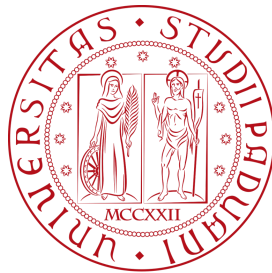


# UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PADOVA

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, LAW  
AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**Master's degree in European and Global Studies**



## WORKING CONDITIONS OF MIGRANT WOMEN IN PADUA'S CLEANING SECTOR

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## **Abstract**

The cleaning industry in Italy is growing and it is increasingly characterised by contracting and subcontracting dynamics that drive down the expenditure allocated to this item in public and private company budgets, such as universities, shopping centres and large corporations. Despite the sector's significance, very little research has been conducted on it. This study examines working conditions in the cleaning industry in Padua and it investigates whether there is a demand for migrant workers, particularly Nigerians, exploring the underlying reasons. The research is based on semi-structured interviews with cleaners and representatives from the ADL trade union, integrated by data analysis provided by the trade union and VenetoLavoro, the regional employment agency. The results indicate that, due to the very low wages and the prevalence of part-time contracts, often below 20 hours per week, this can be qualified as "low-income work", forcing workers to seek additional employment. Approximately half of the workforce has a migratory background, with a significant prevalence of women. The majority of workers come from Romania, Nigeria and Morocco. While Nigerian workers do not represent the largest nationality in this sector's workforce, they constitute a notable portion, particularly in relative terms. This study unveils exploitative dynamics within the sector and highlights the employment trajectories of Nigerian workers in Padua.



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## Introduction

Cleanness and dirt do not constitute only a material condition but they have a moral and social significance. It is tied up with a moral and social order with implications for prestige, work hierarchies, and social positioning. While dirt is essentially disorder, “matter out of place” (Douglas, 1966), cleanness is a founding act of our society. Despite its essential role, the cleaning activity remains largely invisible and undervalued: often characterized by precarious working conditions, low wages, and a lack of recognition for the workers who sustain it.

Considered as a non-core activity, enterprises, both public and private, outsource this service to specialised agencies. The cleaning industry in the province of Padua, like in many other regions, hosts a significant number of workers in this field, who often face precarious working conditions. However, studies examining the dynamics of this industry in Italy, especially in relation to migrant workers and on a gender perspective, are still limited. The existing international literature has established a strong connection with the broader processes of globalisation and labour precarisation (Aguilar & Herod, 2006; Hughes, K. D., & Bernhardt, A., 1999). The discussion also extends to the role of unions within the sector (Knotter, 2017; Wills, 2008;), as well as its link to the academic field of “dirty work” (Simpson & Simpson, 2018; Houges, 1962; Duffi, 2007). However, within the Italian context, research on the cleaning industry, its key aspects and the working conditions of its workforce remains underdeveloped. This sector, which has witnessed an increasing presence of migrant workers, has not been the subject of adequate analysis, particularly regarding its intersection with gender and race. While some migrant groups, such as Ukrainians, Romanians and Moldovans, have consolidated their presence in Italy’s domestic labor market and have been the focus of in-depth studies, African migrant workers, especially women, are still underrepresented in the literature. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by offering a detailed examination of the working conditions within the cleaning industry in the province of Padua. By doing so, it aims to connect

this issue with broader discussions on gender, migration, and in-work poverty. Furthermore, the study provides insight into the work of Sub-Saharan African women, shedding light on their experiences and the structural challenges they face within this labor market. Through this comprehensive approach, the research aspires to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding migrant labor in Italy, particularly for African women in the cleaning industry located in the province of Padua.

This industry has developed as a result of the progressive externalisation of this service by private enterprises and public administrations and it has witnessed a rapid growth during early 2000 (Herod & Aguiar 2006). Thus, one key aspect is the outsourcing strategy, which, although theoretically meant at fostering specialisation, drives costs down with considerable consequences on workers. Therefore, the study explores how contractor transitions affect workers, in terms of job stability, compensation, career progression, as well as the accrual of holidays and social contribution. Analysing workers' perspective on their labour experience, it explores whether their salary provides sufficient financial stability, and how they cope with these conditions. For instance, many workers in the cleaning industry face involuntary part-time contracts, and are forced to take on additional jobs to increase their earnings. However, this also results in fragmented working days, long time spent commuting, heightened stress level and overall reduced benefits.

Considered as a “dirty job” (Simpson & Simpson, 2018; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019) this job recruits a large portion of its workforce from the most vulnerable segments of the labour market (Herod & Aguiar 2006; Pedaci, 2016), such as less educated individuals, women and migrant workers. The intersectionality of racialisation, gender, migrant status and socio-economic background exacerbates the precariousness experienced by these workers. Indeed, migrant workers tend to concentrate in more precarious sectors, often involving manual labour, informal arrangements, poor wages, and little legal protection (Münz et al. 2007; Piore, 1979;



Castles & Miller, 2020). Therefore, the second research question is whether there is a prevalent demand for migrant workers for this job, given the poor working conditions and low salaries. Special emphasis is placed on Sub-Saharan African women, who in the last years have become more visible in this sector, especially in public facilities, such as the University of Padua. Understanding the workforce composition is crucial because it highlights the correlation between the working conditions and the workers. The prevalence of migrant workers in this sector can be explained by the limited employment opportunities, deriving from both individual and structural factors, such as the linguistic barriers, the lack of adequate competence or, on the contrary, the non-recognition of qualifications obtained abroad, as well as the structural racism. Moreover, migrant workers retain a limited bargaining power, as a result of structural vulnerability deriving from the link between residence permit and employment contract (Gray, 2004). This often results in the acceptance of unfavourable conditions and, at times, even exploitation.

Therefore, the cleaning enterprises grow, producing a combined sales volume of 4.2 billion euros, the competition exacerbates and the working conditions impoverish, the labour demand is filled by migrant workers.

To respond to these questions a mixed approach was used. The qualitative approach, through 12 semi-structured interviews with workers and union representatives, provided important information about the working conditions of this industry. This was also integrated with quantitative data from the regional employment agency VenetoLavoro, statistics from the grassroots union ADL and the trade union CGIL, as well as data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. Furthermore, to explore the composition of the workforce, data from VenetoLavoro played a crucial role, considering the socio-demographic characteristics of workers and the occupational trends of the past three years (from 2022 to 2024). However, these statistics indicate the number of new employment contracts in a given year, rather than the actual number of workers employed. As a result, while these data provide important insights into different sectors, including the

cleaning sector, precise data on the workforce remain unavailable. Indeed, obtaining accurate data on this industry proved to be challenging throughout the research.

During the research process, specific attention was given to the relationship between the researcher and the subjects of the research. In line with the debate developed in postcolonial and decolonial studies – that criticise the extractivist approach of Western researches while studying *subaltern*, racialized group, often from the Global South – this study aimed to assume a participatory approach with the involved parts, namely the grassroots union and the cleaners. The ongoing dialogue with both the ADL union and the workers not only has significantly enriched and redefined the research structure, enhancing awareness of the most relevant issues in the cleaning sector, but also it has deepened the overall depth and impact of this work. Moreover, union representatives contributed to the selection and recruitment of the sample. However, due to time constraints, workers' involvement was limited to interviews. Nonetheless, I hope to foster workers participation in future moments of public discussion in which workers can represent themselves.

To provide a comprehensive analysis of these issues, this study is structured as follows.

The first chapter presents a literature review on gender and migration, focusing on gender as a social construct (Beauvoir, 1953; Butler, 1990) and the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990). Additionally, it examines female labor migration, the concentration of migrant female workers in the reproductive labour, especially the domestic sector, (Christou & Kofman, 2022) as well as the increasing migration of skilled migrant workers and the contradictory class mobility they experience (Parrenas, 2020; Romens, 2022; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019; Bolzani et al. 2021).

The second chapter provides a context analysis, outlining contemporary female migrations in Italy, with a particular focus on Eastern Europe

migration and the immigration flows from Africa. It then examines the distribution of migrant women in the Italian labour market and challenges posed by immigration policies. Finally, it introduces outsourcing mechanisms, contract-based employment, and the cleaning industry.

The third chapter illustrates the research goal, the methodology used, including the sample composition and the interviews.

Chapter five and six present the research findings. The former provides an overview of the economic significance of the sector, highlights the most relevant parts of the National Collective Labour Agreement for Cleaning and Integrated/Multiservices, and explores the characteristics of the labour composition. Chapter six delves into the implications of outsourcing, low wages, physical and health problems, work life balance and the strategies, both individual and collective, adopted by migrant workers to navigate these conditions.

By pointing up the working conditions in the cleaning industry in Padua, particularly for Sub-Saharan African women, this study aims to contribute both academically and practically, as it enriches the discussion on gendered migration and labor precarity by addressing a sector and national group that have been largely overlooked in the Italian context. On a practical level, the findings may offer valuable insights for policymakers, labor unions, and advocacy groups, helping to inform policies that improve labor protections, address structural inequalities, and enhance migrant workers' rights.

# 1. Literature Review

## 1.1 Beyond borders: the gendered dimensions of migration

Gender is one of the key forms of differentiation within societies which interacts with other social divisions such as class, ethnicity, nationality, age, sexual orientation, disability and so on. A broad literature on international migration has highlighted the importance of incorporating gender relations into our understanding of migration processes. Adopting a gender perspective does not mean focusing exclusively on women, but focusing on inequalities and differences between and among men and women, and how gender as a social construct affects the structuring of the migratory path. This need does not stem from the fact that women globally make up around half of international migrants (UN, 2020), but also because gender can affect reasons for migrating, the decision of who will migrate, the social networks they use to move, experiences of integration and labour insertion in the destination country. Moreover, labour markets are often highly segmented and the possibility of women and men crossing borders may be restricted or opened up through gendered discourses, practices and regulations (Christou, Kofman, 2022).

Despite women making up around half of the migratory stock, their presence has been for a long time ignored and invisibilized. Gendered understanding of international migration emerged only in the 1970s and 1980s thanks to European and US feminist scholars such as Morokvasic (1975, 1984), Phizacklea (1983), Simon & Brettell (1986). Until then, mainstream neoclassic and structuralist literature was characterised by a *male bias* that assumed men's migratory experience as universal and neutral, thus neglecting female migration or depicting women as following men rather than as initiators of migration or moving as independent beings (Vianello, 2014). Feminist scholars aimed to address the invisibility of migrant women by recognizing and highlighting their active roles in personal and family migration, their economic and political contributions, their agency, and the gendered power dynamics inherent in migration

(*ibidem*). Morokvasic (1984) and Sassen (2000) analyse female migrations from a macroeconomic perspective linking globalisation and feminisation of wage labour both in the Global North and Global South.

Hence, in the 1990s there had been a paradigm shift to migration as a *gendered process* where gender reflected the representations and practices of femininity and masculinity, and the social relations between women and men. In this period, family and social networks assumed a central role in understanding the causes and modes of migration (Boyd, 1989). These studies have highlighted how the decision of migrating/not migrating can be influenced and determined by primary social relations, since households are the social units through which gendered norms are mediated between individuals and society (Will & Yeoh, 2000). On the other hand, in the destination countries households employ migrants as nannies, care workers and domestic helpers in the context of a segmented labour market. Therefore, migrant women are represented in the literature mainly as domestic and sex workers, both racialised and minorised in the hosting country (Bordogna, 2012).

The debate was enriched by the introduction of two central theoretical debates from gender studies: the debate about the *social construction of gender* and the debate about *intersectionality*. The book *The Second Sex* by the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, published in 1949, is widely regarded as a pioneering work that inspired the women's liberation movement and the study of gender. Her statement "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 1953 [1949]: 267) laid the foundations for the social constructivist perspective on sex and gender. This implies the assumption that "there is no essential, naturally prescribed gender binary, but that there are only different cultural constructions of gender" (Hagemann White, 1984: 230). Judith Butler expanded on the concept of gender as a social construct in her influential work *Gender Trouble* (1990). She introduced the idea of *gender performativity*, arguing that gender is not something one *is* but something one *does* through repeated actions, behaviours, and performances. She has highlighted the normative

belief in gender binarism and linked it to sexuality. Since the social regulation of sexuality is based on binary distinctions—such as heterosexuality and homosexuality—there is no basis for assuming any kind of natural sexual orientation. It follows that gender is a human invention that organises our behaviour and thought, but it is not a static structure or set rules, rather it is an ongoing process that is experienced through an array of social institutions from the family to the state (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1999).

The gender binary division results in a hierarchy of labour, where there is a gendered distinction between productive and reproductive labour. Productive labour, typically associated with masculinity, is valued more highly, reflecting the traditional view of men as breadwinners. Meanwhile, femininity is socialised in a more complex way, where women are expected to fulfil reproductive labour and to contribute to the family income (Becker-Schmidt, 1987). This *double socialisation* of women creates a permanent gender-specific asymmetry, where men have few or no caregiving responsibilities. Women, on the other hand, often work full-time to provide care for children, elderly, or disabled family members, or they try to balance work and family by working part-time. Conceptualising gender as a process, as one of the several human ways to create and perpetuate social differences, helps to deconstruct the myth of gender as a natural product and highlighting its power dimension. However, gender is not the sole axis around which power and privilege revolve, but other differentiation based on race, ethnicity, class, nationality play a role, often in conjunction with gender. In this regard, the concept of *intersectionality* as formulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) describes how people's social identities can overlap in forms of inequality and discrimination. This concept developed out of the Black Feminists movement in the 1970s, in contrast to the white liberal feminist movement, to theorise the world's organising logics of white supremacy – a global, social, political, economic, and cultural system which privileges whiteness, gendered racism, and racialized sexism (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989, 1991). They emphasised that the experiences of Black women were necessarily different from those of the white dominant class.

As they stated in *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (1977), Black women are not fighting oppression on one front or even two, but they are addressing a whole range of oppressions as «We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any of these types of privilege have». In other words, multiple forms of oppression, such as those relating to gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, age, disability, are not experienced separately but interact upon and reinforce each other within the existing different power relation systems. Therefore, the incorporation of an intersectional perspective in migration studies can unveil different relationships, inequalities and hierarchies that shape migration in a multidimensional and dynamic way. This provides an inclusive understanding of migrants as members of multiple (under/privileged) groups and the barriers they may face (Christou & Kofman, 2022). The case of migrant women is emblematic: they might face more obstacles to access to education and employment and therefore they might be more at risk of poverty; especially for undocumented migrants, they might be more vulnerable to violence, including domestic abuse, trafficking, and workplace exploitation. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), migrant women are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive than any other group in the EU labour market<sup>1</sup>.

The concepts of gender as a social construct and intersectionality challenge the unequal distribution and access to economic, social, material, cultural and symbolic resources. In the 1990s transnationalism questioned the focus on the bounded nation-state and one decade later gender and migration literature increasingly engaged in transnationalism too, with theoretical analysis of global inequalities, between Global North and Global South. To study gender across transnational spaces, Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar (2001) developed the conceptual model “gendered geographies of power”. In the first place, they distinguished between “transnational” and “global”:

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<sup>1</sup> See the next paragraph for migrant women in the labour market.

global refers to processes that operate on a worldwide scale and are not confined to any single nation-state – such as the spread of capitalism, global markets, and climate change – and affect the entire globe. Transnational, on the other hand, refers to political, economic, social, and cultural processes that cross or extend beyond the borders of specific nation-states, involving interactions between state and non-state actors. Transnational processes are shaped by the policies, institutional practices, and interactions of multiple states, but are not confined to one state alone. The three building blocks of this model are geographies, social location and agency. *Geographies* refers to the multiple spatial and social scales across transnational terrains (e.g. the body, the family, the state) on which gender operates. *Social location* refers to an individual's position within multiple hierarchies, such as gender, race, class, nationality, and sexuality; this position shapes how power is experienced, it confers advantages and disadvantages thus it makes migration harder or easier for some groups. *Agency* is the individual's ability to make choices and act within the constraints of their social location, so their capacity to be initiators, refiners and transformers of these conditions. While structural factors such as immigration policies, labour markets, or societal expectations of gender roles may limit certain actions, people are still active agents who negotiate, resist, or comply with these constraints in complex ways. This component is crucial for avoiding an overly deterministic view of migrants as simply passive subjects of broader systems. The concept also takes into account the importance of geographic scale: how global, national, and local scales interact to shape migration.

Transnational studies have focused also on transnational parenting and the development of “global chains of care”. The latter was coined by Arlie Hochschild (2000) to describe the global ties that are formed through the exchange of paid and unpaid care labour, such as domestic and caregiving work, typically across national borders. This concept is closely related to the international division of reproductive labour, which was developed by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2000) to reflect the growing global demand for reproductive labor (including domestic work, care, and sometimes sex



work). Both frameworks highlight how these transnational arrangements are shaped by economic inequalities, gender roles, and the global demand for care work from wealthier countries and the supply of care workers by less wealthy ones. According to Hochschild (2000) a global care chain descends from the employment of migrant domestic workers, as they simultaneously recruit someone else – generally a woman – to do their domestic work on their behalf. That woman is drawn from an even poorer household or she may be a member of the migrant woman’s own family. As we go down the chain, the value ascribed to the labour decreases and often becomes unpaid at the end of the chain, for instance when the oldest daughter substitutes her mother in providing unpaid care for her younger siblings. In doing so, a “racial division of reproductive labour” is put in place which establishes hierarchies among women based on the race and the class status (Glenn, 1992).

Different socio-economic and political changes in a global context have also oriented the development of gender and migration. Firstly, structural adjustment programs in the Global South led to major cuts in social spending which, together with the privatisation of public services, such as education and healthcare, caused higher poverty levels, social inequality, unemployment and informal economies. Therefore, the increased economic pressures compelled women to migrate (Lucio, 2017).

Secondly, the decline of the welfare state, the entrance of women into the workforce, paired with the ageing of the population have caused a disruption in the provision of care for children, elderly, sick people, and people with disabilities. This resulted in the privatisation of assistance and an increase in the demand of care labour – both unpaid and paid. This need is met by the family members, especially grandmothers (Saraceno, 2003; ISTAT, 2019), as well as by nannies or domestic workers with a migratory background, especially originating from Eastern Europe (Sciortino, 2004).

Thirdly, conflicts in the Middle East and Africa generated large flows of asylum seekers and a renewed interest in gendered aspects of refugee flows

and settlement in Europe in academic and policy studies (Freedman et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2020).

Throughout this period in the growth of studies of gender and migration, it has become common to speak of the *feminization of migration* as one of the four key trends in the age of migration (Castles & Miller, 1993). However, the notion of the recent feminization of migration has been challenged in the last decade (Morokvasic, 2011; Donato & Gabaccia, 2015; Schrover, 2013). The concept of feminization of migration outlines the unquestioned male character of the “past migrations” and the celebration of women participation in migration as a new and contemporary phenomenon that transformed the numerical ratio between male and female migration, as well as the type of migration, as it has become more independent and less family-centred (Morokvasic, 2011). However, feminization is neither a recent nor a linear trend and it is highly problematic to characterise past migrations as “male-dominated” (Gabaccia, 2015). Referring to the English demographer and statistician Ernest Ravenstein, who wrote in 1885, one of his migration laws stated that women migrate more than men over short distances and within countries. The historian Donna Gabaccia (1994) observed the important presence of women from Ireland, Germany and Scandinavian countries in the transatlantic flows during the 19th and early 20th century when the share of women in the flow did not fall below 40% in the classical countries of immigration. In the USA migrant women were the majority during the 1930s (55% of the total, 61% in 1940) (Houstoun et al. 1984). Similarly, during the 1960s, when the recruitment of immigrant labour force was massive, the female portion was already 46,6% worldwide and 48,5% in Europe. It was through the introduction of guest worker programmes in the two decades following the Second World War that migrant men started outnumbering women in Europe, before the share of women started growing again from the mid-1970s onward (Vause & Toma, 2015). According to Schrover (2013), “if there was ever a period of feminization, it was in the interwar period” (p.123). Moreover, empirical studies are often limited as they focus exclusively on relative changes -

shifts in gender ratios – and pay little attention to variations in absolute terms. Furthermore, they only use data collected in destination countries (mostly census data) which poses at least two problems. First, it excludes undocumented immigrants. Second, it ignores differential rates of immigration by gender: several studies have found that men are more likely to return to their origin countries or engage in secondary migration than women (Grasmuck and Pessar, 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Finally, many studies claim that this shift was motivated by a change in the nature of female mobility and a rise in autonomous forms of migration. However, subsequent works have challenged a rigid dichotomy between the two forms of female mobility. Studies suggest that the boundary between family and labour migration is often blurred, as women who migrate to reunite with their spouses may subsequently enter employment at their destination; thus, they use one of the few available channels to reach Western countries as a pretext for labour migration, (Kanaiaupuni, 2000; Coulibaly-Tandian, 2008). In the context of restricted international mobility, the channel of migration cannot be presumed to reflect individuals' actual motivations, but rather the most accessible option for travelling abroad at that moment.

In the light of the above, feminization of migration is not a consistent and universal trend; on the contrary it is a dynamic and complex phenomenon with regional variations. We need to distinguish between the feminization of migration and the feminization of the 'migratory discourse' in which women are conceptualised as actors of migration (Schrover, 2013; Vause & Toma, 2015).

Accordingly, by the late 1990s, there was a systematisation of the "engendering migration" approach, aimed at incorporating gender into mainstream migration literature and expanding the scope of research (Vianello, 2014). Gender is a key category through which analysing migrants' socio-economic conditions in the destination country, migratory strategies, multiple identities and belongings, intergenerational relations, transnationalism, care's structures, migratory policies, sex and love market (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Morokvasi et al., 2003).

Lastly, two lines of research are emerging. The first focuses on highly skilled migrant women. Highly educated women in particular are migrating to a much greater extent than men with a similar educational level with the number of tertiary educated migrants increasing by 79% between 2000/01 and 2010/11, 17% greater than for male migrants in OECD countries (OECD, 2016) (See para. 2.2). The second one combines migration studies with queer theory. Queer migration scholarship critically expands discourses on heteronormative as well as homonormative views of borders, bodies, desires and movements shaped by neo-liberal institutions (Murray, 2014) thus including the experience of lesbian, transgender, non-heterosexual people. Such a conceptual approach makes twofold contribution to migration studies: it increases the visibility of LGBTQI+ migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers within a context that combines rights and sexual citizenship, and it deepens critical engagement with the intersections of sexuality, gender, culture, and migration, challenging essentialist views of identity, desire, and border politics (Luibhéid, 2005).

## **1.2 Invisible movers: the dynamics of female labor migration**

In the 1980s, analyses of women and migration (Morokvasic, 1984; Phizacklea, 1983) focused on making migrant women's roles in the labour force more visible and examining their integration into labour markets. The prevailing view was that post-war migration primarily involved single men, with women arriving as dependents after labour migration was halted in the early 1970s. However, this perspective was challenged by scholars who highlighted women's significant contributions to labour recruitment, particularly in domestic work, manufacturing and nursing (Kofman et al., 2000). These migration flows included women from the Caribbean (Byron & Condon, 2008), Eastern Europe (McDowell, 2005, 2009), Southern Europe (Oso, 2005), and Turkey (Erdem & Mattes, 2003). By the 1980s, female migrants became the majority of arrivals in Southern Europe

(Campani, 1993), filling labour gaps in domestic work previously met by internal migration. In the 1990s, Eastern Europeans could move within Europe without visas, further increasing their contributions to the labour supply.

Nevertheless, it is known that the labour market is a fertile ground for discrimination, including gender discrimination. Horizontal and vertical segregation of women in the labour market is amplified by the intersection of immigration and labour regulation. Policies in these areas can affect women's access to skilled immigration status or other visas, accreditation issues upon arrival, skills recognition and their overall capacity for human mobility (Boucher, 2020). The differential outcomes for men and women derive from structural factors such as gender differences in training and obstacles to women's stable employment, leading to concentration of women in certain sectors and men in others (horizontal segregation) and differences in the advancement in their career pathways (vertical segregation). All these issues that are faced by native female workers become heightened for female migrants, given the increased vulnerability due to the migrant status (Piper, 2008). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021), almost 80% of women migrant workers are in the service sector, 14.2% in industry and 5.9% in agriculture. The distribution of migrant male workers is instead more balanced, with 35.6% in industry, 56.4% in services, and the remaining 7.9% in agriculture (ILO, 2021). These jobs are often precarious, with part-time (often involuntary) and temporary contracts, and little legal protection. Especially domestic workers are at high risk of exploitation due to the characteristics of their job: often working in the informal market, low pay, long hours, labour standards inapplicable, or if applicable, difficult to implement. Moreover, atypical employment relations, low levels of unionisation, fiercely competitive labour markets exacerbate their labour situation (Anderson, 2007).

The role of migrants in household labour varies by country and region, types of tasks, and whether workers live in or live out. This variation is influenced by immigration policies, welfare systems, gender norms, and cultural

attitudes towards care provision both within and outside the household. Mediterranean countries, with familial welfare systems, heavily rely on migrant labour for domestic work and caregiving, where migrant women, in particular, have taken over roles previously filled by housewives and family members in child and elderly care (Christou & Kofman, 2022). For instance, in Italy, 90% of domestic workers are foreign-born (Rostgaard et al., 2011). In contrast, Eastern Europe employs far fewer migrants in household roles, remaining well below the European average. Additionally, the tasks assigned to migrant workers differ, ranging from cleaning to caring for children and the elderly.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of this century, two key scholars (Morokvasic, 2007; Phizacklea, 2000) reflected on what had changed in the past two decades of feminist research on migrant women and labour markets. What they found out was that gender orders and hierarchies have not been overturned. The segregation of women into generally low paid reproductive occupations has reinforced gender hierarchies. Domestic and care workers have become the emblematic figures of globalised female migration, in contrast to the easily mobile male IT worker (Kofman, 2013). Although we cannot deny that domestic and care work employ more migrant women than any other sector, and that the demand has grown as a result of inadequacies of public provisions, it does raise issues around the lack of attention to other low skilled sectors, such as hospitality, and commercial cleaning in hospitals, offices and public spaces, which also employ large numbers of migrants (Christou & Kofman, 2022), as well as for skilled sectors. Skilled labour, such as education, health and social work is also sourced globally to address shortages in skilled reproductive labour (Kofman & Raghuram, 2015). Therefore, we need to consider a broader analysis of gendered division of migrant labour drawn from different sources, as well as to place the demand for migrant labour in a broader context of transformation of labour markets, deregulation and the intensification of neo-liberal capitalism (*ibidem*). Highly educated women in particular are migrating to a much greater extent than men with a similar

educational level, increasing by 79% between 2000/01 and 2010/11, that is 17% greater than for male migrants to OECD countries (OECD, 2016). In the countries of the Global South, highly educated women are the most mobile group among women aged over 25 years. They move especially from poorer countries, such as sub-Saharan Africa, where in 2010 almost 20% of the highly educated women had emigrated in comparison to 0.4% of the least educated (Dumitru & Marfouk, 2015). Women have thus formed an increasing percentage of skilled migrants (defined by their level of education rather than the occupation they take up after they have migrated).

The focus on labour migration framed the migration of skilled women within a general push-pull model. Only more recently has a more comprehensive reflection been introduced on how female migration, to a much greater extent than male migration, might be driven by a desire to escape socially discriminatory institutions and social control (Christou & Kofman, 2022). Evidence from the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) indicates that gender inequalities act as both a motivating factor and a barrier for women's migration (Ferrant & Tuccio, 2015; Ruysen & Salomone, 2018). On the one hand, women who face discrimination in their country of origin may want to migrate to destinations where levels of gender discrimination in social institutions are lower than at home. On the other hand, gender discrimination in countries of origin can also prevent women from being able to migrate, because of onerous family responsibilities, limited access to resources and social networks, little bargaining power or the right to initiate migration themselves.

Furthermore, studies have highlighted the process of disqualification and deskilling that migrants, especially women, face in the initial period of migration. Recent publications have analysed from an intersectional perspective the obstacles migrant women with tertiary education face when accessing employment (Rodriguez & Scurry, 2019; Bolzani et al., 2021; Romens, 2022). One of the main issues explored regards the *contradictory class mobility* (Parrenas, 2020) experienced by migrant women coming from

the Global South entering the labour markets of the Global North. The concept refers to the fact that migrant women can simultaneously experience upward mobility, connected to their increasing income, and downward mobility related to the decline of their professional and social status. In this regard, researchers have stressed that migrant women, and more specifically those racialised from the Global South (Wong, 2014), tend to access positions at the bottom of the employment structure, especially in the care sector, and end up being deskilled (Cuban, 2013; Kofman, 2012). Over-qualification (higher educational qualification than what is required for the job) in Europe affects 36% of migrant women and 31% of migrant men compared to 22% of native women and 20% of men. It is particularly pronounced in Southern Europe countries where for migrant women it may reach 50% level of over-qualification (OECD, 2018).

Deskilling is experienced in two different ways: women professionals work in sectors different from those they originally trained in, and they work at levels below their qualifications (EIGE, 2020). Some factors contributing to deskilling are: qualifications and skills not being recognised; insufficient formal channel for information about access to employment; insufficient or ineffective support structure for newly arrived qualified migrants; deficiency of affordable, accessible and appropriate professional language course (*ibidem*). These factors may affect men and women differently, because of stereotypes and assigned roles that attribute family and care responsibilities to women, which might constitute an obstacle to attending additional courses, such as language courses. National privileges may result in occupations being reserved for national and EU citizens forcing migrants to be employed on less secure and less well paid contracts (Castagnone & Salis, 2015). Racial discrimination on the part of recruiters and co-workers may mean that they are forced to accept positions they are overqualified for, or do not have the same opportunities for career progression (Wojczewski et al., 2015).

Female migrant workers therefore often face a double penalty in terms of labour market segregation and discrimination, as women and as migrants. In



this context, the concept of embodied intersectionality enriches the understanding of the complex intersectional discrimination patterns. The case study of hotels in Venice (Alberti & Iannuzzi, 2020) highlights how social factors such as gender, migrant status, and nationality shape employees' positions within the hotel hierarchy. This often reinforces traditional stereotypes, with racialized and gendered roles assigned to back-of-house and front-of-house jobs. Women, particularly migrant women, are often placed in housekeeping roles, while Italian men or those from privileged backgrounds are more likely to be assigned to higher-status, interactive roles (e.g., receptionists or porters). For instance, Filipino workers are frequently hired for domestic roles, as their cultural background is stereotyped as "naturally suited" for servitude and hospitality, while Arab workers are often excluded from such roles due to perceived lack of "docility" (*ibidem*). Less visible social characteristics such as class or cultural capital are likely to determine a relative position of advantage within a generally disadvantaged group of service workers, such as in the case of the Ghanaian guy who speaks many languages and therefore the combination of race, gender and education give rise to an unusual outcome, whereby black migrants with a higher social background are promoted to interactive positions against the traditional racialized back-of-house positions (Glenn, 1992). These practices of embodied intersectionality are a result of the essentialization of their and others' identities.

Grosz (1990) defines essentialism as «the attribution of a fixed essence to women, [which] is assumed to be given, universal, and is usually, though not necessarily, identified with women's biology and "natural "characteristics" which make them universal and common by all women at all times. Essentialism thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions which limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganisation» (Grosz, 1990: 334). Although Grosz focuses on women, her definition highlights features that encompass forms of essentialism based on racialisation, the reification of cultural differences, and that associate specific traits and attitudes with specific

nationalities. Indeed, racialisation itself can be considered as a form of essentialism, that uses markers such as the colour of the skin, the country of birth, culture or religion to justify superiority and privilege (Grosfoguel et al., 2015) and to define some groups as superior and others as inferior. As such, race is a social construct that was historically and politically created, recreated and challenged (Ndiaye, 2008; Petrovich Njegosh & Scacchi, 2012) and served as a scientific argument to justify material and symbolic domination, for instance for the the development of and perpetuation of the slave trade, the expansion of white at the expense of the native people (Bonilla Silva, 2014; Ndiaye, 2008). As many de-colonial researchers have stressed, global hierarchies of power put in place by Western colonial administrations did not disappear with the end of colonial administration (Grosfoguel et al. 2015). Adopting a decolonial approach is of particular relevance for analysing how migrants are being racialized in European societies. When migrants move to Europe, they do not arrive in neutral spaces, but in spaces that are already ‘polluted’ by racial power relations inherited from coloniality based on the colour of the their culture or their religion, but also according to gender, class, and other social relations that intersect (*ibidem*). Focusing on the concept of essentialism enables us to adopt an intersectional approach.

In her book, Romens (2022) presents substantial evidence of migrant women with tertiary education who are often confined to jobs with low social recognition, particularly in domestic and care work. In particular African women, coming from Sub Saharan countries, appear to be particularly penalised both in Italy and France. Beside the lack of recognition of their titles and experience abroad, African migrant women interviewed by Romens (2022) accounted the explicit use of discriminatory criteria and of gendered/racialized/classed stereotyped representations by recruiters (i.e. the idea that Sub Saharan women are good only for “subaltern jobs”). Generally, compared to other economic sectors, migrant women with tertiary education have more chances to be employed in nursing, social work and teaching, which are seen as an extension of social reproductive activities

(Romens, 2022; Kofman & Raghuram, 2015).

For this reason, a wide branch of research has focused on the impacts on gender relations of the migratory experience and the encounter with different cultures. According to Pessar (2005), there are three possible outcomes: first, the migratory experience can challenge the previous patriarchal convictions, ideologies, and relations existing in the country of origin. Second, emigration allows people to consolidate their counter-hegemonic gender regimes which were available before migrating. Third, migration determines the production, enforcement and radicalization of a conservative vision on gender relations, as a result of the discriminations faced in the destination country. Hence, the dominant hypothesis of migration as reducing gender inequalities has been refuted by many studies, as the effects are not linear and result from a complex process that involves both advances and setbacks. Similarly, the assumption that migrant women's emancipation was a result of the interiorisation of gender-equality values and culture in Western societies has been overcome by the understanding that the redefinition of gender relation derive from the mutations set by the migratory experience, depending on the social structures in both origin and destination countries, family roles, personal and group resources, limits and opportunities encountered (Datta et al. 2009).

In the light of the above, understanding the participation of migrant women in the labour market requires to take distance from the neoliberal idea of migration, especially South-North migration, as an inevitably empowering process, as well as from the victimising rhetoric of migrant women as vulnerable only. The process may be nonlinear and often entail a contradictory social mobility, it can accelerate some cultural, social and political transformations as well as it can enforce vulnerabilities, as a consequence of personal, family, ethnic, religious characteristics, and structural factors such as immigration and labour policies.

## **2. Context analysis**

### **2.1 Migrant women in Italy**

Women make up around half of migrants worldwide. According to United Nations (UN) estimates, 51,9% of global migrants in 2020 were men and 48.1% were women (approximately 135 million). In Europe the female average is higher: at mid-year 2020, women accounted for 51,6% of all international migrants in the region (44.73 million women) (Migration Data Portal). Similarly, in Italy half of the whole foreign population is female (50,9%), accounting for 2,6 million of women.

In Italy, 2,6 millions of women with foreign citizenship were registered in 2024, which is 50,5% of the whole foreign population living in the country (ISTAT). Nowadays Italy is a crossroad of migratory paths from East Europe, from the Balkan Route and from the Mediterranean sea, as a destination country, but also as a transit country to reach other European countries.

Historically, Italy turned from an emigration country to an immigration country at the end of the 1960s. It's during this period that the so-called "pioneers" coming from Cape Verde Islands, the Horn of Africa, Philippines, South America, moved as "lone" female migrants to Italy to work mainly as maids (Bettio F. et al., 2006; Andall, 1998; Vianello, 2007). They initially took advantage of the mediation by catholic organisations and then by their informal migratory networks. In the following years, regular migration continued to increase: according to the Ministry of the Interior, the female presence of regular migrants increased from 39,9% to 49,9% of total immigrant population from 1991 to 2005. In addition to migration flows of domestic workers and the diversification of job opportunities, flows of trafficking victims, on one side, and for family reunification, on the other, became relevant. Although they were not the largest categories, these two received greater visibility, thus conveying the partial and stereotyped image of migrant women as passive, marginal and submissive.

In Italy, the foreign female population mainly comprises women from Romania, Albania, Morocco, China, and Ukraine. These communities form a substantial part of the immigrant demographic, coming to Italy for various reasons, including work and family reunification. Among them, Ukrainian women are especially numerous, with recent arrivals largely due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine (Demaio et. al., 2023).

In addition to the predominantly Eastern Europe migration, Italy experiences immigration flows from Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria, with migrants arriving on its shores. Due to its geographic position, Italy is one of the primary entry points into Europe, along with Spain, Greece, and Malta, for people who, using boats provided by smugglers, attempt an irregular—and often dangerous, even deadly—route to move across borders<sup>2</sup>. In 2023, the number known of attempts by migrants and refugees to cross the central Mediterranean Sea was 212,100 (UNHCR, 2023). This was a 52% increase compared to known attempts in 2022 and marks the highest number since 2017. In Italy the sea arrivals witnessed an increase in 2023 with over 155,570 migrants by the year's end. The main nationalities were from Guinea, Tunisia, Côte d'Ivoire, Bangladesh, Egypt, the Syrian Arab Republic, Burkina Faso, Pakistan, Mali, and Sudan. Although the majority was male, the share of women increased to 10% in 2023 and the predominant nationalities were Ivorian, Guinean, Tunisian, Cameroonian, and Syrian nationals. At the EU level, the number of applications for asylum by women has increased since 2014. Almost 2.5 million women applied for asylum between 2008-2021, with a peak in 2019. In 2023, women accounted for 30% of the total asylum seekers.

In Italy, 117,075 asylum requests by women were recorded between 2008 and 2020. Starting from 4,400 in 2008, the number peaked in 2017 with 21,053 requests, the majority of them coming from Nigeria. Among the total asylum seekers, women represented 17.6% in 2021 and 19.4% in 2022. In

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<sup>2</sup> See more on this migratory route in Toaldo M. (2015) *Migrations Through and From Libya, Changing Migration Patterns in the Mediterranean*; Altai Consulting & UNHCR (2013) *Mixed Migration: Libya at the Crossroads – Mapping of Migration Routes from Africa to Europe and Drivers of Migration in Post-revolution Libya*

2022, the main regions of origin were Sub-Saharan Africa (particularly Nigeria, Eritrea, and Ivory Coast), Eastern Europe (Ukraine and Georgia), and Latin America (Peru, Colombia, and Venezuela).

## **2.2 Migrant women in the Italian labour market: contributions and challenges**

Compared to other OECD countries, Italy is one of the countries where migrant workers are significantly disadvantaged in comparison to native workers in the labour market in various aspects (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2024). Migrant workers are mainly employed in sectors of the so-called 3D jobs: dangerous, dirty and difficult (Münz et al. 2007; Piore, 1979). This often entails: lack of or limited labour law protection; likelihood of discrimination and exploitation by their employers; no entitlement to contribution-based social benefits, or low contributions that entail low pensions. Indeed, the demand for labour, often unmet by the local workforce, underpins the high concentration of foreign workers in specific occupational sectors, creating niches of specialisation and even occupational ethnicization. Migrant networks, in turn, contribute to occupational concentration through mechanisms of information sharing, referrals, and support among relatives and compatriots. As a result, occupational niches emerge, associated with specific national groups, such as Filipinos in domestic work, Sikh Indians in the stables of the Po Valley, Ukrainians in elderly care, and Albanians and Romanians in the construction industry (Ambrosini & Panichella, 2023). The phenomenon of concentration is also evident when studying the distribution of migrants across different occupational sectors, distinguishing them by gender and educational attainment. Accordingly, men are concentrated in agriculture, construction, restaurants and hotels. The occupational segregation becomes more evident for female workforce, as they are employed mainly as domestic workers, in the services sector, and only 9,7% and 3,2% in the industry and in agriculture respectively (Demaio et al., 2023; ILO, 2023).

As a country based on a familist care model, migrant women have satisfied the growing demand of private personal services, especially for long-term care, linked to the participation of women in the labour market, the ageing of population and deficiency of national programmes (Vianello, 2022; Bettio F. et al, 2006). Despite the significant presence of migrant women in the Italian peninsula and their consolidated role in the provision of care work for more than fifty years, the recruitment of migrant workers through regular and formal channels is still defective: the participation of migrant workers in the informal economy is still considerably high. In response, the government relies on the annual adoption of the “Decreto Flussi” and periodic *ex-post* regularisation measures, such as amnesties (“Sanatorie”). The “Decreto Flussi” sets the number of non-EU citizens allowed to enter Italy for self-employed or subordinate work. Through an online platform during one or more “Click Days,” employers can request a set number of immigrant workers. However, the number of foreign workers admitted is significantly lower than the demand from employers. In practical terms, only the fastest applicants during the “Click Days” can secure workers, leaving many excluded from the process.

For instance, in 2024, the quota of foreign workers admitted was 151,000, while employer requests reached 690,000 (Ministry of the Interior, 2024). Consequently, the system was fully booked within four minutes of opening. Moreover, this system predominantly regularises individuals already residing in Italy, rather than recruiting new workers from abroad. Both the “Decreto Flussi” and the amnesties are insufficient measures to ensure the regularisation of migrant workers in Italy, thus contributing to their precarious situation and preventing them from achieving stability for themselves and their families after securing employment in Italy.

Another form of penalisation that migrant workers witness is deskilling and devaluation of their cultural capital. Especially in the initial period after their arrival, the lack of recognition of their titles, the emphasis on host country work experience, racial discrimination on the part of recruiters and co-workers, can translate in a severe lack of opportunity and the need to

accept positions they are overqualified for. Women with diplomas and, even more so, those with tertiary education are the most disadvantaged (Ministry of Social and Labour Policies, 2024; Romens, 2022). One in three migrant women in Italy works in elementary jobs – a significantly higher proportion than the OECD European average, where one in five migrant women holds such roles. Deskilling is experienced in two different ways: women professionals work in sectors other than those they originally trained in, and they work at levels below their qualifications<sup>3</sup>. Some factors contributing to deskilling are: qualifications and skills not being recognised; insufficient formal channel for information about access to employment; insufficient or ineffective support structure for newly arrived qualified migrants; deficiency of affordable, accessible and appropriate professional language course<sup>4</sup>. These factors may affect men and women differently, because of stereotypes and assigned roles that assign family and care responsibilities to women, which might constitute an obstacle to attending additional courses, such as language courses.

According to the data provided by the Observatory on domestic workers, in 2023, in Italy 833.874 domestic workers were employed– excluding the significant number of people that work in the informal economy – but only 11,4% of them were men, and the majority (68,9% of the total) had foreign origins: the highest percentage came from Eastern Europe, followed by Italians, then people coming from South America and East-Asia. From these results, it emerges that the participation of migrant workers from Africa is residual (6,7%), although it has increased by 45% compared to years 2019-2021. This significant difference may be explained by different factors. First, some nationalities, such as Romanian, Moldovan, Ukrainian, Philippin, have consolidated their presence in this sector in the decades, starting from massive flows during the 70s, such that Italians use the terms “Filippina” or “Romena” to refer to domestic workers. Second, the presence of co-national networks facilitates the entry in this sector by other

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<sup>3</sup> EIGE (2020) *Sectoral Brief: Gender and Migration*

<sup>4</sup> *ibidem*



connational thus increasing the participation of this sector of certain groups: on the one hand, this can reduce unemployment, but on the other contribute to the ethnicization of certain jobs. Third, essentialism: as mentioned in the previous chapter, essentialism consists in the attribution of a fixed essence to a social group, which is assumed to be naturally given and universal (Grosz, 1990). Specific nationalities, countries of birth and racialised groups are connected to characteristics that are appreciated or discredited by employers, thus creating a stratification and implicit hierarchy in the labour market. In this context, women born in Sub Saharan Africa face more obstacles than from other areas in obtaining a job as in-house caregivers (Romens, 2022). However, they are overrepresented in the cleaning sector through agencies and cooperatives, which drive down prices to win contracts with large public and private enterprises, such as universities, hospitals, shopping centres, or multinational enterprises.

### **2.3 Contracting employment**

The practice of contracted employment has become increasingly widespread over the last twenty years, fostered by the global trend of outsourcing in production processes (Cillo & Rossana, 2016). The re-organisation of the global production is becoming global and transversal. It is global, as it has affected both the Global North and Global South through international offshoring, as well as within countries through regional relocation and subcontracting. It is also transversal or cross-sectoral, because it impacts various sectors including industry, agriculture, services, and both the public and private sectors (Huws and Podro, 2012). Following this model, clients outsource the provision of labour to contractors. In order to improve their productivity and their competitiveness, enterprises prefer to focus on their *core operations* and to outsource the remaining activities to external specialised agencies. Service contracts provide a straightforward mechanism for decentralization, enabling enterprises to entrust external providers with essential yet *non-core* activities. While outsourcing aims to enhance

specialization, it also leads to cost reduction, with significant consequences on workers, in terms of labor politics, contractual arrangements, and low compensation. This has triggered a structural change in the labour market, characterised by increased flexibility and temporary jobs, ultimately resulting in increased precariousness for workers. Paradoxically, the move toward specialisation and professionalisation does not translate into an increase of the quality and the status of the service provision, but on the contrary, it leads to its undervaluation, with workers being underpaid and treated as second-class workers.

In this triangular employment system, the *formal employer* is the legal owner of the employment relationship and is responsible for hiring and paying workers, while the *substantial employer* is the entity that benefits from workers' output and influences aspects of the work, such as wages, working hours, and work intensity, often through pricing mechanisms (Wills, 2009; Dorigatti, 2015). This structure deteriorates working conditions and, at the same time, weakens trade unions' capacity to exert their *voice* (Doellgast & Greer, 2007). Sectors where contracting is prevalent – such as cleaning, catering, and logistics – show low levels of unionisation. At the same time, traditional union practices may prove ineffective. When unions act against the 'formal' employer, their efforts may yield little impact, as this employer has limited bargaining power over the outsourcer (Wills, 2009).

However, some campaigns have developed alternative strategies for labor protection, shifting the focus from the contracting agency to the client company. These campaigns have successfully pressured substantial employers to take direct responsibility for the conditions of subcontracted workers. Notable examples include the *Justice for Janitors* campaign in the United States (Savage, 2006; Waldinger et al., 1998) and the *Living Wage Campaigns* in the United Kingdom (Wills, 2009), which have played a pivotal role in pressuring major corporations and public institutions to have

played a pivotal role in pressuring major corporations and public institutions to ensure fair pay for outsourced employees.

In Italy, the National Collective Labour Agreement represents a crucial – albeit insufficient – normative tool to set minimum working conditions in this sector. As will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, this agreement mitigates the impact of contracting on workers, sets a minimum standards for wages, working hours, and employment protections, helping to mitigate some of the negative effects of contracting on workers. However, while the CCNL provides a baseline of protection, it does not fully address the structural inequalities embedded in the outsourcing model.

## **2.4 The cleaning industry**

The cleaning industry, as defined by Legislative Decree No. 274 of July 7, 1997, comprises five sectors: cleaning, disinfection, pest control, rodent control, and sanitization (art. 1). This study focuses on cleaning activities, defined as “the ensemble of proceedings and operations aimed at removing dust, unwanted materials, and dirt from surfaces, objects, and delimited areas”. In practical terms, this includes tasks such as mopping floors, cleaning desks, and washing restrooms. These services are essential for the functionality and maintenance of enterprises and the well-being of employees and clients, yet they are often classified as non-core business operations. Therefore, companies prioritise their core operations and outsource cleaning services to specialised agencies.

While this trend has allowed businesses to reduce operational costs and focus on their primary objectives, it has also exacerbated labor market segmentation and job insecurity. In public institutions such as municipalities and universities, this trend has been particularly linked to austerity measures and budget cuts, which have pushed administrations to reduce their expense items, including the one for cleaning provision.

The growing reliance on outsourcing has reshaped the sector, driving a structural shift in employment dynamics and increased fragmentation. This shift has favored cost-driven competition among cleaning firms, often at the expense of workers' rights that are forced to deal with short-term and part-time contracts, frequent job turnover, and lower wages and increasing workloads.

In this labour-intensive sector legal protections are minimal and exploitation is pervasive (Abbasian & Hellgren, 2012; Könönen, 2012). Cleaning jobs are physically demanding and frequently involve exposure to hazardous substances, limited autonomy, and repetitive tasks. Irregular shift schedules – early mornings, late nights, and holiday hours – aggravate work-life imbalances, especially given that the majority hold more than one job, due to the low salary and the involuntary part-time employment.

Despite being essential to maintaining public and private infrastructures, these jobs are labelled as low-skilled and invisible, perpetuating low wages and minimal union presence (Eurofound, 2013). The invisibility of cleaning work is further amplified, as outsourced workers are treated as external workforce, which further contributes to their marginalisation in the labor hierarchy.

In 2020, nearly 3 million people in the EU worked in general building cleaning. In Italy, the sector accounted for 436,944 workers across 34,298 enterprises (Confartigianato, 2020). Within this workforce, migrant workers constitute a significant proportion, particularly non-EU migrants, who are overrepresented in the sector: 11.4% of non-EU workers are employed in cleaning, compared to 2.9% of EU citizens<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, in recent years, the presence of African women in the cleaning industry has notably increased. As a result of the intersectional discrimination based on gender and race, African women, especially Black women, are concentrated in lower-tier roles, often employed on temporary

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<sup>5</sup> EU Statistics, visited on november 2024  
[https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe_en)

contracts or in informal work arrangements. Their precarious employment situation is further compounded by their migrant status, which often ties their residence permit to their job, limiting their ability to be selective in job opportunities. Several barriers restrict their access to better employment conditions, including language constraints, racial discrimination, and non-recognition of qualifications obtained in their home countries. These factors significantly restrict their opportunities for upward mobility and limit their ability to advocate for better working conditions. For undocumented African women, vulnerabilities are even more pronounced, as they face heightened risks of exploitation, abuse, and deportation.

Moreover, the outsourcing model, by creating layers of subcontracting and reducing direct accountability, makes it easier for employers to evade responsibilities, allowing exploitative practices to spread.

Although African migrant women play an increasingly important role in the cleaning industry, academic research and documentation on their experiences remain scarce. Addressing these gaps in literature is crucial for understanding the structural challenges they face and developing strategies for improving working conditions in the cleaning industry.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research goal

This chapter outlines the research design, data collection methods, and analysis techniques adopted to address the research questions.

The main research question guiding this study is the analysis of the working conditions of the cleaning sector in the province of Padua and whether there is a prevalent demand for migrant workers, in particular for Sub-Saharan women. This choice is grounded on several reasons. First, the cleaning industry is an expanding sector in which outsourcing practices drive cooperatives and enterprises to lower prices to secure contracts and increase their revenue. Second, it is a labour-intensive sector characterized by low wages (approximately €7 per hour according to the National Collective Contract) and a prevalence of part-time contracts, placing cleaners at risk of *in-work poverty*. Consequently, this study examines whether this sector is predominantly occupied by migrants rather than native Italians, and, if so, identifies which nationalities are most represented, focusing in particular on Sub-Saharan workers. The emphasis on Sub-Saharan workers, particularly women, is driven by their increasing presence as cleaners compared to other sectors where they remain underrepresented. This trend raises important questions about whether a new form of gendered and racialized labour division is emerging. Additionally, Sub-Saharan migrant women are often narrowly portrayed in public discourse and literature as victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. While the existence of this phenomenon cannot be denied, framing these women exclusively as victims overlooks their agency, aspirations, and motivations for migrating, working, and building new lives in Europe. This limited narrative also fails to capture their diverse migratory paths and often fragmented, burdensome work trajectories, shaped by structural barriers such as complex bureaucratic systems, limited pathways to secure legal residency, and intersectional discrimination based on sexism and racism. Finally, there is a gap in the

literature on this topic, especially in Italy, making it even more necessary to investigate it.

### **3.2 Access to the field: the collaboration with the grassroots union**

This research is based on a close collaboration with ADL Cobas, a grassroots union born in 1992 from the militant leftist activist movement in Veneto. Today, it has evolved into a multi-regional union, offering different services including housing support desks, immigration help desk, CAF and Patronato<sup>6</sup>. Guided by the principles of independence and autonomy, this union is present in different industries, including logistics, cleaning, show business and tourism.

Prior political relationships with this union in the city of Padua provided an informal and initial channel which subsequently developed into a collaboration. Stemming from the idea of co-production, in contrast to the concept of knowledge extractivism, as discussed by decolonial authors (see para. 3.6), this collaboration was established with the aim of reciprocal exchange, rather than unilateral support. More precisely, I was granted access to their workplace and direct contact with their members; in return, a form of compensation and restitution was expected. The ultimate goal is to develop an additional tool that can support and strengthen the advocacy for cleaners' rights, in particular in Padua, through the organisation of assemblies, conferences and demonstrations. Therefore, this collaboration provided me privileged access to the union's database and firsthand testimonies, from both unionists and cleaners, that would have otherwise been more difficult to obtain.

However, this raises some reflections on my subjectivity as a researcher. First, my closeness to the union may have influenced my interpretation, potentially leading to a more negative bias regarding working conditions or

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<sup>6</sup> See more on their website

<https://adlcobas.it/associazione-diritti-lavoratori/chi-siamo/>

reinforcing the perception of a predominance of migrant workers over native ones. To counterbalance this position, I opted for a more cautious approach comparing the testimonies with quantitative data from reliable and independent sources, such as the regional employment agency VenetoLavoro, ISTAT (national institute for statistics) and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work.

Regarding my relationship with the subjects, I was well integrated with the union representatives, as my presence became regular and led me to collaborate on some tasks. In contrast, the workers initially perceived me as an outsider since they had not met me before the interviews. To bridge the distance between myself and the workers, I was introduced by the union representative, who explained my research and the purpose of my interviews. In some cases, I also contributed to their meetings by acting as a language mediator in English, which served as an icebreaker with the cleaners. This experience not only provided valuable insights into their working lives and the challenges they face but also laid the groundwork for the subsequent interviews.

### **3.3 The sample**

The sample consists of ten cleaners, including one Italian, seven Nigerian, one Senegalese, and one Peruvian. Table 3.1 summarises the main characteristics of the participants, recruited through ADL trade union memberships and personal contacts. They were one man and nine women, aged between 29 and 50, with work experience in the cleaning sector ranging from 2 to 20 years. The sample is predominantly non-Italian, as this study aimed to explore the experience and perspective of migrant workers, and how their status as migrants shape their position within this sector.

Interviewees work as cleaners in both public and private facilities, such as the University of Padua, hospital, multinational corporation, shopping centres, Padua's municipality, nursing home and hotels. However, they are



employed in different enterprises and cooperatives that provide cleaning services through contracting. Most of them have more than one employment: four out of ten are employed in two different companies and work at two different facilities every day, while one of them works as a cleaner also for two households. Three out of ten of the interviewed workers have a tertiary education, while the others mainly have secondary education. Additionally, two trade unionists were interviewed: one woman and one man. The last one also dealt with the cleaning sector before the arrival of the female trade unionist, who is now the representative for female workers in this industry. Thanks to her approach and, in part, due to the fact that she is a woman and also of foreign origin, she has been able to establish a lasting, trusting, and even friendly relationship with the workers.

*Table 3.1 List of participants*

| Workers in the cleaning industry in the province of Padua |         |                                                                       |                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Alias                                                     | Born in | Education                                                             | Employment situation                                                                                          |
| Carmen                                                    | Peru    | Diploma in Catering and Hospitality                                   | Cleaner at the University of Padua and for private households                                                 |
| Paola                                                     | Italy   | Missing                                                               | Cleaner at a private company and for the Municipality of Padua.<br>Now retired.                               |
| Silver                                                    | Nigeria | Certificate in CCTV Installation and Surveillance Systems (CCISS)     | Cleaner at a private nursing home and at the public Hospital of Padua.                                        |
| Elizabeth                                                 | Nigeria | High school diploma                                                   | Cleaner at a waste management service centre in the province of Padua.                                        |
| Doris                                                     | Nigeria | Bachelor's Degree in Nigeria; Master's degree in Agriculture in Padua | Cleaner for two private offices; previously with a third employment as cleaner at a shopping centre in Padua. |
| Ndeye                                                     | Senegal | Graduate in Foreign Languages in Senegal; Italian middle age diploma  | Cleaner at a multinational retail furniture company in Padua; seeking an additional job.                      |
| Beauty                                                    | Nigeria | Middle school diploma                                                 | Cleaner at a multinational retail furniture company in Padua.                                                 |
| Judith                                                    | Nigeria | Graduate in Accounting in Nigeria                                     | Cleaner at a Hotel in Padua.                                                                                  |
| Christian                                                 | Nigeria | Missing                                                               | Cleaner at the industrial baker in the Province of Padua                                                      |
| Mercy                                                     | Nigeria | High school diploma                                                   | Cleaner at a shopping centre in Padua.                                                                        |

### 3.4 Interviews

In this research, a mixed approach was adopted. A mainly qualitative approach, integrated by the quantitative one, was used to examine the working conditions in the cleaning industry. To this scope, 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with workers of the cleaning industry in Padua and representatives of the ADL Cobas grassroots union in 2024/2025. The semi-structured interview method was chosen for its flexibility and versatility that enable reciprocity between the interviewer and the participant (Galletta, 2012). On the basis of previous knowledge on the topic, a list of main open-ended questions with follow-up probe questions was prepared, in order to cover all relevant aspects during the interview. Accordingly, as the interviewer, I had the flexibility to modify the order and wording of the questions, based on the participant's responses. The goal was to understand the individual experience of cleaners in this sector, considering their gender, nationality and qualifications and how these influence their work. Therefore, the semi-structured interview was the preferred data collection method for capturing the participants' unique perspective (McGrath C et al., 2019). This method ensures ample freedom to both the interviewer and the respondent (Corbetta, 2023), facilitating a more natural conversation in which the participant feels comfortable, while at the same time ensuring that all the relevant information is collected. Moreover, this approach allows the respondent to share personal experiences and emotions related to the topic, while also helping to uncover facts or dynamics that may be unknown to the interviewer (Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. L., 2021). Finally, semi-structured interviews can complement quantitative data when used in conjunction, as in a mixed methods approach (*ibidem*).

The interviews with workers centered on their current jobs, including their working conditions (e.g. work hours, overtime work and personal leaves), experiences in the workplace, their relationships with colleagues and employers; their impressions on their job and the related pay, and their

experience in the trade union, work-life balance. Additional focus was given on their personal backgrounds, and for migrant workers, particular attention was given to their arrival in Italy and their initial years in the country (Table 3.2).

In contrast, the interviews with representatives of the ADL trade union aimed to provide a general overview of the cleaning industry in Padua, focusing on the demographic composition of workers in this sector, the diffusion contracting and subcontracting practice, as well as how it has evolved throughout decades and its consequences for workers (Table 3.3).

All interviewees gave informed consent to participate in the research. I also recorded the interview for personal use with those that gave me their consent. Subsequently, recordings were transcribed and anonymised. Interviews were held in person and via video call, lasting between 30 to 60 minutes, speaking in Italian or English, according to the interviewees' preference. They were collected from November 2024 to February 2025 in a public space or at the ADL office. Organizing the interviews with cleaners was challenging due to the limited willingness of workers to discuss their job, as some were either distrustful or uninterested, and on the other hand, to the variability of their work hours and schedules. For instance, some appointments had to be canceled, or rescheduled, because they were called to work on their day off.

The analysis of interviews was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017), a qualitative research method that, through a six-step process: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The interview transcripts were carefully reviewed multiple times and initial codes were generated both inductively (emerging from the data) and deductively (based on predefined categories). These included:

- Impact of contractor transitions on workers in the cleaning industry

- Relationships with colleagues, customers and employers
- Socio-demographic characteristics of the workforce and perceptions of migrant labor, particularly for Nigerian workers
- Work schedules and their impact on personal and family life
- Access to leave, including sick leave, maternity leave and holidays
- Perceptions of wages and financial adequacy
- Health consequences of working conditions
- Workers' coping mechanisms

At the end, the findings were structured according to these identified themes, integrated by direct quotes from participants to provide depth and authenticity. Moreover, quantitative data were used to complement the qualitative findings, mitigating the limitations of the restricted sample, to reduce possible biases as well as to enhance the generalisability of the results.

*Table 3.2 Outlines of semi-structured interviews with cleaners*

#### Personal background

- Tell me a bit about where you come from, what you used to do, what your country was like.
- What year did you arrive in Italy?
- Before coming to Italy, did you go to other countries in Europe?
- Did you come to Italy alone?
- Where did you leave from? (What journey did you take, without details?)
- In your country of origin, did you study? Until what age?
- What did you study?
- Did you work in your country of origin? What kind of work did you do?
- Would you have liked to continue the same job in Italy?
- If not, what kind of job did you imagine/hope to do in Italy?
- What job(s) have you done in Italy since you arrived?
- How did you find them? (Friends, family, community members, reception centers, ads)
- What kind of jobs were they? (Contract? Under the table?)
- Did you face any difficulties? (Dismissals, unpaid wages, maternity, etc.)
- How long after your arrival did you start working?
- What were the biggest challenges?
- Documents? Did you wait a long time? Was it difficult to get them?
- Were your qualifications adequate? Did you have to take any courses?
- Did they make you take courses at reception centers?
- How did you learn Italian?
- Are you married?
- Is your spouse in Italy?
- If separated, does he contribute to child support?
- Do you have children?
- How old are they?
- How did you manage childcare when you started working?
- Did anyone help you?
- Do you also care for anyone else? (Parents, relatives, friends)
- Did your family stay back home?
- Do you support your family from here?

#### Working Conditions

- What job do you do now? (One or more?)
- Where?
- Tell me about a typical day.
- What are your duties?
- Which agency/cooperative do you work for?
- How long have you worked there?

- Do cooperatives/agencies change frequently?
- Do you have a contract?
- What type?
- What are your working hours?
  - Specific hours/shifts
  - Weekly hours
  - Flexibility required?
  - Extra hours? Paid?
- How do you find your hours? (Convenient, inconvenient, can you balance work with your needs?)
- Do you work alone or with others on your shift?
- Do you think the hours are appropriate for the work you need to do? Do you have to rush, or can you do a good job?
- Do you usually work when activities are paused/places are closed?
- If there are people around, how do you feel about it? Do you feel respected? Do they greet you?
- How would you define the relationships among workers?
- Do workers help each other? Is the environment nice?
- Are your colleagues Italian?
- Where are your colleagues from?
- Do you all do the same tasks?
- Are some tasks lighter or heavier?
- Who does what? Are there distinctions based on nationality?
- Do you feel comfortable at your workplace? Do you feel respected?
- If you have a problem at work, can you talk to someone? If so, who?
- How would you define your relationship with your employer?
- Can you talk to your employer?
- How do you feel about the pay you receive for this job?
  - Is it adequate for the workload?
  - Is it adequate for your needs?
  - May I ask how much the pay is for this job?
  - How much do you think it should be?
- Do you usually have issues with vacation, leave, and sick days? Can you request them easily?
- Have you ever had work-related health problems?
  - Back pain? Physical pain?
  - Dermatitis or allergies related to products used?

#### Union

- Which unions have you approached since you've been in Italy?
- Why did you turn to them?
- When?
- How did you learn about them? Did someone suggest them?

- Why did you change?
- Are you satisfied with them?
- Do you trust them?
- How do they help you?
- Do you participate in strikes and demonstrations?
- Has anything changed in recent months/years?
- Can you hold union meetings in your workplace?
- If not, where do you hold them?
- Have you attended meetings with other workers and union representatives?
- What do you usually discuss?
- How does it work? Who can join?
- How many members are there?
- What does it mean to you?



*Table 3.3 Outline of the semi-structured interview with union representatives.*

- What is your role within the ADL?
- How many cleaning workers are in your union?
- Where do they work? (public and private sectors, names of companies)
- What is the demographic composition? (age, origin, gender, level of education)
- How widespread is the phenomenon of subcontracting in Padua?
- Who are the actors involved in this practice? (names of cooperatives, contractors, and subcontractors)
- What does this mean for the workers?
- Wages
- Vacation
- Sick leave
- Maternity leave
- Job insecurity (layoffs and contracts?)
- Working hours
- How do gender, class, and nationality intersect in this sector, in your opinion?

Over the years, have you seen an improvement or deterioration in working conditions?

What are the reasons for this?

- From a legal perspective, considering the national collective agreement (CCNL) and local measures (e.g., the Padua Municipality Protocol), what protections exist for workers in this sector?
- What has changed over the years through union struggles?
- Are you able to establish relations with both the formal and the actual employer?
- What are the main difficulties you face as a union in advocating for workers' rights?
- What issues remain unresolved?
- What attitudes do workers have towards these issues?
- What mechanisms of resistance, adaptation, or reaction do they adopt in this situation?
- Have you faced challenges in engaging workers with the union?
  - How did you manage to do it?
  - What role have communities played in this? Have they helped attract workers to the union?
- Beyond the workplace, what other areas of advocacy exist, particularly for migrant women (gender, "race," migrant status)?
- Are you able to carry out broader struggles, such as feminist or migrant rights movements, in addition to labor rights?
- Are the forms of struggle, practices, and methods different compared to those used by men?

- How did the women's group originate?
- Can you tell me about it?
- Who participates
- What topics are discussed
- How often did they meet
- What has the group achieved

### **3.5 Secondary analysis on quantitative data**

The quantitative analysis was based on the data provided by the regional employment agency, VenetoLavoro, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies' reports, and statistics from trade union's membership register. This method was more accurate to answer the question on whether there is a prevalent demand for migrant workforce in this industry. These sources provided insights on hiring trends and on demographic characteristics of cleaners in the province of Padua, focusing on gender, nationality and age on a larger scale. Special attention was paid to the increasing participation of Sub-Saharan women in cleaning jobs and the overall segmentation of the labor market. This was helpful at assessing and reducing possible biases from workers and the trade union. Considering the limitations of the sample used in this study, supplementing interviews with employment data mitigates this limitation by contextualizing findings within broader industry trends. Indeed, according to VenetoLavoro data, Italians represent the largest national group of the workforce in this sector, in contrast with workers and trade unionists' impressions. However, it is important to note that VenetoLavoro provides data and analysis based on the number of new employment contracts, rather than the number of employed people. This means that it is not possible to obtain the exact number of the total population of this sector and their characteristics, as one person may have multiple contracts in a given year, due to both several short-term contracts or multiple jobs at the same time. On the other hand, people already working in the sector are not accounted for. Nevertheless, the data still allow for an understanding of general trends in the sector, the most common types of contracts, and overall demographic patterns.

For this analysis, the focus was on the three foreign nationalities of workers in the province of Padua with the highest numbers over the past three years (2022-2024) (Romanian, Nigerian, and Moroccan workers), weighting these figures with the total number of residents for each group residing in the

same area. This comparison provided valuable insights into the relative representation of these nationalities within the cleaning industry. Additionally, VenetoLavoro formulates "Sector's Geographies"<sup>7</sup>, a series of interactive graphs and statistics which provide detailed insights regarding the demand for each sector. Particularly, it indicates the total number of hires in a given year, the workforce size, and the number of permanent contracts. Since it was possible to filter the results by "Italians" and "Foreigners", this revealed further insights into the market trends.

Second, the ADL register proved to be very useful for obtaining statistics on the nationality, gender, and age of cleaners. Nevertheless, this information cannot be considered representative of the entire population of cleaners, as it may be biased by the specific target group of the trade union. I also accessed statistics from Padua's CGIL trade union regarding cleaners enrolled in their union. However, their records only provide the total number of subscriptions in the cleaning sector for the year 2024, with a distinction made solely between the "non-EU" total and the overall total. This data was too general to allow for an analysis of the national distribution of workers.

Finally, the Ufficio Camerale website<sup>8</sup>, the information portal for enterprises, provided precise insights into the companies identified through interviews and ADL membership register. Particularly, the available information included details on the company's sales volume, the number of employees, profit, legal status and more. These data were useful for understanding the economic dimension of these enterprises and of the cleaning sector as a whole.

Overall, the information on the population working in this sector is very limited and no statistical analysis disaggregated by gender and nationality was available. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data provides a greater understanding of the sector, although not exhaustive. The findings

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<sup>7</sup> See more on their website: <https://www.venetolavoro.it/geografia-settori>

<sup>8</sup> See more here <https://www.ufficiocamerale.it/>

derived from these methods will be presented and analyzed in the following chapter.

### **3.6 Research utilisation**

Drawing on the debate from postcolonial and decolonial studies on epistemic extractivism, this research questions both the production and the utilisation of research findings. In the last decades, anthropology and sociology have witnessed a considerable tension, due to the “rebellion” of the research subjects, often racialised and subaltern groups or communities, against the extractive character and colonial legacies embedded in the discipline (Lozano, 2017). Recognising that knowledge is always situated (Dussel, 1996; Harding, 2004) implies moving away from the implicit assumption of a universal and context-independent knowledge. Realising one's own positionality and the limits of one's knowledge is a crucial step for a renewed approach. Consequently, fostering collaboration and reframing of the relationship between researcher and research subjects – through the co-production of knowledge – has become a key strategy for anthropology to reconfigure its epistemological and methodological coordinates, as well as its theoretical and empirical horizons (Lozano, 2017).

Critical scholars have emphasised that researchers do not live in a vacuum (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), rather, they are embedded in social relations in terms of class, gender, and racialisation, among others, that influence how data are collected and how social phenomena are analysed. Acknowledging this, I recognise my position as a white, educated, Italian speaking woman conducting interviews with migrant, often black, precarious workers. This entails a significant distance between myself and them in terms of age, experiences, racialization, and, in some cases, education.

Cusicanqui (2012) argues that the distance between academics and non-academics (re) produces the invisibility and marginalisation of non-academic knowledge, creating the conditions for the extraction of these subjugated knowledges. In this context, the findings presented in the next chapter are the result of a collaborative effort with the grassroots union ADL Cobas and, to a lesser extent, with cleaners who willingly shared and discussed their working -- and personal -- experiences. The ongoing dialogue with both the ADL union and the workers not only has significantly enriched and redefined the research enhancing awareness of the most relevant issues in the cleaning sector, but also it has strengthened the overall depth and impact of this work. Moreover, union representatives contributed to the selection and recruitment of the sample. However, despite efforts to engage cleaners more directly in the research process, workers' involvement was limited to interviews. The time constraints and structural barriers prevented the possibility of a more collaborative relationship. This limitation highlights the challenges of conducting participatory research within a workforce that often faces intense workloads, unpredictable schedules, and various forms of job insecurity. This could lay the foundation for future developments.

With the shared goal of using these findings to improve working conditions in this sector, there is a strong and collective willingness to co-create spaces for discussion and debates on this topic in academic, social and public spaces. The commitment to fostering such discussions reflects a broader desire to create moments in which workers and union representatives can speak for themselves and portray their experience on their own.

Furthermore, participants should be aware of what they contributed to producing. Acknowledging the limited accessibility and convenience of reading such a long thesis, a streamlined and results-oriented report could be created and translated in different languages. On the one hand, this would serve as an informative resource that values cleaners' accounts and allows them to share their experiences; on the other hand, it could function as a tool

for the union to support their campaigns for fair wages and improved working conditions.

To this purpose, creating accessible and multilingual informative materials and ensuring the active participation of research subjects in knowledge dissemination, contribute to challenge traditional forms of unilateral knowledge transfer, which often exclude subaltern perspectives and subjects from the academic discourse.

## **4. The characteristics of the cleaning industry**

### **4.1 Relevant aspects of the working conditions in the cleaning industry**

The cleaning activity is a fundamental component of the maintenance and functioning of any environment – whether commercial, residential or industrial – as it enhances the wellbeing, safety and efficiency of those that live in or pass through that place. However, despite its essential role, both the activity itself and the workers find little recognition or reward. Similar to domestic work, cleaning is among the lowest-paid occupations, as it is not perceived as a productive activity but rather as a marginal or auxiliary service. As a result, private companies, public administrations, hospitals, universities and other institutions, increasingly outsource cleaning services to specialised cleaning enterprises. This trend reflects a broader managerial strategy of delegating non-core activities to external providers to enhance organisational efficiency.

However, outsourcing has significant consequences for workers, as the contracting mechanism increases the competition and drives down service costs, thus directly affecting workers' wages and working conditions, often leading to precarious employment arrangements. In most of the cases, cleaners receive low or very low wages that do not adequately compensate them for their job, which, although classified as low-skilled, is physically demanding and requires endurance, precision, and attention to detail. Particularly, the issue of low pay is further exacerbated by the prevalence of involuntary part-time arrangements in this sector. Moreover, the industry is characterized by atypical working hours, frequent overtime, and the necessity for many workers to seek multiple jobs to secure a sufficient salary. The fragmentation of production processes and labor markets is closely linked to a growing reliance on immigrant workers, who are often employed in the most precarious sectors, with fewer legal protections and a higher risk of exploitation. The various aspects deriving from the labour



conditions in the cleaning sector are examined in greater depth in the following chapter (Chapter 5).

This chapter examines how labour fragmentation, with regard to the cleaning industry, is entrenched with a broader pattern of discrimination and inequality based on gender, nationality and generational divide (Schierup, 2007). Moreover, this chapter provides an economic overview of the cleaning industry, drawing on data from 30 cleaning enterprises operating in the city of Padua and its province. Additionally, it examines the role of the National Collective Labour Agreement, which sets the regulatory framework for employment conditions in this sector.

Furthermore, the chapter presents findings on the composition of the workforce, assessing whether migrant or native workers are more prevalent and identifying the dominant national groups within the industry. A particular focus is placed on Sub-Saharan women, especially Nigerian workers, analysing their participation not only in absolute terms but also in relation to the residing community in the Province of Padua. The emphasis on migrant workers' experiences stems from the fact that their legal status significantly shapes their employment trajectories, affecting their job opportunities, their exclusion from certain sectors, and the constraints they face, such as language barriers and the lack of recognition of their qualifications. Their juridical status and their vulnerability in the labor market further limits their ability to negotiate better conditions or to leave undesirable jobs, increasing their susceptibility to exploitative practices.

The data presented in this chapter are derived from the regional employment agency, Veneto Lavoro, and the national statistics institution (ISTAT), and further integrated with qualitative insights derived from interviews conducted with cleaners and trade union representatives. To ensure the privacy and protection of interviewees, all quotations from workers are attributed using pseudonyms (see Section 3.3 Table 3.1).

#### 4.1.1 An overview of the cleaning industry's economic importance

As already mentioned, outsourcing has become a strategic managerial tool, experiencing significant growth over the last 20 years. The cleaning service is essential for the functionality and maintenance of enterprises and the well-being of employees and clients, yet they are often classified as *non-core business operations* and, therefore, outsourced. This mechanism has created a new market for these services' provision, which has turned these enterprises into significant economic players. In Italy, in 2022, 49.628 firms and approximately 466.000 workers were employed in the cleaning industry, which had recorded a 3,3% increase, with a cumulative growth of 5,9% since 2019 (Confartigianato, 2023).

During this research, more than 30 cooperatives and enterprises were identified, facilitated by the ADL membership register. What emerges is the predominance of medium and large enterprises<sup>9</sup>, many of which operate on a national or international scale. They are facility management providers, ranging from cleaning, sanitisation, disinfestation, laundry to logistics, mechanical maintenance, and energy renovation. In 2023, these enterprises generated a combined sales volume of 4.2 billion euros. Of the 30 enterprises analysed, only three and five can be classified as micro and small enterprises, respectively, while nine achieved sales volume between €10.147.679,00 and €46.435.275,00<sup>10</sup>, and therefore are classified as medium. Thirteen enterprises surpassed this threshold as in 2023 they recorded a higher sales volume between, ranging from €70.275.962,00 to €878.599.324,00.

In Padua, the average sales volume of relevant enterprises is approximately €135 million, with an average of 3519 employees. As mentioned above, some of them operate in different countries: for example, Apleona Italy S.p.A employs 40.000 people in Europe and operates in more than 30

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<sup>9</sup> According to *Commission Recommendation 2003/361 concerning the definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises*

<sup>10</sup> Data obtained from <https://www.ufficiocamerale.it/>

countries<sup>11</sup>; Euro & Promos with 6000 employees has opened a new branch in Germany<sup>12</sup>. Understanding the scale of these enterprises is useful in identifying the reach of this sector, considering that many of them are major production giants that make the market highly competitive. Therefore, to reduce competitiveness among themselves, some cooperatives and enterprises choose to collaborate by forming Temporary Enterprises Associations<sup>13</sup>, as explained by the trade unionist below.

*«There are many [...]. They are very large enterprises. Recently, they developed the tendency to organise into ATI, Associazione Temporanea d'Impresa [Temporary Enterprises Association], to participate in call for tenders and afterwards, redistribute contracts among themselves, in order to reduce competitiveness. [...] Although lately one gained a monopoly [...] as it is very big and holds many contracts at the national level.» (Trade unionist, 10.02.2025)*

Moreover, it is interesting to note that many of them maintain the legal form of cooperative society, which implies some fiscal benefits, especially for social cooperatives. Compared to a typical enterprise, cooperatives benefit from reduced regional tax on productive activities (*IRAP*), a lower corporate income tax rate (*IRES*), and a reduction or exemption from stamp duty and Government license fees (Cooperativeonline, 2020; Enac, 2021).

Despite the impressive economic performance of these companies – some of which are projected to reach one billion euros in sales in the coming years – the working conditions of cleaners is a serious concern. Conversely, the increased competition among companies – due to both the increase in participation and the growth accumulation – pushes them to cut costs and benefits to ensure the contract. While these companies manage to secure multiple contracts at the same time, taking advantage of their multifaceted specialisation, workers wages remain at the minimum as set by the National Collective Labour Agreement. Additionally, inflation in recent years has

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<sup>11</sup> Visit their website <https://apleonaitaly.com/lavora-con-noi/>

<sup>12</sup> Visit their website <https://www.europromos.it/en/press/news-en/europromos-comes-to-germany/>

<sup>13</sup> In Italian Associazioni Temporanee di Impresa (ATI)

significantly reduced the purchasing power of these already minimal wages. Hence, the disparity between the conspicuous capital accumulation of firms and the precarious conditions of their workers raises important questions about equity and sustainability within the sector. In the following section, cleaners' labour conditions are examined, drawing on their experience as recounted during the interviews.

#### 4.1.2 The National Collective Labour Agreement

The *National Collective Labour Agreement*<sup>14</sup> (hereinafter referred to as CCNL) regulates the labour relations in the cleaning and multiservice sector at the national level<sup>15</sup>. It is based on the bargaining agreement between the workers' organisations, such as trade unions and workers associations, on the one hand, and those that represent firms and enterprises, on the other. It is a regulatory source with a three year validity period, after which it is revised and a new one is adopted (art. 3). Up to now, the National Collective Agreement adopted for the period 2021-2024 has recently expired, and a new one for 2025-2027 will soon be bargained and adopted.

The *CCNL for Cleaning Services And Integrated/Multi Services* can be applied to a variety of specialised agencies operating in industrial and civil cleaning, covering different services such as maintenance, gardening, and logistics. The agreement regulates different aspects concerning employees' rights and the relationship with the employer.

First, it establishes a classification system for staff, defining different levels, on the basis of experience and specialisation, that corresponds to different compensation levels. However, this does not always adequately reflect the actual skills required or sufficiently recognised professional experience, leading to an undervaluation of both professional status and remuneration. Indeed, the CCNL sets minimum standard wages according to job categories

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<sup>14</sup> In Italian: *Contratto Collettivo Nazionale di Lavoro (CCNL)*

<sup>15</sup> Retrieved on January 2025

<https://www.onbsi.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/CCNL-Eng.pdf>

with periodic increments (art.18-22). Nevertheless, these wages are often insufficient to meet living expenses and ensure a dignified standard of living, especially considering the prevalence of involuntary part time contracts. In this regard, the CCNL refers to a weekly amount of 40 hours for full time workers, but in practice the majority of workers are part-time, for which it sets a minimum working hours per week is 14.

Second, the agreement provides for specific indemnities to compensate for additional burdens related to overtime, night shifts and holiday work (art. 38-39); means of transport allowance, difficult working conditions allowance, industrial production department cleaning allowance (art.24). Despite their importance, these compensations are not always applied correctly or systematically remitted, further contributing to the precariousness of the sector.

A key provision within the CCNL is the so-called *social clause*, that ensures that during the change of contract, the new employer must maintain the same occupational level, with the same contractual conditions. This measure is crucial to protect workers from unemployment and structural changes in their working conditions, however, as discussed in the next chapter, the change of contract still has important implications on workers.

The Collective Agreement also includes some measures to address gender-based violence, sexual violence and harassment in the workplace. Specifically, article 7-bis establishes the employer's obligation to ensure working conditions that guarantee the physical and moral integrity and dignity of workers, as well as their psychological well-being. To this end, initiatives of an informative and educational nature must be organised. Article 52-bis grants the right of workers involved in protective measures relating to gender-based violence that are certified by social services, anti-violence centers or shelters to abstain from work for a maximum period of 90 working days. While this measure is particularly important, especially considering the gendered composition of this sector, it has some considerable limitations: first, the requirement for official certification can

be limiting for those that do not want to or are unable to access institutional support; second, to exercise this right, workers is obliged to give the employer at least seven days' notice, indicating the beginning and the end of the period of leave, which is completely in contradiction with the urgent and unpredictable nature of situations involving gender-based violence, potentially making this measure less effective.

Lastly, the CCNL indicates trade union rights (art. 59,61,62), ensuring that unions play a role in monitoring the application of social and labour legislation and granting workers the right to leave for union activities. Despite these provisions, the effectiveness depends on the strength of unions in the workplace, which is often scarce due to the labour fragmentation and the prevalence of migrant workers. The fear for reprisal and the difficulty in organising themselves hinder the exercise of these measures.

Overall, while the CCNL provides an essential regulatory framework for workers in the cleaning and multiservice sector, its practical application remains problematic and some aspects need to be improved and strengthened.

Until the new agreement is adopted, the older one remains in force. Although it is not possible to predict the time for its adoption, the debate on it has already started. In this regard, some of the priorities indicated by the public statement promoted by La F.I.S.A.S.C.A.T. (Italian Federation of Trade Unions for Workers in Commercial Services, Related Sectors, and Tourism) (2024) are:

- increase in the minimum wages to maintain purchasing power, aligned with inflation indices
- harmonization of seniority-related indemnities
- the strengthening of union relations
- important part-time contract revisions including 35% premium for supplementary hours
- consolidation of some supplementary hours into contractual working hours

- increase minimum weekly hours to 18, adjusting monthly and annual minima
- a structural income support for workers with cyclic part-time contracts during suspension periods, with company contributions and government involvement
- full integration of INPS indemnities for maternity/paternity leave to reach 100% salary
- additional 90 days of leave for victims of violence with 100% salary indemnity
- specific leave for family-related needs (e.g., school placement, family reunification, residence permit renewal)
- recognize dressing/undressing time as work hours.

These points correspond to some of the most compelling issues raised by both workers and union representatives, which are discussed in the next chapter.

Therefore, if these proposals are approved, some of the issues highlighted in the next chapter will be positively impacted. However it is safe to assume that a lower compromise will be reached between the workers' associations proposals and their counterpart. This is also due to the scarce mobilisation from workers in this industry, as a consequence of their working conditions that keep them isolated and dispersed.

The persistence of low wages, involuntary part-time contracts, difficulties in enforcing indemnities, and the precarious nature of employment due to outsourcing mechanisms highlight the structural vulnerabilities of the sector. These challenges reinforce the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms, improved protections, and more effective union representation to ensure that the rights established in the CCNL lead to tangible improvements in workers' conditions.

## **4.2 Characteristics of the workforce**

This study focuses exclusively on cleaning staff, excluding other types of workers such as office employees and human resources personnel. Considered as a low-skilled job, this sector primarily employs unskilled or low-skilled workers. Especially given the high demand for labour compared to the low supply, this sector is not particularly selective in terms of experience and education. As a result, it sees significant participation from migrant workers who are, instead, often excluded from other sectors that require higher qualifications, language proficiency, and where native workers are prioritised.

While this industry is still quite diverse in terms of nationalities, its gender composition is more clearly defined. Women are the majority of the workforce in the sector. Data from the regional employment agency VenetoLavoro shows that in 2024 75,5% of cleaners in the province of Padua were women. However, this percentage is slightly higher among unionized cleaners, reaching 82.5% at ADL and 80.8% at CGIL trade unions. This small discrepancy might be explained by several factors. First, as mentioned earlier, VenetoLavoro's database does not provide information about the number of individuals actively working in the sector, but the number of contracts established in a given year (or trimester). This suggests that men tend to establish more employment contracts, possibly to compensate for the involuntary part-time contracts and secure enough working hours, more than women. Second, there might be a higher incidence of unionisation among women than men. These explanations are not mutually exclusive and likely contribute jointly to the observed difference.

Interviews further confirm the prevalence of female cleaners and a small presence of men. However, one key finding is the work organisation along the gender distinction. Namely, both men and women do the ordinary cleaning activities, but men are also responsible for the more physically demanding tasks. This highlights how, on the one hand, the male presence



seems to challenge traditional gender roles that associate cleaning with women. On the other hand, a gender reaffirmation occurs as men are assigned the more physically demanding tasks (Pullen & Simpson, 2009; Alberti & Iannuzzi, 2020).

*«Yes [I do the same activities as women], but the difficult work [too]. I do the work of men.*

*The strong ones, I do them, but the minor ones, the ladies do those ones. [...] Like washing of teli [cloths] they put the bread with. When the teli [cloths] is very dirty, we will bring all of them outside to wash.» (Christian, 27/01/25)*

With regard to the age, the majority of workers are adults (30-55), with a prevalence of people aged 40-49 (VenetoLavoro, 2023). More precisely, workers under 30 make up 15,9% (700 out of 4390), with a slight prevalence in the 25-29 group. The largest share (61%) falls between 30 and 49 years old, with nearly half of them (1180) being 40-49. The senior category (55-64 and above) account for 23%, with a prevalence in the 55-59 age group. Comparing these results with the ADL membership register, most workers are aged between 40 and 60, with a slight prevalence of 55-60. It might be concluded from this, that there is a prevalence of adult workers with a limited presence of those under 30. This suggests, on the one hand, that this industry is not attractive to young people, and on the other, that workforce renewal is lacking. Moreover, the presence of workers over 60 in this sector highlights the low social mobility towards other jobs and the necessity to remain employed at an older age due to economic reasons, even in physically demanding roles.

This raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of the sector, given the general ageing population in Italy and the overall limited shortage of workforce, particularly in this sector. However, migrant workers represent a crucial labor force that is increasingly filling this gap, as the native population grows older and becomes less willing to take on physically demanding jobs under questionable working conditions.

### 4.2.1 Migrant workers

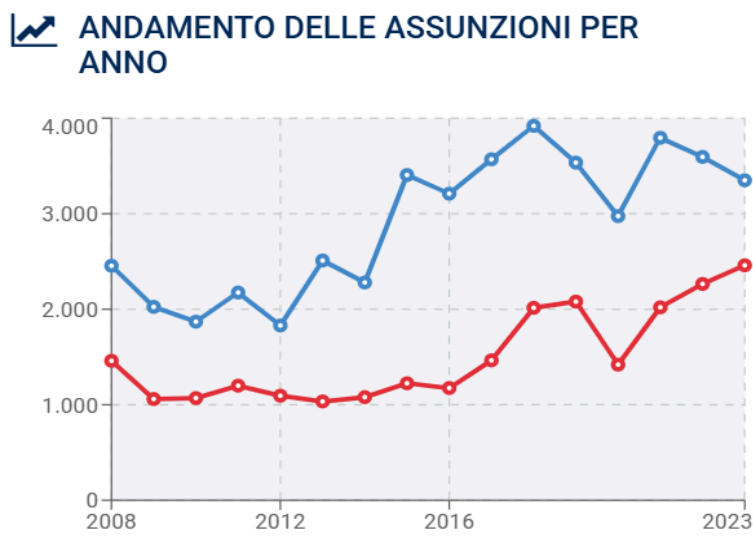
This research was aimed at understanding whether there is a relevant demand for migrant workers in this sector, to understand whether there is a correlation between poor working conditions and a vulnerable and easily exploitable workforce. According to VenetoLavoro, in 2024, migrants accounted for 41,3% of new hires in the province of Padua, similarly with the previous years. While this data may not fully reflect the composition of the entire workforce, it highlights the significant presence of migrant workers in the cleaning industry, even though they do not constitute the majority. This share appears particularly disproportionate when considering that foreign nationals make up only 17.5% of Padua's total population (Municipality of Padua, 2023). More broadly, this trend aligns with EU estimates of migrants being 30% of the workforce in this sector (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2009) and with the national pattern, as immigrant workers make up one-third of the workforce in the service industry (Ministry of the Labour and Social Policies, 2024 ).

Despite not being the dominant workforce, the portion is still significantly high and an analysis of annual hiring trends reveals important insights (Figure 4.1)<sup>16</sup>. First, the trends for migrant and Italian workers differ significantly: the former have experienced progressive growth, especially since 2015, with the exception of 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic spread, while the latter have shown a more fluctuating tendency. Second, since 2021, following the economic shock caused by Covid-19, this industry has resumed its expansion. However, this growth has been more evident and constant for foreign workers, whereas Italians' hirings has been decreasing in the last few years. Therefore, annual hiring trends reveal the gradual narrowing of the gap between the two groups.

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<sup>16</sup> See more on VenetoLavoro <https://www.venetolavoro.it/geografia-settori>

Another important factor to consider is the employment balance over the last years, which has recorded negative figures for Italian workers, while positive ones for immigrants. More precisely: in 2024, there was a net decrease of 20 Italian workers, while 190 foreign workers were added to the workforce; in 2023, the decline was even greater, with 45 fewer Italians and 180 foreigners employed; in 2022, the drop among Italians was particularly sharp, with 180 fewer Italian workers and an increase of foreign workers of +125 (VenetoLavoro). Prior to 2021, however, the trend for Italians was still positive. The cleaning industry appears to be hiring fewer Italians while increasingly relying on foreign workers. This could be explained by multiple factors. On the one hand, fluctuations in Italian hiring could be attributed to economic conditions, employment policies, and changes in the local labor market. On the other hand, the growing presence of migrant workers may be linked to Italians seeking jobs in sectors with better conditions and higher wages, while immigrants - who often have fewer opportunities – are more likely to enter the cleaning industry.



*Figure 4.1 Hiring trend by year in the cleaning industry in the Province of Padua. "Sector's geographies" (VenetoLavoro). The blue line for Italian workers; the red line for foreigners.*

As previously discussed, while native workers are less willing to do manual jobs and accept unfavourable working conditions, the high demand and the low selectivity of the cleaning sector makes it an accessible employment opportunity for people facing difficulties in securing employment in more demanding industries. This makes it particularly attractive for migrant workers, especially those from non-EU countries, who often struggle to find employment, due to linguistic barriers, lack of adequate qualification – often connected to the non-recognition of their qualifications and competencies. Indeed, a portion of the migrant workforce do this job, despite being overqualified for it, thus experiencing a contradictory class mobility (Parrenas, 2020; Romens, 2022).

Among the interviewed migrant workers, three out of nine were graduates. One graduated in Senegal and, once arrived in Italy, she found out that her degree was not recognised; so, over the years she studied to obtain the Italian middle school diploma. Another worker graduated and worked in Nigeria, before following her husband to Italy where she started working as a baby-sitter and as a cleaner. While the other one earned her bachelor degree in Nigeria and completed a master degree in Padua, but she was unable to find a job in her sector. To remain legally in Italy after finishing her master's degree, she was compelled to find a job with a minimum of 25 hours.

A key factor in creating a structural vulnerability is the residence permit depending on employment, which severely limits job opportunities and forces many workers to accept exploitative conditions, immobilising them in the secondary sector. The constant risk of losing their legal status makes it difficult to assert their rights, leaving them more susceptible to blackmail and labour exploitation. Furthermore, informal employment and undeclared work are widespread among migrant workers, exposing them to wage reductions, unsafe working environments, and a lack of social protections. This is evident in their overrepresentation in low-skilled and physically

demanding jobs, such as in the agricultural labour, domestic work and construction (Fondazione Moressa, 2014).

This precariousness is reinforced by immigration politics dominated by the precarisation and criminalisation of immigrants through the application of restricted, selective and discriminatory policies (Basso, 2010).

In a context where the cleaning industry is undergoing a significant expansion, working conditions remain highly precarious and below average standards, particularly in terms of pay, the pool of replacements shrinks, and demand continues to exceed supply. In the meanwhile, the Italian workforce is aging and retiring, narrowing the gap between Italians and migrants in this sector. As predicted by the dual labor market theory (Piore, 1979), the migrant workforce acts as a crucial labor pool to meet the chronic demand of lower-skilled workers. Rather than improving the working conditions, employers prefer to rely on migrant workers who face disadvantages in employment opportunities due individual factors – such as lack of education, limited knowledge of the local language, uncertain or irregular legal status – as well as structural factors, including the lack of formal recognition of foreign degrees and discrimination based on gender and race. Many migrant workers furthermore identify with workers and working conditions in their home-country rather than with the host country conditions. As a result, they are more inclined to accept inferior wages and working conditions (Piore, 1979)

As a result inequalities deepen, social mobility opportunities diminish, and labor market segmentation becomes more pronounced: on one side, highly paid professionals in finance, management, research, and on the other, the poorly paid workers, in unstable, precarious and often informal jobs who service their needs.

#### 4.2.2 Dominant nationalities: Sub Saharan women as the new main workforce?

As already mentioned, precise data on characteristics of cleaner are not yet available. However, VenetoLavoro provides useful insights on hiring trends, allowing us to distinguish employees based on their Italian or foreigner citizenship and their nationalities.

In the province of Padua almost 60% of cleaners are Italians. Among foreign citizenships, the most represented nationalities are Romanian (10,5%), Nigerian (6,7%), and Moroccan (4,4%). To a lesser extent, there are also Moldovans, Albanians, and Ukrainians (table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Italian workers and the most conspicuous foreign nationalities among cleaners in the province of Padua (VenetoLavoro)

| <b>Nation</b> | <b>2022</b> | <b>2023</b> | <b>2024</b> |
|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Italy         | 2,575       | 2,500       | 2,610       |
| Romania       | 350         | 360         | 440         |
| Nigeria       | 265         | 295         | 280         |
| Morocco       | 210         | 245         | 185         |
| Moldova       | 105         | 100         | 100         |
| Albania       | 85          | 70          | 75          |
| Ukraine       | 60          | 50          | 60          |
| Tunisia       | 45          | 70          | 55          |
| Serbia        | 20          | 25          | 25          |
| Philippines   | 20          | 45          | 25          |
| Senegal       | 35          | 45          | 30          |

Nonetheless, it's important to consider that these national groups have different histories and characteristics. Female immigration from Eastern Europe into the domestic sector during the 1980s has consolidated the

presence of Romanian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian women, making them some of the largest migrant communities (Demaio et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Albanian immigration started in the 1990s, with memorable images of overcrowded boats reaching Italy's southern coasts. Today, Albanians represent the second largest non-EU community in Italy, with 416.829 residents. (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2023; ISTAT, 2023). Romania, however, has the largest overall foreign population in Italy, numbering 1.081.836 residents, while the Moldova community consists of 109.804 people.

The migration dynamics of Nigerians are different. Until 2000, Nigerian immigration was relatively marginal, but it saw significant growth after 2011 and again in 2022 (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2024). In 2023, the Nigerian community ranked as the 13th community in terms of regularly resident citizens, with 123.646 people (2,7% of total non-EU citizens) (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2024; ISTAT, 2023). In contrast, the Moroccan community is four times larger than the Nigerian one, though it has been gradually decreasing since 2014. With 415.088 Moroccan people, it is the first nationality within the non-EU foreign resident population (10,7% of total non-EU residents) (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2024; ISTAT, 2023).

Focusing on the province of Padua, the employment ratio in the cleaning industry relative to the national population for Romania, Nigeria and Morocco highlights the notable prevalence of Nigerians in this sector. Specifically, 7,49% of Nigerians in Padua are employed in the cleaning industry, compared to only 1,36% and 2,07% of Romanians and Moroccans. This trend is even more pronounced among women, given the high genderization of this industry: in 2024, 13.5% of Nigerian women work in this sector, compared to 2,19% of Moroccan women and 1,14% of Romanian women. Examining trends from 2021 onwards, the share of Nigerians in the cleaning industry has progressively increased in relative terms, at the expense of the other groups.

Looking at the other Sub-Saharan nationalities, their overall employment in the cleaning sector is low, with a maximum of 30 contracts signed per year. However, in relative terms, their participation in this sector is significant. For instance, according to VenetoLavoro, in 2024, 20 employment contracts were signed with Senegalese women. Given the size of the local Senegalese population, it is estimated that 6.5% of Senegalese women in the province work in this sector.

This suggests that, despite not being the main national group in the cleaning workforce, Nigerians represent a considerable portion of it in relative terms. In particular, this sector provides one of the main employment opportunities for Nigerian migrants. In other words, there is a high probability that Nigerians, especially Nigerian women, end up working in this field. Several factors contribute to this pattern. First, structural racism plays a crucial role, leading to the exclusion from many positions, such as those that involve interaction with clients, and the preference for Italians or Caucasian migrants, as discussed in chapter 3 (par. 2). Second, inadequate or insufficient competences, also connected to language barriers or the non-recognition of their qualifications, prevent Nigerian migrants from accessing other sectors. As a consequence, many migrant workers, despite being overqualified for this job, are forced to accept low skilled jobs due to the absence of better alternatives.

More broadly, migrants tend to accept low-paid and low-status jobs that natives are no more willing to do, as they are more motivated to find a job and also because their social frame of reference is in origin communities (Piore, 1979). Additionally, migrants' networks play a crucial role in facilitating job opportunities, promoting the expansion of the cleaning industry among Nigerian workers (Granovetter, 1978). Migrant networks contribute to occupational concentration through mechanisms of information sharing, referrals, and support among relatives and compatriots. In turn, this process fosters the development of occupational niches, associated with specific national groups.



Therefore, the intersection of race, gender and migrant status make migrant women the ideal workforce for an industry characterised by precarious employment and low wages (Christou & Kofman, 2022). Except for highly skilled workers that are recruited from abroad for specialised roles, most migrants end up working in low status jobs with limited prospects for upward mobility, regardless of their education level and, to some extent, the social class they belonged to in their country of origin.

*« The fact that almost all of them are immigrants, it's a job done by immigrant women – there are men who do cleaning jobs, mainly immigrant men – but the majority are immigrant women [...] because it's how the labour market works! It's because of how the labour market is structured in Italy, it's practically the only choice they have. [...] As you know, the residence permit is often linked to their employment contract, so you are... how do you say it? When the employer knows this, it uses this for their advantages, you are blackmailed. You accept all these conditions because you know that you need the employment contract also for the residence permit or the rent. [...] Especially for African women, it's their only choice because they are often excluded from the domestic work for a racism matter, I think. Here domestic workers are mainly from East Europe, they are white, christians, so they move from a cleaning enterprise to another; they have network among them, they communicate with each other where pay is better, they warn each other, they know more or less how enterprises are, but their margin of action is not that much.» (ADL union representative, 27/11/2025)*

During the interviews, all respondents confirmed the presence of many migrant colleagues, especially from Africa. This phenomenon was explained in different ways. First, the industry was described as less selective, compared to others, as no prior experience or qualification was demanded. Second, they noted that fewer people, especially native workers, are willing to do this job, as it is too physically demanding and poorly paid. In contrast, migrants are more willing to accept even harsh working conditions, due to limited employment opportunities, and financial urgency, both to support themselves and to send remittances to their family in their country of origin.

As a result, migrant workers have a strong presence in this precarious sector, while native workers have progressively withdrawn from it.

*«There are all nationalities: there are Nigerians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Pakistans. They are all here, because, sorry, I don't think that Italians come to work like this, with this wage. Nobody would accept it. Since you are a foreigner and you need to live, if they give you this, you accept it. [...] Everyone has their own history. There are people that fled from war, so if they give them 7€, they accept it anyway.» (Ndeye, 22/01/2025)*

Looking at their work trajectories, what emerges is the prevalence of informal and low-skilled labour, often connected to reproductive work. A key role was played by national networks that often acted as employers, shaping their access to job opportunities. For instance, four out of ten worked as babysitters; three were employed by Nigerian compatriots, while one worked also as a maid for an Italian family. Others found jobs in different sectors: two in a warehouse, one in a factory, one in a cafeteria run by Nigerians, and one as a container loader, the latter for seven years without a contract. Their experiences were marked by significant challenges, including difficulties in securing jobs with a contract and with sufficient hours, the instability of fixed-term contracts, and physically demanding tasks. Some also faced the additional burden of working for companies that went bankrupt, further disrupting their employment and leaving them with unpaid wages. Bureaucratic obstacles, such as long waiting periods for documents, added to their precariousness, making their labour conditions even more unstable and uncertain.

The majority entered the cleaning industry through personal contacts, particularly from their national community, who suggested such employment, highlighting the importance of social networks in their job research. Only one person followed a different path, after the employment center recommended her a training course, she received a certificate as a cleaner and started working in this sector.

In the light of the above, their fragmented work trajectories become evident, marked by informal and poorly paid jobs. As a result, securing a job with an open-ended contract appears as a successful achievement, even when the pay remains low and the working hours are insufficient to meet their needs. Additionally, It is also important to consider that, despite the challenges, all respondents expressed satisfaction with working in this sector, except for the low pay. Many emphasised that working held meaning, beyond its financial aspect, providing them a sense of autonomy, self-determination and self-esteem. Therefore, it is essential to recognise migrant workers' agency that is expressed also in their labour choices, even within the constraints of precarious employment conditions. By defining *agency* as the individual's ability to make choices and act within the constraints of their social location – including structural factors such as immigration policies, labour markets, or societal expectations of gender roles – this concept stresses that people remain active agents who negotiate, resist, or comply with these constraints in complex ways (Mahler & Pessar, 2020). This perspective is crucial for avoiding an overly deterministic view of migrants as simply passive subjects of broader systems.

*« [My previous job] was not well paid, although we had to move all around the city for €400 a month. It is true that we earn for living, but in my case, it is a little bit different. I work primarily for my well-being, because I like working. This is the main reason. I do not look at the money, it comes second. I like moving, going out, doing something, and feeling useful. This comes first, and then money, of course.» (Ndeye, 22/01/2025)*

## **5. Labour conditions in the cleaning industry**

### **5.1 Contractors transitions and insecurity**

In the following chapter, I explore the prevailing labour conditions in the cleaning industry in the province of Padua, a sector characterised by marked precariousness and structural issues that profoundly affect workers' daily lives, ranging from the effects of contractors' transitions, to isolation and social exclusion, as well as difficulties related to involuntary limited working hours, the illicit use of time off and health problems resulting from physically demanding work. Additionally, their wages appear to be significantly below the national and regional averages, such that cleaners can be considered at risk of *in-work poverty*. In a national context characterised by increasing cost of living, inflation, stationary salaries, paired with a housing crisis in the city of Padua, workers struggle to make ends meet. The chapter is structured into several sections that examine these issues in depth, aiming to highlight the relevant aspects concerning this job. These findings are based on interviews with workers and trade unionists, supported by literature and data from VenetoLavoro and ISTAT. Specifically, I will examine how working conditions affect work-life balance and, despite these challenges, how workers manage to find ways to deal with these daily struggles, particularly analysing the coping strategies workers adopt to survive and resist these adverse conditions.

The provision of cleaning services is nowadays almost entirely governed by contracting and subcontracting mechanisms, leading to frequent changes in management between companies.

Outsourcing in the cleaning industry is generally justified on the basis of efficiency, cost reduction and flexibility. Organizations, especially public institutions, large corporations and property management firms prefer to delegate cleaning operations to external service providers so that they can focus on their core activities, while theoretically benefiting from the

expertise and resources of specialized cleaning firms. However, in practice, companies are pressured to submit the lowest possible bid to secure agreements, often at the expense of service quality and working conditions. One of the primary concerns is job insecurity, due to frequent contract reassignment to different companies. To address this issue, Article 4 of the National Collective Agreement includes a *social clause* that requires the incoming company to retain the same staff. Particularly, the outgoing company is required to provide preventive notice to union organizations and the relevant company, detailing the number of workers involved, along with information about their previous contracts (including respective weekly contractual hours, classification level, date hired in the terminating company). This measure is crucial for ensuring the same employment levels. Particularly, the right of workers to remain in the same workplace with their previous contract ensures greater stability, reducing the risk of unemployment or reassignment to a different location – or even in another part of the city – during contractors' transitions. It is also supposed to allow workers to maintain their shifts, tasks, and contractual terms. However, new contractors may attempt to circumvent labour protections by offering reduced wages or cutting working hours and workers may be forced to accept less favourable conditions or risk losing their job.

When companies win contracts by offering lower bids, but the required work remains unchanged, the consequences fall directly on workers. Particularly, employers may expect the same results in a shorter time or with fewer workers, worsening the quality of the work and working conditions. As a result, despite the essential role in maintaining hygiene and safety standards in public environments, labor becomes the first area where cuts are made, resulting in stagnant wages, increased workloads, and fewer benefits for cleaning staff.

Moreover, the constant shift in management and policies can create instability in workplace dynamics: workers may struggle to adapt to new supervisors, operational changes or different contractual obligations, such as

compensations, holidays, contributions. Indeed, contractor transitions result in the establishment of a new employment relationship, meaning that employees' official start dates are reset with each change, even if they have worked in the same workplace for years. This has multiple consequences for workers: it hinders career progression and the following wage increments; the accrual of vacation days and social security contributions; and it puts at risk the recognition of workers' union rights. In other words, after contractor transition, workers often experience cancellation of their accrued holidays, because the incoming company wishes to reorganise leave policies or that everyone starts from zero, thus threatening workers' right to holidays. This has led to disputes between workers and trade unions against the enterprises, which only in some cases resulted in the recognition of workers' leaves, but it still remains very common, especially for those that are not unionised.

In addition, frequent contractor transitions increase job insecurity, as workers cannot be certain that their hard-earned rights – particularly those won through collective action – will continue to be upheld. This issue arose in the case of union meetings during working hours, a fundamental trade union right. In a multinational enterprise in Padua, cleaners had previously won the right to hold union meetings during work hours after prolonged disputes. However, when a new contractor took over, this right was revoked because the company refused to recognize the grassroots union to which the workers belonged.

Another aspect arising from a fragmented employment relationship is the difficulty in obtaining recognition for seniority increments. According to Article 22 of the CCNL, workers in the sector are entitled to a flat-rate seniority increase after four years in the industry, rather than with a specific employer. On the one hand, this measure has the advantage of unlinking seniority from a specific employer and instead basing it on the sector. On the other hand, it is a one-time-flat-rate increase ranging from €51,02 to €82,99 per month, depending on the level. While white-collars employed in the cleaning industry are entitled to an increase of 6.25% calculated on the

standard salary for each two-year period of work with the same company (art.22), cleaners are the only working category that do not benefit from periodic increments during their career, but only from a one-time seniority increase. In an already precarious and poorly compensated context, this measure significantly penalises workers in the long run, creating a disparity from the rest of sectors where workers benefit from periodic increments. Additionally, as trade unionists reported, this increase is not granted automatically and companies rarely apply it, unless workers or unions exert pressure for it. Employers only provide the seniority increment once they have verified the employee's work history.

Finally, the existence of two *de facto* employers, a formal one (the contractor) and a substantial one (the contracting entity), complicates the workers' ability to negotiate for workplace issues, even for minor ones. This split creates a situation in which accountability is blurred, such that when workers raise a concern with their supervisor, responsibility is often shifted back and forth. The company may claim that it is not their responsibility and that they are simply following the instructions provided by the contracting entity. This creates a frustrating cycle where no one takes ownership, leaving workers with unresolved issues. A clear example of this issue arose when workers claimed access to staff facilities, such as the canteen and changing room, but it was initially denied, as discussed in the next paragraph. Similarly, workers often receive inadequate equipment, but securing better tools can be difficult. For example, some workers reported being provided with garbage bags that were too small or gloves that were too thick to use effectively. This lack of proper equipment not only compromises the quality of work but also increases the risk of injury or strain. In some cases, workers have taken matters into their own hands, purchasing their own supplies to make their jobs more manageable. For example, one worker chose to buy her own garbage bags, as the ones provided by the employer were insufficient for the amount of waste she had to handle.

While this individual solution may temporarily alleviate the problem for one worker, it highlights the larger issue of insufficient resources provided by employers, in a context where accountability is diluted, while workers are forced to bear the cost of essential tools and make personal sacrifices, using their already inadequate wages.

## 5.2 Working in isolation, neglect, and exclusion

Like domestic work and other jobs related to reproductive labour, this job often involves social isolation and invisibility. Considered as a “dirty job”, the cleaning activity is supposed to remain invisible while it is being done: workers typically clean during off-hours and, if not, they are expected to be discrete and not disturb customers nor other beneficiaries of their service. Some scholars argue that invisibility may be common in, if not characteristic of, occupations that are low-status and stigmatized (Simpson et al., 2012). Accordingly, invisibility is a fundamental characteristic of cleaning work for several reasons, including sociocultural, spatial, and temporal mechanisms (Hatton, 2017; Hood, 1988). First, sociocultural ideologies, such as perceptions of ‘dirty’ work, render this occupation invisible. Building cleaning involves at least two types of ‘dirt’: physical – as cleaners work in hazardous conditions and are associated with the trash and the bodily fluids they clean – and social – as cleaners occupy a subordinate position in customer relations, workplace hierarchies and society at large (Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). Additionally, cleaning involves tasks that are historically and culturally associated with women, whose labor in general is often naturalized, thankless, undervalued, and therefore rendered invisible (Fletcher, 1999; Simpson & Lewis, 2005).

The cleaners also described the often invisibility of their work, even when it is being carried out. Several workers shared their experiences of feeling that their labor was not given the respect it deserved. For example, when they



were mopping floors, people would often walk in and out without acknowledging them. Although some people would apologise or greet them, many do not notice their presence, and workers perceive this as a form of disrespect. One worker also expressed a sentiment that captured a broader issue of discrimination, saying «Some Italians do not like people of colour» (Mercy, 15/01/2025).

Invisibility and isolation often overlap due to organizational practices that render this occupation systematically invisible, separating spatially and temporally cleaners from other coworkers and customers. Indeed, within a cleaning team, tasks are organised in such a way that different people work at the same time, but without interacting, as they are assigned to separate floors, buildings or even districts. Even if they meet some colleagues in the changing rooms, they spend most of their time alone. This scattered distribution significantly reduces opportunities for casual conversations, mutual support and the ability to collectively address workplace concerns. Unlike workers who have easier access to networks of colleagues and meetings, outsourced cleaners face structural barriers that prevent them from developing a sense of community and, hence, from organising and advocating for better conditions. Nevertheless, their spatial separation and isolation was normalised by workers. Although there was not the opportunity to go in depth on this aspect, workers did not express any particular concern on this aspect. However, I observed a markedly different attitude when a cleaner shared with enthusiasm and warmth her experience in the nursing home and the daily interactions she has with the patients, some of whom suffer from dementia. She openly expressed enjoyment and affection while spending time with them, chatting, and «trying to make them laugh». This revealed a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction deriving from social relations she developed with the patients, whom she referred to as “friends”. This contrast highlighted how social relationships in certain work environments can contribute to a higher level of job satisfaction and

emotional connection, especially when those relationships are seen as more meaningful and personal.

Research has shown that physical isolation can lead to feelings of social isolation at work (Cooper & Kurland, 2002), as it alters work-related experiences and interactions that inform employees' perceptions. Such isolation has been associated with decreased job satisfaction and decreased extra role performance, i.e. providing support to their colleagues, promoting a positive environment or maintaining a proactive attitude (Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011). Social isolation can be particularly problematic for migrant workers who – especially in their early years in a new country – may experience increased marginalisation, a lack of social networks, and negative effects on their mental and physical health, well-being, and quality of life.

Furthermore, working as contracted employees creates a distinction between those directly employed by the facility and those perceived as outsiders. This results in a classification where one group enjoys several advantages and benefits, while the other is treated as second-class workers, often excluded from common areas and service. For example, outsourced cleaners found themselves denied access to facilities such as canteens, break rooms and changing rooms. In some cases, they are required to use inadequate spaces for basic needs, reinforcing their marginalisation.

*«We couldn't access the canteen or the changing rooms like other workers. They told us we couldn't stay there, we had to wear our uniform in the toilet for people with disabilities. But I am not a person with disabilities. We are more than forty people, we cannot get dressed there. [...] Then, they did not want us to eat at the canteen, so we had to go out. I clean the tables and the dishes they use to eat there. If I don't wash them, they cannot eat. But we fought for that and now we can eat there and change our clothes with the rest of the workers. [...] However, we still cannot use the elevator.» (Ndeye, 22/01/2025)*

This testimony highlights both the structural barriers imposed on outsourced workers and the ways in which they resist and challenge these inequalities. The denial of access to the canteen and changing room is representative of a hierarchical division between permanent staff and subcontracted workers, where the latter are considered as outsiders and unworthy of the same rights and accommodations.

Cleaners, despite playing a crucial role in maintaining hygiene and therefore safeguarding the image of public institutions, corporations and shops, are often overlooked, unless their job is done inadequately. Paradoxically, their labour is essential for the comfort of other employees and customers, but they are denied access to the spaces they clean, creating a cycle of exclusion where cleaners are both physically and socially separated from the rest of the workforce.

### **5.3 The predominance of involuntary part-time contracts and inconvenient working hours.**

This industry is characterised by a significant prevalence of involuntary part-time contracts. According to data from VenetoLavoro, in 2023, 3800 out of 4385 contracts (86%) established in the province of Padua were part-time and only 585 were full-time. Coherently, almost all of the workers I interviewed had part-time contracts with fewer than 20 hours per week, and four out of ten reported to have a determinate contract of 10 or 15 hours per week. Only one worker, a man, had a full time contract of 36 hours, while an Italian woman was able to work 38 hours a week, on the basis of two different contracts across three different facilities, before recently retiring.

*«I wake up at four in the morning, I get two buses to start working at 6.30 and finish at 8.30. Two hours, sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon or at night.» (Mercy, 15/01/2025)*

*«In the morning I used to work at Infocamere [...] and then I started working at the municipality. [...] From 4 am to 7.45 in the morning; then from 8 to 9 to the library; and then in the afternoon, at the civil register office, from 12.30 to 4.00 pm.» (Paola, 14/01/2025)*

All of them complained that the amount of hours allocated in their contract is below their needs. This need is more compelling for migrant workers whose residence permit for subordinate work requires a minimum of 20 hours per week. As a consequence, workers that were employed with a determinate contract and for 10 or 15 hours experienced anxiety and urgency in finding additional jobs that could allow them to remain legally in Italy .

Moreover, many have complained that the time allocated in their contract is insufficient for cleaning properly, especially if they work when the facility is open, with people and clients interrupting them or ruining their job. As a result, they are required to work hurriedly, thus affecting the quality of their work and also their health, as it increases the already demanding physical effort and the risk of injuries. One way for cleaners to cope with this issue is by partially reorganising their schedules: they may start earlier or finish later to meet expectations and deliver high-quality work, often without any recognition or compensation for this extra effort.

*«I'm supposed to work there from 6 to 9 am, Monday to Friday, but I start at 5:30 because I have to clean three big rooms, and they want us to be finished before 8. If I didn't, I would have to clean very quickly, so I prefer to go earlier. By the time the students arrive at 8, I've already finished. This is something I choose to do, even though I'm not supposed to, but it doesn't matter» (Carmen, 11/12/2024)*

Likewise, they have a part-time contract, but they frequently work additional hours. This often occurs when a substitution is needed, and they receive a last-minute call, especially on their day off, or when there are more clients and workload increases. According to the National Collective Agreement, the supplementary hours are paid with a 28% increase calculated on base pay and paid the month following the work done (art.

33). Although supplementary hours provide a small increment in workers' earnings (approximately €2 more per hour), they are excluded from the calculation for holidays, leaves, treatment of illness and social contributions. Therefore, workers argued that they would prefer the integration of these extra - although frequent - hours in their weekly schedule, not only for their social contributions, but also to gain more stability. Both workers and trade unionists have complained about inaccuracies in the paycheck, where supplementary hours are not counted or are not paid correctly. This may be a mistake and not intentional, but if it is not corrected, workers may be unfairly underpaid, especially considering that many do not understand the Italian language or the Italian wage system.

*«On Sundays, I usually finish after 5 pm. Sundays are so crowded that sometimes I come back home at 8pm or 9pm. [...] They say they pay you for overtime work but they don't. When you see your paycheck, you see they pay it ordinary work, not as overtime.» (Ndeye, 22/01/2025).*

The working hours of this job come with several disadvantages. First, they often fall outside the regular operating hours of the workplace, meaning shifts may start early in the morning or late at night. This can be particularly problematic for women, who might feel unsafe on the streets or when using public transportation during these hours. Second, the time spent commuting to work can sometimes be very long compared to the hours worked, with some employees traveling over one hour for just two hours of work. Third, not all nighttime hours are always compensated fairly, as some workers have reported. Lastly, the low hourly pay and the involuntary part-time force many of them to seek additional jobs, often in the same sector, thus spending many hours, energy and eventually money in moving from one place to another. In other words, a worker may be engaged from the early morning until the evening or night, but being paid for five or six hours only, for example. Conversely, when workers do not have a fixed schedule and it

changes weekly, finding other compatible jobs becomes challenging, which can create serious financial difficulties.

*«The one in the morning, I spend one hour going. One hour going, one hour coming. That's two hours, not paid. Then, the one in the evening I also spend one hour going and one hour coming. Four hours of my time not paid.» (Doris, 27/01/25)*

With regards to absences, leaves and illness, interviewed workers did not report significant issues when requesting time off, as long as they followed the proper procedures. Most workers stated they were expected to inform the company in advance so that arrangements could be made to find a replacement. This expectation was generally seen as reasonable for planned absences, such as personal leave or vacation days, but the situation became more complicated in cases of unexpected absences, particularly due to illness. Even when unwell, some workers felt pressure to show up for work. *«You know that you are putting the company in a difficult position, so sometimes I go even if I don't feel very well».* (Paola, 14/01/2025).

On the other hand, workers' right to holidays was often disregarded or violated. As mentioned in section 5.1.3, holidays are frequently subject to changes based on contractors variations and company decisions. One of the most recurrent problems was the non-recognition of accrued holidays when a new contractor took over the cleaning contract, either because they want to start from scratch or because they prefer to organise them differently. This practice created considerable instability for workers, as they often lost holidays they had planned to take or were forced to postpone their leave indefinitely.

Additionally, workers face unfair deductions from their holidays in two main ways: first, when the workload is low and the company notifies them – sometimes with very little notice – that they are not working on that day; hence, employers deduct them from the workers' holiday entitlement, effectively forcing them to use their paid leave without their consent.

Second, during facility closure, for example when the University closes during Christmas holidays, cleaning services are suspended for a certain period. Rather than providing alternative work assignments or considering these as paid non-working days, companies would automatically deduct the corresponding days from workers' holiday balances, leaving them with fewer days available for personal vacation later in the year. Although illegal, this practice is widespread. Both trade unionists and cleaners accounts confirmed that employers systematically violate holiday regulations. Nonetheless, workers and trade unions have contested this issue and have often succeeded in ensuring that workers' holiday rights are respected, regardless of workload or facility closures. In some cases have resulted in formal agreements that establish clear protections for outsourced workers, preventing companies from arbitrarily resetting holiday balances and organising them in advance.

#### **5.4 The low pay**

A key focus was placed on how workers perceived their wages and what they considered to be a fair and adequate level of pay. Many expressed the view that their current hourly wage was not only unsustainable but also insufficient, particularly given the limited number of weekly hours available and the physically demanding nature of their work. From their perspective, the low pay failed to provide financial security, making it difficult to cover basic living expenses. As a result, they frequently called for government intervention to implement a wage increase, with many advocating for a minimum hourly rate of at least €9 or €10. Beyond just a pay rise, workers also emphasized the importance of stabilizing and increasing their weekly working hours. They believed that these two factors combined – a higher hourly wage and more guaranteed hours – would significantly improve their financial stability and overall quality of life.

The current salary for the average sector classification (level 2) from July 2024<sup>17</sup> is €7,41 gross, with a €0,11 increase per hour compared to the previous year (art.73). The estimated net pay is approximately €6 per hour. However, those that are new to this sector are classified as “first level workers” for the first nine months (art.10), earning €7,04 gross per hour. This is significantly below both the average and median gross wages for dependent employees in the private sector in north-eastern Italy, which are €14.20 and €11.70, respectively (ISTAT, 2022). Furthermore, it is lower than the proposed minimum wage of 9€ per hour, which political parties, trade unions and the civil society have advocated for over the last years<sup>18</sup>.

The issue is exacerbated by the prevalence of involuntary part-time contracts, with weekly hours ranging from 10 to 25. Assuming an average of 20 hours per week, the monthly wage for a worker in the cleaning industry is approximately €640. While workers may earn more through supplementary hours or night shifts, these fluctuations are unpredictable and do not offer financial security. For this reason, as previously mentioned, most cleaners hold more than one job to get a sufficient wage to meet their needs.

According to the EU-SILC indicator, an individual is at risk of in-work poverty when they work for over half of the year and their equivalised yearly disposable household income is below 60% of the national household median income level (Eurofound, 2017). In addition to this definition, in Italy, the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) estimates the share of household reference people employed and self-employed living in absolute or relative poverty. Other estimates have used the net median hourly income (*ibidem*). It should be noted that in-work poverty is not synonymous with low pay: the former refers to the household, while the second to the individual worker.

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<sup>17</sup> The National Collective Agreement (2021-2024) provided an incremental increase of €120 in five years, with effect every 1st of July.

<sup>18</sup> See more on the proposal

<https://firme.salariominimosubito.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/LIP-SALARIO-MINIMO-TESTO.pdf>



In north-eastern Italy, the household median income for a two-person household is €33.568, which is considerably higher than the national median income (25.276€) (ISTAT, 2023). Therefore, the relative poverty threshold is €20.140,80, though this varies depending on family structure, for example, whether children are present or it is a single-parent household. In contrast, the poverty threshold in a northern Italian city is €940 per month (Finsenas, 2024).

Given the prevalence of involuntary part-time contracts, assuming an average of 20 hours per week at an hourly wage of €7,41, a cleaner's annual gross salary is approximately €8.982. Although cleaners experience frequent fluctuation in their working hours – leading to potential income variations – and they may share the financial responsibility with their partner, their earnings still remain significantly below the relative poverty threshold in northeastern Italy.

Unsurprisingly, the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2023) reports that the median income for foreign households is significantly lower than that of Italian households. On average, the income of foreign families is €6,400 lower than that of Italian families, but the discrepancy increases from the North to the South of Italy, where the median household income is 60% of those of Italian families (*ibidem*).

Among the interviewed migrant workers, many were responsible for supporting their households, with some having children (ranging from 1 to 6 children). Some of them had a partner who shared this responsibility, while others were in Italy alone and sent remittances to their families in their countries of origin. Most importantly, all of them expressed concerns about their wages, which they considered too low, both considering the intensity of the job and their needs, in light of the inflation Italy has experienced in recent years, along with the rising cost of rent and living in Padua.

In light of their low wages, particularly in reference to the poverty thresholds, and their testimonies expressing serious concern about the unsustainability of their financial situation, workers in the cleaning industry

can be classified as *working poor*. In many cases, despite being employed, their earnings remain insufficient to meet basic living expenses, forcing many to endure precarious financial conditions. The combination of stagnant wages, rising living costs, and limited access to additional benefits or job security exacerbates their vulnerability, reinforcing a cycle of economic hardship that is difficult to escape.

*«Retribution for cleaning is too low for a person that is supposed to live, pay the house, eat, pay the bills, pay stuff. How can you do that? You are paid €7 per hour and at the end of the month you have €500 or €600. How can you pay the rent and everything? It's not possible.» (Ndeye, 22/01/2025)*

*«For me, I know the pay is a general thing in Italy because everything costs now. So if the government can be able to, you know, augment to make the bills be ... [affordable] . Because they give us per hour, they pay us €7.30. But you know, the cost of things in the market, if they can be able to, you know, make it up to like €10 per each operaio [worker]. I think it's better because the money at the end of the day, you don't really save. You, you know, you have to pay bills, the children, you have to buy one or two things for them. You have to take care of yourself. So sometimes the money is not enough. [...] It's not only me, it's a general thing. Everything is going on and they are still giving you the same thing. They have been paying you for almost five years back. They are still giving you the same thing. So when you pay the bills here, you pay here, you are left with nothing [...] Because sometimes sometimes they pay you 6€ or something. Sometimes they pay you seven something. It's not regular, it's up, down, up, down. You understand? So [the pay] it's not too okay.» (Silver, 20/01/2025)*

Additionally, delayed wage payments are a recurring issue. In some cases, workers have experienced delays in receiving their salaries, with some waiting for weeks and others enduring delays of up to four months, even after repeated interventions from trade unions. Delayed payments have caused severe financial distress, forcing workers to rely on personal savings, borrow money from friends and family, or struggle to meet essential financial obligations such as rent, utility bills, and other basic living

expenses. This uncertainty not only undermines their financial stability but also adds significant stress and insecurity to their daily lives.

*«[laughs] They said they would pay me on the 20th of every month, but I think it happened twice in four years. They are always late.» (Judith, 07/02/2025)*

## **5.5 Physical and health problems**

Workers in the cleaning industry are particularly vulnerable to work-related stress and physical pain, as this job can be physically demanding and repetitive. Most cleaners have to perform different types of tasks during one single working day. Although this can imply a variety of tasks and postures, they often involve the repetitive use of the same muscle groups, leading to chronic strain and fatigue. Research has shown that cleaning tasks can be strenuous and demanding for the musculoskeletal and cardio-respiratory systems (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2009). In particular, cleaners daily engage in repetitive arm movement – such as wiping surfaces, scrubbing floors, or dusting high places – as well as in high static and dynamic force – when mopping large areas – and they carry heavy loads, including buckets of water, vacuum cleaners, or large bags of trash.

These types of muscular activities contribute to muscle fatigue and may lead to musculoskeletal disorders. Workers in the cleaning industry are particularly vulnerable to work-related stress and physical pain, stiffness, reduced mobility, and, in severe cases, permanent disability. Despite the risks, many workers normalize their pain and consider it an inevitable part of the job, as illustrated by the words of one cleaner:

*«You know, in Italy, when you are working, your body hurts. [...] Yes, I do have body pains sometimes. Not all the time. When I take pastiglia [pills], maybe Tachipirina, everything goes away. It's not all the time, sometimes, but it's normal. When you work, you are tired, you are worn out, your body will be paining you sometimes, but sometimes*

*you are strong, you don't feel any pain. So normal thing. Yeah.»*  
(Silver, 20/01/2025)

This perception of pain as “normal” suggests that workers might neglect safety measures and avoid seeking medical attention or reporting discomfort out of fear of losing their job. However, over time small discomfort can develop into chronic conditions, significantly affecting workers’ well-being. This was the case for one cleaner who had worked in the industry for twenty years and now suffers from serious problems with her feet and joints, likely due to osteoarthritis.

Apart from musculoskeletal disorders, another major concern in the cleaning industry is workplace accidents, particularly slips, trips, and falls, which are among the most frequent causes of injury in this sector (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2009). Indeed, cleaners often work in wet environments, handle slippery substances, and use cables and heavy equipment, all of which increase the likelihood of accidents. In many cases, these risks could be mitigated through better safety measures, such as improved footwear, proper training, and better scheduling to avoid excessive workload and fatigue.

Furthermore, this job carries significant chemical hazards, due to a wide range of chemical agents to remove dust, disinfect and maintain hygiene, and biological when staff is exposed to microorganisms such as bacteria, viruses and moulds<sup>19</sup>. The risk associated with chemical exposure depends on the type of products used and the conditions under which they are used such as frequency, amount, and manner of application; the efficiency of ventilation during and after cleaning; the use of protective measures to limit exposure and intake (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2009).

Despite these risks, most interviewed workers did not report significant health issues related to chemical exposure. However, this does not

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<sup>19</sup> See more on European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2009), The Occupational Safety And Health Of Cleaning Workers. *European Risk Observatory. Literature Review*. DOI: 10.2802/21855

necessarily indicate an absence of harm, as some workers may not associate symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, or skin irritation with chemical exposure. Only one explicitly mentioned to suffer from severe allergies, such that she had considered quitting the job, due to the respiratory issues, sneezes and catarrh triggered her at work.

## **5.6 Work life balance**

Work-life balance is a crucial aspect of working life, especially for women, who generally bear the burden of productive and reproductive labour (Federici, 1975; Bhattacharya, 2017). In addition to their paid employment, many female workers are responsible for their children, managing their education, doing the housework, in line with gender roles expectations. This creates a significant workload that extends far beyond their official working hours, making time management a key challenge.

One of the main characteristics of this sector is the atypical and often unpredictable nature of its schedules. Cleaning is typically performed outside the usual daily working hours, generally in the morning (from 6am to 9am), evening (from 6pm to 9pm) or at night, so that it does not interfere with the daytime “core” activities of the host company.

This arrangement has certain advantages, as having the middle of the day free can be beneficial. In particular, being off from work before lunchtime allows working mothers to cook and have lunch with their children and help them with homework or engage in caregiving responsibilities.

The impact of migration further complicates work-life balance. While some moved to Italy alone, leaving their family and children in their home country, supporting them through remittances, others built their family in Italy. The decision of having children has naturally influenced their professional paths, requiring them to navigate the challenges of balancing work and family life. Indeed, for those who became parents in Italy,

maternity leave played a key role in the early years of their children until their kids started attending kindergarten. At this stage, workers opted for jobs that were compatible with their children's schedules. However, the lack of a strong family support network – often due to migration – made unexpected situations difficult to manage, such as when children fell ill or required additional care. Even when they had a partner to manage childcare with, this was not always a feasible solution and childcare often fell on mothers. In most cases, mothers bear the primary responsibility for childcare, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Only one worker reported hiring a babysitter to pick up the child from school and look after them until she came back from work.

As their children grew older, responsibility within the household gradually shifted. In many cases, as older children grew up, they became responsible for the youngest siblings helping with school pick-ups, meal preparation, and supervision while their parents were at work. This dynamic, while common in many migrant families, also placed a certain level of responsibility on children from a young age. Now that some of their children are teenagers, they feel they have a greater flexibility in managing their job, as older children require less supervision, and, instead they partially take on caregiving duties.

Despite these coping mechanisms, the irregularity and unpredictability of work schedules pose significant challenges. Cleaners frequently experience sudden schedule changes, being called in on short notice to work on their days off or, conversely, having their shifts canceled with no warning due to low workload. This uncertainty makes it difficult for them to establish routines, plan family activities, or secure additional employment.

For those engaged in multiple jobs, work-life balance becomes even more precarious. Many workers in the cleaning industry take on additional employment to compensate for their low wages. This leads to a fragmented workday, where individuals move between different workplaces, often spending more time working than a standard full-time employee but with a

significant portion of that time unpaid due to commuting or gaps between shifts. The time spent commuting – that may be nearly as long as the shift itself – diminishes the advantage of part-time flexibility. Moreover, since commuting hours are unpaid, they add further frustration, as workers feel they are dedicating significant portions of their time to work without corresponding financial compensation. Moreover, the stress and fatigue associated with this lifestyle can cause chronic exhaustion, sleep deprivation and increased stress level.

Overall, the dominant feelings associated with their work-life balance are general tiredness and dissatisfaction, stemming from different factors. First, many workers desire a “normal” full-time schedule – running from morning to evening – rather than the flexible but ultimately irregular hours they are given. Second, while the working hours themselves may be inconvenient, the real frustration arises from the time spent commuting and the limited number of paid hours. To conclude, when work schedules are relatively stable, they allow a moderate balance with personal and family life. However, since this work is involuntary part-time and highly flexible, workers remain unhappy with their working hours and free time.

### **5.7 Coping Strategies: how workers react to this conditions**

Since this sample was recruited through the ADL grassroots union, it naturally consists of individuals who have already chosen to address job-related issues with union support, which could introduce a potential bias. However, the decision to join can be motivated by various reasons and serve different functions. According to Hau and Borello (2024), collective strategies of worker mobilisation can be viewed as a dynamic continuum between resistance and coping, in which network embeddedness plays a key role.

When examining migrant workers and their mobilisation, many aspects emerge: they often have different cultural frames of reference (Merton,

1968: 527), they tend to face precarious employment (Refslund, 2021), and they generally have limited opportunities to engage in unionised forms of effective collective action (Berntsen, 2016). Moreover, the nature of the cleaning work implies isolation and dispersion among workers, which makes it harder to foster a sense of collective identity. Yet, some workers do find ways to address these issues, whether individually or collectively.

Except for one, all interviewed workers had approached the ADL grassroots union, however the motivations and the kind of relationship they had with the union vary significantly. Most approached the union for the first time when seeking help with residence permits or filling out bureaucratic documents, such as the ISEE Certificate (Indicator of the Equivalent Economic Situation). This suggests that their motivation was not directly linked to a desire for collective action, but rather as a means of coping with personal and legal issues.

Nonetheless, two important patterns emerged. First, networks of colleagues and friends played a key role in encouraging them to join the union to find support. Overtime, these workers began using the union to address specific work-related problems, in particular, with contractor transitions, ensuring the continuity of accrued holidays, social contributions, and correcting wage discrepancies or delayed payments. While initially addressing individual issues, these workers progressively chose to rely on the union, some even developing trusting relationships with union representatives, expressing feelings of relief and gratitude.

Importantly, only workers with an open-ended contract are officially enrolled in ADL Cobas, while those on precarious contracts enjoy a different form of membership, ensuring that their employer is not aware of their relationship with the union. This is due to the fear – and awareness – that union membership may hinder their career progression toward a permanent contract as a form of reprisal. Sometimes, this fear persists even after they secure open-ended contracts, leading them to try and keep union involvement hidden when dealing with certain situations.



Despite the challenges of organising within an isolated and fragmented workforce, instances of collective resistance do exist, ranging from strikes and demonstrations to the organisation of alternative forms of collective action, beyond unionisation. For instance, in December 2024, a group of cleaners protested after a colleague was injured by a needle<sup>20</sup>. Following this episode, they demanded better security equipment, particularly gloves, but their concerns were dismissed, and the union delegate was mistreated and threatened. As a result, a group of workers decided to strike and to organise a protest with their trade union in front of the multinational company, holding banners and engaging with local media. This protest, although it yielded little immediate change, reflected broader dissatisfaction with their working conditions and the lack of security and safety measures. Moreover, it exemplified solidarity among workers and their collective desire for better working conditions and adequate wages.

Another important collective coping strategy for workers is through informal support networks. In recognition that political engagement for female workers in this sector differs from that of men working in other sectors, such as logistics or factories, a women-only group was created in 2022, facilitated by the women union representatives in ADL. This mutual support network groups together women of different nationalities, age and backgrounds to discuss and organise around productive labour issues, as well as social reproduction. Given their status as women and migrant precarious workers, they exchange skills and knowledge, provide support, and engage in collective action on issues such as housing, language problems, documents, gender based violence. For example, the group successfully mobilised when one of its members was at risk of eviction. Moreover, it serves as an opportunity to expand their network, enjoy social moments and find some distraction. As this testimony exemplifies, this

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<sup>20</sup> See more Arcolini C. (2024, 21st december) La denuncia: «Turni massacranti a 7 euro lordi l'ora». *Padovaoggi.it*  
<https://www.padovaoggi.it/attualita/padova-sciopero-ikea-pulizie-21-dicembre-2024.html>  
© PadovaOggi  
<https://www.padovaoggi.it/attualita/padova-sciopero-ikea-pulizie-21-dicembre-2024.html>

group is not only aimed at providing emotional support but also at fostering mutual empowerment through the exchange of knowldges and tools.

*«We have a forum for women where women that have difficulties, health problems, have problems with houses, problems of every kind, work, language. [...] We can help ourselves, you know, the women in ADL. So sometimes when we come, they teach you: some people are good at one thing or the other. So they try to teach you and be able to tell you how to go about things. Like for the house, sometimes they write letters to the Comune [municipality]: “Look at these women, they need a house”. “Look at the problem they are passing through”. They try to represent and go and speak on the behalf of the women. So we do have the meeting sometimes. Once in three months, once in four months. Like last year we had a meeting like three times in a year, we had it three times. Like sometimes if somebody has a party. We come together, we do summer time, we are together at the park, we eat, we dance, you know, we just have some fun.» (Silver, 20/01/25)*

Thus, the decision to join a grassroots union addresses crucial job-related needs, but for only a few, it represents a form of active mobilisation. In some cases, their activism extends beyond their working related issue, with some participating in demonstrations on International Women’s Day (8th March), the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (25th November), or opposing government policies on immigration. However, this group remains small compared to the overall number of workers.

While many workers expressed frustration and even anger for their working conditions, the majority do not participate in union meetings, strikes and demonstrations. Their motivations vary: some lack interest in such activities, others prefer to focus on their jobs to avoid problems, while some are unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts with work or lack of energy.

For migrant workers, the risk of losing their job can be highly problematic due to its connection with their residence permit. Moreover, their already precarious conditions can reduce their capacity for resistance, especially if they moved alone in Italy while bearing the financial responsibility for their

family, whether it is in Italy or in their origin country. Therefore, some give up on fighting for their condition and instead prefer to manage on their own, opting for individual coping strategies to navigate the challenges posed by their working conditions.

*«I believe that rather than a sort of adaptation, there is an awareness of the reality and all the problems they have to face, and the choice of which battle to fight. They know what is acceptable or not: a delay of 10 days is okay, but when it is longer, when they force me to take leaves that I do not want, those that are more aware and with a stronger character decide to take action. Usually, they are those who do not fear losing their job because they have a working partner, because they have a house contract, or a longer-term residence permit. It is also linked to other aspects of their lives. I also believe that they negotiate, they weigh what is worth fighting for or not. Sometimes they just say that nothing is going to change, it's true. So, since nothing is going to change, they prefer looking for a new job, rather than arguing with the employer. Then, there are limits connected to the nature of their work. The fact that they are not together, in the same workplace, with the same shifts makes it harder to develop that feeling of belonging, of seeing each other, discussing things together, you know? To get angry together. To stop together. It's this feeling of loneliness, everyone minding their own business. The inherent fragmentation of this job does not help.» (ADL Cobas representative, 27/11/2024)*

One of the most common individual strategies adopted by workers in precarious conditions is acceptance and normalization of poor working conditions. Many workers internalize the idea that job instability, unpredictable work schedules and delayed payments are simply part of the job. This perception discourages them from reporting workplace issues or demanding better conditions, as they fear repercussions. However, as highlighted in the quote above, workers do also set a limit on what they are willing to tolerate and when crossed – particularly in the case of prolonged delays in wages – , they decide to turn to union support to advocate for better treatment.

A widespread mechanism to compensate low wages and involuntary part-time is by taking additional jobs and working frequent overtime. This strategy helps address their financial demands, especially for those with family responsibilities, whether it is in Italy or in their home country. Although some have tried to ask for increasing their working hours, their requests were denied in most of the cases; therefore, they found solutions autonomously. However, the unpaid time spent commuting between workplaces significantly reduces the benefits of having additional income; moreover, it leads to fragmented workdays and increases exhaustion.

Balancing work and family responsibilities is a key challenge for workers, especially for migrant workers. This is reflected in the organisation of the working day around the children's schedules. Moreover, once their children are grown, they become partially responsible for their siblings and housework.

Additionally, the physically demanding nature of cleaning work leads to widespread exhaustion among workers. Although many tend to normalise it, others resort to various coping strategies, including using painkillers, getting self-massages, providing a short-time relief, without addressing the root causes.

In response to the isolation that this job implies, many cleaners turn to personal networks for emotional and practical support. This includes participation in mutual aid groups or maintaining regular contact with acquaintances, family members and friends, which can help provide information on better job opportunities, warn of problematic employers, and assist in finding new positions.

Finally, for some workers, returning to education or attending training courses provides a strategy for coping with the difficult working conditions. These educational pursuits serve as a means not only to improve job prospects and secure better-paying or more stable employment, but also as a personal endeavor, allowing workers to invest in their own future and engage in something they find meaningful.

These individual coping strategies highlight the resilience and adaptability of workers facing difficult conditions. However, they also reveal the structural constraints that limit their ability to improve their situation independently, while structural inequalities perpetuate themselves on these survival strategies. Collective forms of resistance, such as union support, worker solidarity and mobilisation are crucial in advocating for systemic change to achieve meaningful improvement in their working and living conditions.

## 6.1 Conclusion

This research aimed at investigating the working conditions of the cleaning industry in the Province of Padua. The cleaning activity is crucial for the maintenance and the functioning of every workplace, whether public or private, including universities, hospitals, municipalities, hotels, shopping centres, and multinational corporations. However, classified as a non-core activity, this service is outsourced to specialised agencies that deliver this service to one or more facilities, through contractual agreements. This has created a valuable market for the cleaning provision in which the outsourcing mechanism has significantly shaped the labor market, with direct consequences on cleaners. Involuntary part-time contracts, wages significantly lower than the national and regional averages, frequent contractors transition that affect the accrual of holidays, social contribution and leaves, thus contributing to both financial and labour instability.

In the second instance, given the low wages, job instability resulting from outsourcing, and low status associated with this job, the research aimed at understanding the composition of its workforce, hence, to examine whether there is a prevalence of migrant workers over the Italian ones. Particularly, my research sought to understand whether African women, especially those from Sub-Saharan Africa, have become the dominant group in this sector. This was motivated by factors such as the increased visibility of Black women working as cleaners in public spaces, such as in the University of Padua, while remaining almost absent in other occupations. Second, the intersectionality of gender, racialisation and migrant status makes it particularly difficult for African women to find employment, as a consequence of structural racism and essentialism (Romens, 2022). Third, the lack of literature on Black women's labor experiences in Italy, where studies tend to focus primarily on human trafficking and sexual exploitation rather than their participation in other sectors of the labor market.

However, my findings partially contradict this initial hypothesis. Migrant workers do not constitute the majority of the workforce in this sector, as approximately 60% of cleaners in Padua are Italian, but they are still overrepresented. Nevertheless, occupational trends reveal a progressive shift, with fewer Italians being hired and the gap between native and foreign workers gradually narrowing. Additionally, Sub-Saharan migrants are not the most represented nationalities in this industry, as Romanian workers far outnumber them. However, the Romanian one is the largest foreign nationality residing in Italy, counting for more than 1 million people. By analysing employment data relative to the resident population, it emerges that 7,49% of Nigerians in Padua are employed in the cleaning industry, compared to only 1,36% of Romanians and 2,07% of Moroccans – the third largest foreign nationality in this sector. When considering only Nigerian women, given the gendered nature of the labor market, the difference is more pronounced: in 2024, 13.5% of Nigerian women work in this sector, compared to 2,19% of Moroccan women and 1,14% of Romanian women. This suggests that, while other nationalities tend to be distributed across other sectors, such as Romanians in domestic work, Nigerians tend to concentrate in the cleaning industry. This may be explained by the lower skill requirements of the sector, high labour demand and structural racism that limits job opportunities for migrants, especially Africans, in other fields. This study concentrated on the experience of migrant workers in the cleaning industry, acknowledging that their migrant status is a driving force influencing their labour experience, making them more inclined to accept unfavourable employment terms. To explore this, I employed a mixed method, prioritising qualitative data over quantitative one. Through 12 semi-structured interviews with workers and union representatives, I collected first-hand information on the most pressing issues that cleaners face daily. Additionally, data from VenetoLavoro supplemented these findings, providing a broader understanding of general trends in this industry.

This work was conducted with the collaboration of ADL Cobas, a grassroots union based in Padua. This collaboration granted me privileged access to the union's database and firsthand testimonies, from both unionists and cleaners, that would have otherwise been more difficult to obtain. Moreover, ongoing discussions with union representatives provided important insights that deepened my understanding of the structural issues within this industry.

In most Western countries, the cleaning sector recruits a large portion of its workforce from the most vulnerable segments of the labour market (Herod & Aguiar 2006; Pedaci, 2016), particularly those with the lowest educational levels and fragmented employment histories. As a matter of fact, compared to other sectors, there is a high concentration of female workers, migrants and people over 50 years old. In the Province of Padua, the cleaning industry exhibits a strong gender and racial division of labor, as 75-80% of workers are women and 41% are migrants. Although migrants do not constitute the majority, they are significantly overrepresented in this sector.

Existing literature (Piore, 1979; Wills et al., 2010; Ambrosini, 2001) suggests that migrant workers tend to be concentrated in low skilled occupations, especially in the service sector, agriculture, construction, characterized by low wages, limited legal protections and precarious working conditions. For female migrants, this often means working in sectors linked to social reproduction, such as domestic work, elderly care and cleaning service. Gray (2004) argues that migrants tend to get the worst casual jobs because they are the most disadvantaged workers with the least bargaining power, and thus they get the jobs that are disproportionately part-time and temporary, and where wages increase more slowly than in other jobs. Their vulnerability is shaped not only by individual factors (e.g., language barriers, lack of educational recognition) but also by broader structural inequalities, such as racialization and social stigma (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2010).



Outsourcing plays a central role in the deterioration of working conditions in the cleaning sector. The cost-cutting strategy adopted by firms to maximise their profits directly affects workers' wages and job security. As a result, many cleaners are forced to complete their tasks under time pressure, increasing the risk of work-related injuries. Paradoxically, while their contracted hours are reduced, workers often work beyond their scheduled time – either through overtime (which is often unpaid) or by finishing tasks off the clock without additional compensation.

The low wages in this industry do not reflect the physical demands of the job, that although it does not require specialised skills, it is physically demanding, and often repetitive and monotonous. Workers in the cleaning industry are particularly vulnerable to work-related stress and physical pain that, in the long term, can lead to mobility reduction, joint diseases, as well as issues deriving from chemical and biological hazards.

The limited retribution also depends on the prevalence of part-time contracts, often under 20 hours per week, that force workers to seek additional jobs. With an hourly wage of approximately €7,40 gross and the involuntary part-time contracts, many workers are at risk of in-work poverty. This issue reflects a broader trend in Italy, where employment no longer guarantees economic security (Saraceno, 2020). While in-work poverty primarily affects the least qualified social groups, migrants are disproportionately impacted due to the lack of recognition of their educational qualifications, including tertiary degrees, limited social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the greater barriers to social mobility they face, compared to other OECD countries (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2024).

Moreover, frequent wage discrepancies, incorrectly paid overtime, and frequent delays in salary payments further aggravate the financial situation. Many rely on personal savings, borrow money, or struggle to pay rent and basic expenses due to these irregularities.

Beyond contractual and wage precarity, cleaning workers also experience a condition of isolation, invisibility and exclusion within the structures where they operate. Despite their essential contribution to the functioning of offices, hospitals, schools, and other public and private spaces, their work is often undervalued. This marginalization is not only symbolic but also translates into a clear separation from other workers: cleaners are treated as outsiders, denied the same benefits, rights, and even access to common spaces such as changing rooms, canteen and elevators. This spatial and social segregation reflects broader dynamics of inequality, reinforcing the perception of outsourced cleaners as second-class workers unworthy of the same rights and accommodations.

In this context, unions play an important role in advocating for workers rights. However, many structural challenges limit their effectiveness: first, the isolated and dispersed nature of cleaning work makes collective organizing difficult. Second, in a triangular employment relationship – where cleaners are hired by subcontractors but ultimately serve external clients – the union's bargaining power is significantly weakened. While unions have been effective in addressing individual complaints, structural interventions remain more challenging.

For all these reasons, cleaning work has been described as a symbol of contemporary labor exploitation (Wills, 2009).

Although this research has deeply examined the working conditions in the cleaning industry, it is important to acknowledge some limitations that might have influenced the results and can be developed and improved in further research. First, the sample size, geographic scope, and worker heterogeneity were limited, potentially restricting the generalizability of findings. Second, my closeness to the union may have influenced the perceptions of the industry, amplifying negative aspects and introducing potential bias. Third, difficulty in accessing precise documentation and data about the socio-demographic characteristics of the workforce.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting interviews with a larger and more diverse sample, located in a broader area, across the Veneto region or North-eastern Italy, and eventually compare it with other areas or regions in Italy. Furthermore, comparative studies between unionised and non-unionised cleaners could further explore the impact of union membership on working conditions. Additionally, a more participative method could be more effective in balancing the relationship researcher-researched, thus realising a research where participating parts contribute with different kinds of knowledge and means to realise a common project.

Nevertheless, this study provided an extensive picture of the cleaning industry in the province of Padua. So far, research on this industry in Italy is still lacking. This study aimed at highlighting the effects of the contractors' change, the daily challenges faced by cleaners in securing their rights, calling attention to the financial insecurity they experience and how workers organise and cope with these conditions.

Overall, this study has contributed to highlight the recurring relationship between a state of precariousness – and at times, exploitation – and the condition of being a migrant, often compounded by gender, as many of these workers are women. Given the rising cost of living in Italy, and particularly in Padua, the minimum wage set by the National Collective Agreement is no longer sufficient to make ends meet and grant a dignified standard of living. The information gathered in this research may serve as a basis for further advocacy and mobilisation efforts, to ensure that the cleaning work stops being undervalued, and it is rather recognised, with adequate wages and improved working conditions.

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