As successive lockdowns lifted, some of the women found themselves in high demand and were suddenly required to work extremely long hours to deliver deep cleans.

The post-pandemic era offers an opportunity to re-think how societies acknowledge and value work such as cleaning as an essential public health service and act of caregiving.

“

It's not something that I really wanted to do. But the situation asked me to do it. Because I also have to make a living ... Nobody wants to live like that. Nobody wants to do a job like that. Everybody wants to do a job where there will be dignity, there will be respect.”

Cynthia, self-employed cleaner

How to cite this report

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For more information on this study, contact:

Dr Nicola Chanamuto
nchanamuto@lincoln.ac.uk

