

# Home, Struggle, Tomorrow: the outsourced Cleaning assistants of the State University of Campinas\*

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## Abstract

Considering the context of flexibilization and precariousness of work and its consequences, differentiated according to gender, this article presents a study of the social trajectory of outsourced workers in the Cleaning sector at the State University of Campinas. The ways in which they perceive, experience and react to their work situations are the object of study, that seeks to understand the reasons and strategies that make "acceptable" the instability, insecurity and low income that characterize this job.

**Keywords:** Female work, Outsourcing, Casualization of work, Social mobility, Resistance.

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I struggle from the time I get up to the time I go to sleep, everyday. It is a war. So, I am a fighter. I and all the women who work there, you know? Each one with her problems, but we are fighters. One needs force of will to live the way we live nowadays. With the wages we earn, with difficulties at home, raising a child. I have to give them shoes, to feed them, with these wages... And seek informal jobs and always work. It is not easy. One cannot even live one's personal life. It is not possible to have one's own personal life, one's own. One's life is the home, is the struggle, is the day of tomorrow (Teresa, Unicamp's outsourced cleaning worker, 49 years old, mother of four children).

Daughter of rural workers in inland Maranhão, Teresa started working at the age of eight “helping” her parents to till the land and with domestic chores. In order to support her children and herself, she relies solely on her own efforts and on the informal jobs she manages to find, doing cleaning work in night clubs and bars on weekends. Her interview was carried out, discreetly, inside Unicamp. Permanently controlled by overseers, cleaning assistant workers are instructed not to talk to students and teachers at the University.

Dwelling in a city in the metropolitan region of Campinas, Teresa comes to work daily at 5:30 a.m. after riding the coach hired by the company. As she describes herself as a fighter, she recognizes herself in her working mates - mostly Black or Brown women, like herself, poorly educated, mothers and heads of the household - who need to overcome daily challenges in order to secure the family's survival, “on the day of tomorrow”, as she says. Life conditions that hinder imagining the future beyond the short term, as noted by Bourdieu in his classic study on Algerian workers (Bourdieu, 1977).

Just like Teresa, the trajectories of many outsourced assistant cleaning workers of Unicamp are marked by early school dropout, by early co-responsibility in home and family care from childhood, and by the premature start of working life in rural labor and domestic chores. Aware of the economic and familial realities on the one hand and, on the other, of the limited schooling trumps they hold, they perceive outsourced work in cleaning as one of the best options at their disposal, though recognizing the precariousness that characterizes this type of work. Poor schooling, the need to care for and educate the children, everything seems to conspire to adjust, silently, their subjective hopes to their objective chances. Or, further, everything conspires to render their subjective hopes even fainter than their objective chances (Bourdieu, 2007; Bourdieu; Passeron, 2014).

Outsourcing and the consequent precarization of work are well-known themes among economists, sociologists, historians and feminists. Studies in the sociology of work and in the economic literature of the last 30 years have emphasized the indissolubility of outsourcing and the degradation of living and work conditions, be it by means of the reduction of benefits, of the worsening of health conditions, of bigger number of work accidents or of the weakening of union organization (Druck et al., 2018).

Although the degrading of employment relations is the general condition of outsourcing processes, its analysis from a gender perspective renders evident how the perverse effects of subcontracting are unequally lived by men and women. Feminine labor force, in Brazil, is found above all in outsourced companies placed in the lower ends of the productive chain, where the worst work conditions and the weakest labor employment links prevail, and in which the required abilities for the execution of the tasks are acquired in the domestic space by the process of socialization and formation of gender (Araújo; Ferreira, 2009). Following the same segmentation patterns of the labor markets, 70% of the outsourced women are concentrated in cleansing activities, 68% in catering, 67% in the clothing industry and 66% in education and health (FEBRAC, 2015; Krein; Castro, 2017).

Under the light of the context of flexibilization and precarization of the labor market and of its consequences differentiated according to gender, this article intends to recover the social trajectory of the outsourced female workers in the sector of Hygiene, Conservation and Cleansing of the State University of Campinas and to constitute into an object of study the ways in which they perceive, experience and react to their labor situations, seeking to interrogate the reasons why they are led to consider acceptable the conditions imposed by this modality of work contract characterized by high turnover, by low incomes and by the suppression of labor rights.

The decision to constitute the work experience of the assistant cleaners, their trajectories and their perception of precarious work as a research object started with the initial observations made by one of the authors of the present article<sup>1</sup> during an extramural project in the graduation years in Economics at Unicamp. At the time, I was interested in identifying the forms of resistance that could have developed in this daily routine constituted by many struggles.

Outsourced work, in the perspective of the interviewed female workers, features as a progress in their social trajectories. When compared to unemployment, to unpaid domestic work and to informality, doing waged and “registered” work, even if precarious, is an achievement. However, formality cannot render invisible the conditions imposed by outsourcing. Although it helps to secure labor rights and to fill the requisites in order to access benefits of social welfare, the work permit (*carteira de trabalho*) does not represent in itself the overcoming of precarious work, since, in Brazil, a high level of non-observance of public and collective labor norms prevail (Krein; Buarque, 2021).

Our initial hypothesis proposed that the assistant cleaners recognized the precariousness of their work and resisted it by means of forms of organization and of resistance still little known in the literature. And also that, in face of precariousness, they would be seeking alternatives to outsourced work, seeking to continue their trajectories and struggles in order to achieve some sort of economic and social stability for themselves and for their families.

The methodology employed for the development of research was the study of their social trajectories, carried out by means of interviews and observations of their daily work routines. By resorting to micro-history (Revel, 1996) and to the sociology developed by Pierre Bourdieu, we sought to recognize the strategies developed by each of them, according to their social positions. Their itineraries were reconstructed from their “geographic, professional paths, their demographic behaviors and their relational strategies” (Revel, 1996:22).

Against the “biographical illusion” thought as a totalizing and coherent whole, Bourdieu proposes a study of trajectories as a series of positions occupied within a social space. Biographic events are thought of as a series of displacements inside this space, always in transformation, be it due to demographic factors, be it by changes in the state of the educational systems or of the world of labor.

By means of the study of the familial and occupational trajectories of a group of 18 assistant cleaners, we sought to identify their strategies, perceptions and meanings attributed to their experiences in the course of their lives, seeking to relate their paths to labor global movements, such as precarization processes, lack of a protection net for workers, organization and resistance possibilities and the improvement or not in the life conditions of female workers on low incomes and with poorer educational backgrounds. We also aimed at scrutinizing the workers’ perception about their own conditions and about change possibilities.

The field research was carried out in the city of Campinas, inside the State University of Campinas (Unicamp) campus, between 2017 and 2019. The empirical material was produced, chiefly, in the course of eighteen semi-structured interviews<sup>2</sup> and by observations derived from the participation, for two consecutive years, in the fortnightly handcraft workshops led by a group of the university’s assistant cleaners<sup>3</sup>.

The research device elaborated proposed, further, the close monitoring of a working day of an outsourced worker<sup>4</sup> and interviews with representatives of the workers’ trade union (SIEMACO).

<sup>1</sup> The community extramural project, known as *Coletivo Festeja*, develops, with outsourced workers at Unicamp, educational and cultural activities anchored in Popular Education.

<sup>2</sup> The interviews were carried out based on a script with 50 questions encompassing family history, childhood, study background, work, leisure and plans for the future. All interviews were carried out after clarifying the aims, the context and proposal of the research and after obtaining authorization for the providing of information.

<sup>3</sup> The handcraft workshops were part of the activities developed by *Coletivo Festeja*.

<sup>4</sup> The monitoring of this assistant cleaner was properly authorized by her superior, besides being previously communicated to the board of the place where she worked. But, unfortunately, on the day following the monitoring, she was transferred from the sector, and, after this event, it was not possible to find her. It is not possible to know for sure the reason for the transfer. However, we have sufficient reasons to suspect that it was possibly related to her supervisors’ and her working mates’ suspicion that she may have reported inappropriate events. In such case, the transfer would have been

Additionally, 38 pay slips were analyzed, grounded on the norms and principles to which outsourcing is subordinated.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the fragility implicit in their positions rendered risky any suspicion of involvement with speaking out, which could result in drastic consequences for the workers, including dismissal. As they were forbidden to talk to or to share space with other of the campus' users, notably teachers and students, the approximation with a student imposed certain restraints. Thus, in order to protect those who have trusted us, their names were changed for fictitious ones, some information was crossed and some places and other indications that might allow for identification were changed or omitted.

The research results, convergent with other studies, suggest that the outsourced employment in the sector of Hygiene and Conservation of Unicamp is characterized by instability, by low income, by constant disrespect to labor norms, by the segregation of the assistant cleaners from the rest of the university community and by the almost nonexistent possibility of promotion. In face of all such conditions, the cleaners develop, confronted by the possibilities offered by circumstances (Certaú, 1994), resistance strategies to circumvent work problems. Such strategies were translated above all into individual actions (such as reluctance, dissimulation, false submission, simulation of ignorance or of incompetence) and there was no formation of a ground on which to build a collective complaint or struggle.

We also concluded that, even with the realities of bad work conditions, most of the workers intended to indefinitely remain in outsourced work (contrary to expectations) and there was no perspective of change in this or other job. This position yielded from the perception of the limits to economic and social ascension that derive above all from their class and gender conditions, i.e.: the lack of schooling, the lack of professional experience outside the field of domestic labor and the pressing need to take care of the home and of the family. There was, however, a transfer of aspirations and projects onto their offspring, and a large portion of their efforts were directed to their greater chances of making good such aspirations.

In order to analyze the trajectories of the outsourced assistant cleaners of Unicamp, we shall start examining the degradation process of labor conditions that follows outsourcing. We will observe in what measure this process is observed in the specific case studied and we will use the category of gender to analyze a few of the particular effects of the labor experiences in the lives of the women who are, mostly, mothers and heads of the household. Then we will sketch out the aspects common to trajectories of the assistant cleaners interviewed and, by means of the portrait of two individual trajectories, we will illustrate the most frequent patterns. Finally, we will identify some of the main obstacles to the collective organization of the workers and will shed some light on some of the oppositional practices able to confront and resist exploitation and degradation of work.

### **Outsourcing, precarization and sexual division of labor**

The development and consolidation of outsourcing in Brazil, in the 1990's, can be understood in a context of changes in the patterns of labor organization and the proliferation of more precarious forms of hire, an international phenomenon. Such transformations in labor relations result from a monumental process of labor flexibilization unleashed from the 1970's onward in central countries and above all in the mid-1980's in Southern countries (Antunes, 2020).

Although the precarization of labor has intensified in the last few decades, this is not a new phenomenon. In the Brazilian case, the labor market is historically characterized by structural surplus labor force, by the high degree of heterogeneity and informality and by little social protection – characteristics that result from the country's development process, especially from our long slaving-colonial past and from the late transition to and consolidation of the capitalist mode of production (Krein et al., 2020). Even if structural, the labor problems here have been aggravated from the

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a kind of warning or punishment. As a consequence, we did not carry out this kind of monitoring of the cleaners' working day again.

<sup>5</sup> The appropriate legislation can be found in: *Convenção Coletiva do Trabalho, Consolidação das Leis Trabalhistas* and *CADTERC – Estudos Técnicos de Serviços Terceirizados, Volume 3, Limpeza Predial*.

1990's onward with policies of neo-liberal features, when the country incorporated the agenda of the flexibilization of labor relations.

In Brazil, there has been an outsourcing epidemic in recent decades. Widely deployed in the public and private sectors, in industry, in services and in agriculture, this practice was imposed as one of the main management strategies in order to flexibilize the use of labor force aiming at the reduction of costs, the externalization of labor conflicts and increase in productivity (Antunes; Druck, 2013; Filgueiras; Cavalcante, 2015). Even as outsourcing has been recorded in Brazil since the end of the 1960's, it was in the 1980's and 1990's that, in the midst of the movement towards trade opening and deregulation of work contracts, employers strongly strived to widen and legitimate outsourced contracts (Cavalcante; Marcelino; 2012). From 1985 to 2010, the number of outsourcing companies in Brazil soared from 121 to 5,342 (Pochmann, s.d:16), and, in 2014, the typically outsourced activities already featured around  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the formal work bonds in Brazil (Pelatieri et al., 2018).<sup>6</sup>

According to the information available in the Annual Report of Social Information (Rais), in the activities typically outsourced, work conditions and remuneration are, generally, significantly inferior to the ones verified in the not outsourced activities of formalized work. In 2004, 85,9% of the contracts in outsourced activities hired shifts totaling between 41 and 44 hours a week, while in the sectors typically under a contract, this proportion fell to 61,6%. For the former, the percentage of licenses due to work accidents was also superior (9,6% against 6,1%). The same takes place with the relation between active and broken contracts that, in the outsourced sectors, could reach as high as double than in formal work, with eighty contracts broken in a hundred actives. And, on average, the wages of the former (R\$ 2.011) were 23,4% less than in the latter (R\$ 2.639), with a concentration of men in the intermediate remuneration strata in the outsourced activities and of women in the strata with the least remuneration (Pelatieri et al., 2018).

The sectors that normally make use of outsourced activities are those traditionally more precarious and in which the most vulnerable populations in the labor market are to be found – women, Black people, youngsters, migrants and immigrants (CUT, 2014). However, the lack of data on this modality of hire hinders the sizing of the magnitude of this phenomenon and the study of a race and gender perspective. To take into account such variables, however, is a must, and the accurate, precise and systematic analysis of the indicators that express inequalities and their evolution is the necessary condition for the reversion of such framework.

In 2013, 33,3% of the total of outsourced contracts were with women and with 66,7% with men. These contracts were concentrated above all in the building sectors, where there is a strong predominance of male laborers, and in services, which feature 43% of female participation (Krein; Castro, 2017). Outsourced female workers are most often present in cleaning activities, where they represent 70% of the total work force; in catering (68,5%); clothing industry (67,5%), and education and health (66%) (FEBRAC, 2015; Krein; Castro, 2017). And, despite the insufficient statistics with race profiles related to such workers, it is reasonable to suppose that the Black outsourced female worker predominates, once again, among the worst occupations and those with the lowest wages. Researches carried out in the last decade strengthen this argument. A study by Passos (2016) on carers of residential therapeutic services in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro shows that of the 258 outsourced female workers, 72% were Black. Lima and Carvalho (2016) observe that the outsourced caterers of the Pedro II School, in Realengo-RJ, were mostly Black and dwellers of the city's outskirts. Assunção (2013) shows that most outsourced workers who toil as cleaners at the University of São Paulo are women and dwellers of the surrounding *favelas* (Passos; Nogueira, 2018); also at the Federal University of Bahia, Souza (2012) found out that, of the 87 outsourced

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<sup>6</sup> Considered typically outsourced activities: Activities of support, maintenance and repair; Activities related to recuperation; Services of preparation; Specialized services; Trade representatives; Auxiliary activities; Other activities; Technical support; Other service providing activities; Provision of and management of human resources for third parties; Monitoring activities; Combined Services; Debt collection services; Activities of services rendered chiefly to businesses, not previously specified, among others; Building; Clothing industry; Footwear manufacture; Collection of residues; Storage; Catering services; Consultancy in information technology; Telex customer service activities; and Engineering services. All of the other economic activities were considered as typically formally contracted, except in agribusiness and cattle raising (Pelatieri et al., 2018).

workers of the cleaning sector interviewed, 72,2% were women and 92,5% self-declared as Black or Brown.

The Hygiene, Conservation and Cleansing is one of the sectors in which outsourcing most grows and that employs an increasingly greater part of the feminine workforce. According to the “The Strength of the Sector” research, published by FEBRAC (National Federation of Conservation and Cleansing Services Providers), it was estimated that between 45 and 55% of the professional cleansing market is outsourced, and, in the public sector (around 60% of the market), the level of outsourcing is a lot bigger and more stable, reaching 80 to 90%.<sup>7</sup> In 2018, the FEBRAC’s Admissions and Dismissals report identified that, with a stock of 1,541,384 million contracts in the beginning of the year, and of 1,562,975 million at the end of the first semester, the Cleansing and Conservation Service Providers Sector continued to grow (FEBRAC, 2018).

Although the statistics available in Brazil do not allow for precisely sketching out the profile of outsourced workers for the whole of the country, some studies seek to cut out segments classified according to work activities (Thébaud-Mony; Druck, 2007). In the Hygiene and Conservation sector, a research carried out by DIEESE in partnership with the Union of Workers in Hygiene and Conservation and Urban Cleansing Service Provider Companies of São Paulo (SIEMACO-SP), between the years of 2008 and 2010, indicated that in the state of São Paulo – the state with the highest concentration of outsourced companies in operation (Pochmann, s.d.) – women composed 58,8% of the workforce. Besides the strong feminine presence, the greatest part of the workers (73%) self-declared to be Black or Brown (*negros, pardos, morenos, marrons ou mulatos*), were between 40 and 49 years of age (59%) and did not complete middle school (57%). Around 60% of them were born outside of the State of São Paulo and, among those originating in other Brazilian states, 83% were from the Northeast region. The monthly average family wages for 97.7% did not exceed R\$2,500.00, and over half of the families (almost 54%) were paid under R\$1,000.00. Among the women thus employed, 53% declared to be head of the household, as two thirds of the workers of this category had children or stepchildren who depended on them economically (SIEMACO, 2011).

In the particular case observed in this study, the predominant profile of the female workers followed the same trends: of the 18 people participating on this research, all women were assistant cleaners, 13 self declared to be Black or Brown; 9 were between 30 and 49 years of age; 10 were not from the state of São Paulo and 13 did not reach middle school. Besides, 12 of them were married or unwed couples, 9 had one or two children and 8 had three or four. Finally, 10 of the workers were the main source of income on the house, heading their families with wages of R\$1.078,35 a month, before tax.

### The outsourcing of cleansing services at Unicamp

At State University of Campinas, the outsourcing of cleansing services started in 1995. Before that, such services, besides catering, production and distribution of meals were carried out by public servants hired to perform “General Services”.

Between the years of 2015 and 2020, the period covered by this research, the company in charge of providing services of Hygiene, Conservation and Building Cleansing in the university was *Alternativa Serviços de Terceirização em Geral Ltda*. Work was organized around the separation of sectors to be cleaned and the activities to be carried out. The distribution of such tasks and of the sites was defined by the overseers (*encarregadas*), women in charge of a team of approximately 40 workers (at the time, there were around 500 cleaners and 12 overseers). The overseers, in their turn, answered to two supervisors, which was a task carried out without contact with the cleaners, rare occasions excepted.

The university’s assistant cleaners worked 44 hours per week and earned, in return, a pre-tax monthly salary of R\$1,078.35, approximately R\$940.00 after taxes (values of 2018). Not infrequently, wages were paid late, as were the holiday pay and benefits. In some cases, the extra pay given for the insalubrious work of cleaning and collecting rubbish from public toilets, plus the

<sup>7</sup> Source: [http://www.febprac.org.br/novafeprac/images/documentos/feprac\\_pesquisa2012.pdf](http://www.febprac.org.br/novafeprac/images/documentos/feprac_pesquisa2012.pdf)

installments they have the right to by force of the Participation in Results Program (in 2017 and in 2018, the value awarded was of R\$ 251.04) and even the modest income provided by the family benefit (R\$ 32.00 for each child under the age of 14) was not paid. Besides such irregularities and disrespect to the law, there was also a lack of sufficient cleaning materials and safety equipment, a lack of replacement uniforms and the absence of replacement workers.<sup>8</sup>

The university's cleaners and other outsourced service providers make up a unique group of the academic community who must wear uniforms and who do not enjoy access to the university's facilities, such as hospital, day care centers, libraries, computer laboratories and the internet. They are instructed not to walk about the campus, to have lunch only in one of the three university restaurants, and always before noon. The constraints to communication, to the body, to time, to circulation and to access to the university installations express a violent distinction and discrimination of the outsourced workers from the rest of the university corpus, reinforcing their inferiority and configuring a situation that often leads to the compromising of their mental health (Antunes; Druck, 2013), as the following statement indicates:

I think it would be nice if there was a psychologist, you know? A psychiatrist, I don't know... 'cause if you are [...] very stressed out and all that, you could undergo a treatment. [...] In my case, I need to talk, or to listen... [...] You get to a stage in which you lose the notion of life... This is my point.<sup>9</sup>

Practices of sexual harassment and abuse of power are also common among the workers and their superiors. Their submission and public or private humiliations, combined with dismissal threats and bankruptcy of the company configure some of the main mechanisms that the company deploys to stop workers from taking a stance in face of the set of disrespects towards the public and collective labor norms that characterize outsourced work:

Every time I went there [to the administration office] I was treated like a dog. Not even a dog is treated that way! Such stupidity, such big stupidity... [...] They treated us so badly that we thought twice about going down there, in order to ask about something, to sort out some issue or to say something. I myself don't go there. I will not be treated badly, if they don't have an answer... so I just don't go, I avoid it.

In consonance, the organizational design of outsourcing operates in such a way as to inhibit the creation of bonds between the workers themselves. By means of high turnover (both spatially, between the university's sectors, and contractually), of a policy of warnings and of growing overbearing of services, they seek out to secure for themselves the lighter chores and the best places to be. It is common that some cleaners accuse their colleagues of practices considered inadequate. One of the workers interviewed told us that one working mate falsely claimed to the overseer that her colleague had seen her sleep during work hours and, as a result, the cleaner received an unfair warning – with three such warnings, she could be lawfully dismissed. It is worth adding that the position of animosity built among some workers could indicate, in part, intra-gender violence resulting from culturally constructed notions, such as feminine competition. Often we found statements justifying the environment of intrigue resulting from the work force being composed mostly of women: “The bad thing is that when you work with a lot of women together, there is always a lot of gossip, this is bad.” As the myth of natural competition among women is cultivated, the company's actions that strategically discourages the creation of bonds between them is obfuscated.

<sup>8</sup> In conversation with the union representative, some of the problems were confirmed, such as the excess of work, aggravated by the lack of replacement workers and delays in wages being paid. Others were denied, especially ill treatment from superiors. According to the union representative, even though complaints often reached him, the outsourced workers were not willing to confront the problems raised. On the other hand, he stated that if they showed a confrontational stance, the company would claim it was not able to fulfill all due obligations and that, if it did, it would go bankrupt. It is worth adding that, among those interviewed, there was a general distrust regarding the union, and any form of approximation with it seemed to immediately be associated to risk.

<sup>9</sup> As a convention in the writing of this article, we have adopted italics to mark out the cleaners' words, collected in the interviews and observations.

The degradation of work conditions, the low incomes and insecurity regarding continuity in the job attest to the precariousness of outsourced cleaning work at Unicamp. Notwithstanding, there is a set of mechanisms hidden in the outsourced workers' routine at the university that contribute to their exclusion from the academic space and community, establishing a division between the "outsourced ones" and the rest of the community, destroying workers' sociability and generating permanent ill-feeling inside the campus. The feelings of isolation and inferiority resulting from this process, added to the atmosphere of constant competition are decisive factors for the weakening of bonds and rupture of trust ties between workers and also between them and the whole of the university corpus, configuring thus important obstacles for their coming together and organizing to overcome the precarization of work and of life.

The situation of precarization of work impacts in particular women who are, mostly, mothers and heads of household. Stopped from being full-time mothers and in face of the insufficient labor rights and collective equipment, especially hospitals and creches, some of them have to deploy alternative mechanisms of child care, such as mobilizing the relatives and neighbors network (Bruschini; Lombardi, 2001/02:164): "One day my daughter, I had to leave her [...] with my neighbor [...] The girl was burning with fever! [...] I was lucky she took her [to the hospital] for me! How could I miss work? [...] If we don't turn up to work, they take it off pay, they withhold the alimentary values [obligatory payments corresponding to basic food items], everything". Others had to seek informal jobs in order to supplement the home's income, such as cleaning jobs at private households, manicure services and sporadic jobs in bars and private parties.

In face of this reality, what were the cleaners' perceptions regarding their working experiences? What were their stances when confronted with the degradation of labor relations and conditions? Would they have perspectives for this or other employment?

#### **Perceptions and perspectives: "I seek something that I did not live [...]. And I fight for this"**

In order to answer these questions, we shall present the main aspects identified in the trajectory of eighteen outsourced female assistant cleaners interviewed between the years of 2018 and 2019 in the Barão Geraldo Campus at the State University of Campinas and we will recover two individual trajectories to illustrate the more frequent patterns observed in the life of these workers.

To consider trajectories, and not life stories, as Pierre Bourdieu (2016) writes, implies in considering such itineraries within the vital (social and geographic) space where they unfold. It means taking into account key moments such as the decision to start working, of leaving school and of getting married, where "choices" are never free. We highlight that the examination of such trajectories does not imply a regression to the individual. On the contrary, analysis shows that it is the (always social) relation that "determines its terms, and not the opposite, and that each individuality is the place where a plurality plays a role [...] of its relational determinations" (Certeau, 1994:37-38).

The trajectories analyzed here feature in common a precocious participation in rural and domestic work and the responsibility for home and family care. As a rule, the parents of such workers had little or no schooling, and a great part resided in the rural zones. In all cases, the parents took up manual rural and urban work and, generally, the families were big, with at least 6 offspring. The class condition inherited by the workers considerably influenced their social fate, almost always resulting in early school dropout, in being jointly put in charge of home and child care and in an early entry in working life. Only two had completed basic education, and the great majority started to work still in childhood (7 of them between seven and eleven years of age, and 9 between twelve and fifteen). Other than tilling the land, the first job, in all of the other cases, involved domestic chores: washing, cleaning, baby-sitting, sewing or cooking.

As a matter of daily needs and urgencies, since early on work seems to have been imposed as an absolute priority in the workers' life and family. The fruits of work, not only the parents' but of the whole family, were indispensable to obtain the minimal conditions for survival (Linhares, 2008). As a consequence, while children and youngsters, very often they did not develop perspectives and projects regarding their own future: "Actually I had a life ideal very... I thought that I would not



manage even to get married, to have children, that I would not manage to support myself, because it was so difficult that I could not aim at a profession, a future...”.

Looking back, we see that the work experience of the today cleaners and of their mothers developed chiefly in the informal market and in activities culturally associated to the female condition (especially in domestic remunerated work), characterized by the absence of rights, by low incomes and by the high degree of personal interactions with the boss or mistress who surveil the work done.

The awareness of the economic, educational and patrimonial reality that they carry within has resulted in very moderate professional expectations. Their search is usually for formal employment and fixed shifts, attributes that signal a significant progress in the face of their previous experiences. In such conditions, the familiarity with domestic chores seems to render attractive the option of formal work in the areas of cleansing, food and the clothing industry – labor fields that, in the formal market, are highly outsourced.<sup>10</sup>

Entry into formal and outsourced work represents, therefore, positive changes in the workers' perspective and most of them (11) intend to indefinitely remain in outsourced cleansing work. When compared to the experiences of previous generations, they have achieved better life conditions, that is, they learned to read and write, have a formal job and fixed wages. If compared to rural work or to the chores of a domestic servant, outsourced work features a minimal set of benefits (such as the obligatory payments corresponding to basic food items and unemployment insurance), besides enjoying a higher degree of autonomy thanks to the impersonality typical of this job. Confronted with the verdict that low schooling signals for them in the labor market, precarious work in cleaning is tolerated: “I like what I am doing, because I don't know what else to do, right? If I had study, I wouldn't care, so I have to like what I do”. Resignation with regards to work, however, does not mean they are not aware of the problems this job presents. On the contrary, it is possible to recognize in their speech that, despite all difficulties involved, this work is considered one of their better options.

Though formal employment is much valued by female workers, they do not wish the same for their offspring: “I aim at something I did not experience myself, understand? Something better than what I have been through. And I fight for this”. There is a transfer of aspirations and projects onto the offspring, and a great part of the efforts are directed so that the children have more chances of making them real. While the greater part of such workers did not go as far as considering, when young, whether they would like to have a profession or not (even less which one), the effort they make is towards allowing their children at least this one choice. There is, therefore, the hope that the trajectory of their successors will be better than their own, and the degree of schooling, in their discourses, seems to be the key element for getting ahead in life:

Because I don't have higher education, because I didn't go to university, I don't hold a certificate, people look at us with a different gaze. Because we are from cleaning, not everyone comes close, is friendly, or when they do come around they have that 'oh my, let's sit on the other side' look in their eyes. So you end up facing such situations too. Even the issue of belongings... If you are inside a classroom cleaning and someone leaves something behind, because the students want to wait outside, then they keep opening and closing the door in order to check if you steal something or not. I wouldn't like my children to have this profession.

As a mother, I would not [like my children to work in cleaning]. Because it is a little... Not boring, but it is a little... Let's say discriminated, isn't it? Because there are things that you see and you have to keep quiet. And I do not want my children to go through this, but I make sure they keep studying so as to have another job, whatever they want.

Multiple are the factors that explain the entry and permanence of the cleaners in a type of work characterized by low incomes, negligence of labor laws and instability. The origin in poor and rural families, the early dropping out of school, the entry in the labor market while still children and the accumulation of experience in domestic chores are factors that strongly influence in their

<sup>10</sup> In typically outsourced segments, such as Invigilating and of Cleansing and Conservation, the level of formal employment reaches as high as 90% (Krein, 2007).

professional and social fates. Further, the passing through and, in most cases, the permanence in precarious jobs, is perceived by the workers as the necessary condition for the achievement of better social positions for their offspring via increase in schooling levels. This achievement is translated, above all, as entering higher education and, as a consequence, in obtaining jobs that are more valued in the world of labor. The school seems to represent, thus, for the workers, the path to opening a trajectory different from their own.

The picture drawn by two individual trajectories, Roseli's and Maria's, represent the most frequent patterns identified and reveal, among other things, the weight taken up by the projects of schooling the children. In Roseli's case, staying in outsourced work is considered the only possible alternative, since, at the age of 58, she believes she would never get another job. Her trajectory is exemplary where the efforts undertaken rendered concrete the expectations of educating her kids. Here, entering outsourced work is given after her children's entering university, so that, with the proximity of retirement and with the parameter of her previous experiences in informal work and in the night shifts, she is satisfied with her present work. Maria, on the other hand, besides having a still infant child, has a husband who has been unemployed for years. Thus, the continuity of outsourced work is given above all due to insecurity, since the sustenance of the whole family depends on this job. Her desire for professionalization remains on the background, and her main occupation is the guarantee for the family's survival and schooling of the children.

#### **Roseli: "I would do it all over again"**

Born in 1961, in the countryside of the State of São Paulo, daughter of rural workers, Roseli self-declares to be Brown. She had to leave school still a child in order to care for her infirm mother. At the age of 9, she baked bread in the firewood stove and was in charge of making the meals, taking them over to the relatives toiling in the field and taking care of the home and of mother. Her mother was a midwife, and her father, a rural worker, both illiterate. Together they had four children, three girls and one boy.

A little older, Roseli also started to work in the land. The first entry in her work permit book was at the age of fourteen, as a rural worker. Later, she worked as a domestic servant in a private home, as a cleaner in a boarding house, as laborer in a sweet factory and as a cleaner in hospitals, before becoming a cleaner in the university, where she awaits her pension.

She is married to a presently retired rebar setter, with whom she had two children. The eldest, 34, lives with the couple. The youngest, 30, is married with two children. During the offspring's childhood, Roseli tried to get back to studying, but she was not able to conciliate learning with remunerated work and family care.

Presently, both her children have completed university and are working, which the worker tallies as an achievement, with great joy: "I have a graduated engineer. And the daughter too!". In order to achieve that, she had to conciliate two jobs, giving up her sleep and leisure. She worked the night shift (from 5:45 p.m. to 5:45 a.m.) as a cleaner in a hospital. At the end of her shift, she told us that she took a shower and a coffee and then "*idled a little*" in the bathroom, in order to rest. At 7:30 a.m. she started another job and worked there till 3 a.m. She worked at a private house three times a week, where she carried out the tasks of cleaning the house, besides washing and pressing clothes:

It was not easy [...] The money he [the husband] got plus mine was not enough to pay university. I struggled on. It all went right and if I had to do it all over again, I would. I did not want my children cleaning classrooms, cleaning toilets. My mother was not able to struggle to give us study. It was very different from the field. Now, the amount of struggle I did to see them study and enter university... I want them to have good work.

Today, with the children grown up and with her husband's pension, Roseli manages to be in a single job, as an outsourced cleaner. However, she still carries out a large portion of the domestic chores. She says her husband helps out in the home tasks preparing dinner and folding the clothes into the drawers. Even so, she spends most of her time keeping the house in order: she washes and presses clothes and cloths, cleans the rooms and makes the beds. At the end of the day, she enjoys

sitting on the sofa to crochet. Roseli says she has no complaints about the work. She believes that, due to her old age, she would not manage to get another job and, as she considers her previous experiences, especially in night work, she declares to like the present job and, chiefly, the hours of the day she works.

**Maria: “I just go on staying here, because jobs are not easy to get”**

Born in 1973, in the countryside of the State of São Paulo, Maria was raised by her mother. From Minas Gerais, with six children and incomplete elementary school, her mother was a rural worker and, later, started to work as a domestic servant, first in a private house, where she stayed for thirty years, and then as an outsourced domestic servant.

Maria enjoyed going to school and says she used to get good grades. However, at 10 years of age she started to work as a baby-sitter, which led her to interrupt her studies. When she moved to Sumaré, where she lives to this day, she returned to studying and completed one more year at school. But she stopped studying for a second time, because she considered she had to spend more time with her youngest son.

With her husband, a bricklayer unemployed for the past two years, Maria had two children. The eldest is married, works and lives with his wife. The youngest, 11, is studying and lives with the parents. As her wages are insufficient to cover all of the family expenses, besides the outsourced job at the university, she works cleaning and pressing clothes in other homes on Saturdays and, sometimes, works weekend early mornings as a cleaner in night clubs.

During weekdays, Maria wakes up around at 4 a.m. in order to catch a hired coach and arrives at the workplace at 5:35 a.m., where she stays up to 4 p.m. Her husband, unemployed, carries out a good portion of the domestic chores. According to her, the only thing she has to do when she gets home is dinner: “as he is without work, when I arrive he has done everything. And also my boy, he helps to clean the house before going to school. I get home, make dinner and nothing else”.

This worker identifies a few difficulties at work, such as the excess of tasks, the evasion of labor obligations by the employer, and, chiefly, the lack of respect by the company. This is why she says that if a better opportunity cropped up, she would take it. However, she does not seem to seek out such opportunity: “I would like to stay here, so while I have work and like my job, I stay on. Unless something better turns up, where I will earn more, then I myself will seek to leave”. She recognizes the difficulty of getting more valued jobs, with her trajectory:

I would not [like that my children did the same work as I do]. Not that it is not dignified... It is. It is only that, if I had the right conditions, I would have studied more and would have got a better job. So, not scorning what we do, but the way they treat us. [...] I think about returning to school and doing a professional development course in the administration area, but otherwise I will carry on here, because it is not easy to find work.

Resignation to the present job derives not from an indisposition towards work, but from an acute awareness of her responsibility for her family and of the disadvantage that low schooling represents in accessing better occupational positions. The fact that she is the home's sole source of income and her extenuating work routine does not contribute to the worker risking to seek other opportunities. Not that she does not have other desires and dreams, but they are far from amounting to a priority, so the schooling and professionalization efforts remain centered around the children.

After the conclusion of this research, Maria was unfairly dismissed. She used to have a combative attitude regarding the company and, in the instances when she found irregularities in her pay slip, she went down to the administration offices to sort it out. For her, the motive for dismissal was an argument with her superior and, according to the supervision, it was due to the fact that “she encouraged other workers to seek their rights.” After dismissal, Maria carried on working as a cleaner in night clubs and pressing clothes in private homes.

### Positionings: “We find a way”

If, by necessity, the workers intend to continue working in outsourced cleaning work, they do so in the best way they can: “without leaving the place where one has to live” and that “imposes a law” onto them, they use, in their favor and creatively, the time, the occasions, the spaces and the relations that they find (Certeau, 1994:87). Grounded on this perception and based on the understanding that “one needs to point at both the obstacles of domination and the resistances to it plus the ways to circumvent it” (Kergoat, 2014:14), our last proposal here is to render visible another side of outsourced work, configured in small resistances developed by the female cleaners at Unicamp.

When we think about resistance, we do not understand it as “the aim or the goal of political struggle, but instead as its beginning, its possibility”, as a “minimal notion of necessary agency so that the relation of oppression ↔ resistance is an active relation” (Lugones, 2014:939-940). Although limited to a very restricted frame of possibilities, we consider that the subjects hold intentions and values that condition their actions and that are able to creatively create oppositional practices, which confront the imposed order – albeit often silently.

To understand the everyday resistance ways invented by the cleaners is, therefore, to understand how they manage to defend their interests in the best way they can. If, on the one hand, a certain conformity is needed for survival (there is an inevitability of “following the ordination of the world and play according to the rules imposed by the employers” (Thompson, 1998:20). On the other, there is also a persistent resistance, derived from the experiences of exploitation.

Surely, certain care is needed in order not to end up in “poetizing” exploitation. It would be a mistake to romanticize the “weapons of the weak”. It is highly unlikely that the practices observed here “do more than marginally affect the various forms of exploitation” of outsourced workers (Scott, 2011:219). On the other hand, what we intend to show is that they are not trivial and can indicate a way forward.

The information presented below resulted, chiefly, from the observation and analysis of a working day in the life of cleaning worker Elisa, in combination with other practices and discourses observed during the years carrying out this research.

Elisa arrived everyday by hired coach in Unicamp at 5:35 a.m. She then walked to the dressing room of her work sector, where she put her uniform on and ate the breakfast she had brought from home. At this time, there was little interaction between her work mates. At 6 a.m., she started her shift. She was in charge, alone, of the cleansing of a building composed by a library, three bathrooms (female, male and employees’) and an administrative sector comprised of three rooms, a canteen and a storeroom.

Before the library workers arrive at 8 a.m., she must dust the furniture, clean up the tables and the carpets and wash the floor. Despite the recommendations to sweep, Elisa says that “each one cleans in a particular way” and that, as her time was “very busy”, she opted to sweep only the carpets. Between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m., she washed the toilets, cleaned the toilet seats and collected the rubbish. On Fridays she said she saw no problem in not doing a few of her daily chores, such as wiping the bookshelves with a wet cloth, since during weekends the building was much less used. On the other hand, she understood that the work in the first days of the week, especially on Mondays, should be more “thorough”.

After 9 a.m., opening time for the library, Elisa returned to her dressing room to exchange her wellies for her work boots. She stopped by for a cup of tea in a canteen for Unicamp’s workers. In another canteen (now in the library, the room she cleaned), she sat down to take her tea. On the day we followed her, the worker almost had no interactions with the community, with a few exceptions. One of them was with a worker that had kept the leftovers (a bit of cake, nibbles and soft drink) from the previous day, of a birthday party of one of the library’s workers. Elisa then ate, washed her dishes and, later, sat on one of the library’s easy chairs in order to rest for a few instants. She said she preferred not to take a rest in the dressing room with the other outsourced workers, for they might think she was “skiving” work. Despite not being allowed to take pauses for rest or coffee, Elisa had diabetes and administered her time and work so as to secure adequate food intake every three hours.

Around 10:30 a.m., her lunchtime, Elisa met colleagues who worked in other sectors in order to catch a free Unicamp circular bus in order to go to the university restaurant. She took lunch in approximately half an hour and rested the remaining minutes. At noon, she returned to work. She dropped by the library to fetch the gallons of cleansing products and took them to the storeroom (outside the building) where the products were stocked in order to fill up the recipients. She returned to the library and checked, around the whole building, if everything was in order. She reviewed the toilets (mopped the floor, poured disinfectant in the toilets, again cleansed the seats and collected the rubbish). She also collected the other dustbins in the library and in the administrative sector. Finally, she took the rubbish to the dump (outside the building) and washed and organized all the material used. Around 3:30 p.m., she returned to the dressing room, changed clothes and walked to the hired coach, which left at 4 p.m.

The picture of Elisa's daily routine helps to illustrate the specificities of the logics of monitoring of the university's outsourced cleansing services, a monitoring that is carried out, to a large extent, by her very work mates, who are constantly on the lookout to detect if their colleagues are "skiving" work or if they are following the prescribed cleansing procedures. In face of such situation, the worker's main complaint was of the lack of union among her colleagues: "if we were all united, it would be easier"; "it is all individual"; "you can trust no one".

In order to build protection against false accusations, the tactics adopted by the cleaner involved choosing to be in charge of the hygiene of an isolated building, even if too big. In this manner, she carried out her duties and rested with great discretion: "Here, at least, I found a way. I am more remote, I am peaceful". As she was not constantly under the gaze of her colleagues, she filled her work routine in a considerably better way: she made brief pauses, she sat on the easy chairs and used the sector's canteen to both keep and take her meals. However, she felt alone most of the time: "They can chat away over there, I have to be on my own". It is worth highlighting that during the whole working day, Elisa had very few interactions with the academic community, even as she was in charge of one of the spaces of greatest circulation of the Institute where she works.

While some of the cleaners made an effort to establish a good relationship with the overseers, aiming, above all, to secure for themselves easier tasks and in the better places, others preferred to keep their distance and interact as little as possible. In the case observed, the workers closest to the overseers did lighter work and enjoyed longer resting time. Although their shifts started at 6 a.m., they effectively started work at 6:40 a.m., since they had to wait for another employee to arrive in order to switch off the alarm in the place to be cleaned.

Elisa worked alone in a building and was instructed to follow the cleaning procedure indicated in the Technical Specifications of the cleaning service's edict contract. Notwithstanding, with the reduced time to perform the expected tasks, she was not able to do all the work demanded from her. Additionally, some tools and products she had available were not in perfect use condition, so that a few "hacks" had to be created in order to adapt and to better use the available resources: she chose the frequency and the order of her tasks, intercalating them in the course of the day and in the course of the week, giving priority to some of the tasks demanded. She did not see, for instance, the need of applying certain products or of hoovering the carpets, nor she thought necessary to dust the book shelves on a Friday.

Albeit limited, the observation and analysis of Elisa's working day indicates small transgressions that configure, at least, a refusal to the "identification with order or the law of facts" (Certeau, 1985:8). In general, Elisa's small detours and those of the other workers' observed in this research represent a form of individual self-help, they do not need any coordination and avoid any confrontation with authority. These are expressed especially in the subtle acts of disobedience such as reluctance, dissimulation, false submission, simulation of ignorance or of incompetence (Scott, 2011). Even with all such limitations, such tactics are resorted to as manners of mitigating or rejecting the demands and norms with which they do not agree.

Among the practices observed, we can consider, for instance, that delays during meals configure a challenge to the reduced lunch period; that false acquiescence is a way of circumventing abuse of power; that the purposefully slow pace of work is a refusal mechanism to the overload of tasks or, finally, that there is a claim to belonging to the university's space and community implicit in

the “crashing” by such workers of certain reserved spaces: “If you want to go to a place where there are lots of Unicamp people, as you got interested in something taking place there, sooner or later we find a way to get in and participate too!”.

The lack of representation of the category’s trade union, the economic and social vulnerability of their positions, the logic of surveillance to which they are submitted and the turnover dynamics result in a straight-jacket for the female workers. Even if they perceive themselves as a group separate from the rest of the university community (and the words of a cleaner makes this clear: “if something goes missing [...] they will not think that it was one of them who took it”), very rarely the struggle they develop results in organized opposition, with an agenda, discipline and leadership. Even with similar individual complaints, such as the excess of work and lack of materials, there is no formation of a base for the building of a collective demand and their practices continue showing an informal, dissimulated character, largely concerned with immediate gains (Scott, 2011).

As they do not have formal organization, name, leaders or demands and because their safety is secured in anonymity, the cleaners’ resistance practices take up institutional invisibility. On the one hand, the hidden character of their disobediences guarantees their not being caught out and, therefore, punished. On the other, the problems that such practices try to circumvent remain being made invisible, rendering the possibility of its resolution as yet far away.

## Concluding

The study of the social trajectories of Unicamp’s outsourced female cleaners indicates how their paths and social positions follow important socio-demographic movements in the world of labor. Rural exodus and migration to peripheral regions of big cities, the passage through remunerated domestic work and entry in outsourced services reflect, on the one hand, structural aspects of our labor market – i.e., the surplus labor force, the high degree of heterogeneity and informality plus little social protection, and, on the other side, important transformations of the working class and of labor relations unleashed from the end of the 1980’s, with the adoption of the liberal agenda. This moment inaugurates the flexibilization trend in labor relations, motivated by capital’s strategy of widening its freedom in determining the conditions of the hire, use and remuneration of labor force and the retrieval of social protections, a process that features strong impacts on employment and on the sectorial composition of the occupation and in which outsourcing and the outsourcing of the economy take up a novel protagonism in the Brazilian economy. They also reflect how, regardless of changes, the organization of our labor market continues to impose on the Black population, on women and on poorest, the most vulnerable, precarious and badly remunerated occupations (Krein et al., 2020).

The development of the services sector takes place, increasingly, by means of outsourcing, and has led many women without educational qualifications to participate in the labor market by means of jobs related to domestic work, unstable, badly remunerated and featuring almost nonexistent possibilities for promotion or a career, as is the case with the university’s cleaners. With limited social rights, constant negligence of public and collective labor norms, insufficient income and little collective support equipment (such as creches), the feminine labor force, still in charge of most of family and home care, is particularly affected, needing, often, to seek informal work in order to supplement income and find alternative artifices for child care.

Although unable to exercise full-time motherhood, , the testimonials suggest that the decisions and choices of the outsourced cleaners aimed at securing their children a social fate above their own fragile achievements. With this goal, the constant threat of unemployment allied to low educational levels, to the scarce union activity and the organizational dynamics of outsourcing at the university, tends to lead them into submission at increasingly alarming levels of exploitation and disrespect to labor laws, devoid of any change perspectives in this or other job.

The notion of trajectory, developed by Bourdieu’s sociology, seeks to deny the “biographical illusion”, investing chiefly in thinking trajectories as the displacements of agents within a social and geographic space, rendering visible the properly social factors that impact such trajectory. In this sociological perspective, the agents’ paths cannot be understood outside of the intergenerational relation and the educational trumps and handicaps are never neglected. The parents’ social origin,

the first jobs, early socialization with home chores, the awareness of the limitations of one's educational credentials to face a competitive market, as well as the projection of hopes of a "better job" onto their children's generation, contribute to the understanding of the reasons why an occupation marked by daily humiliations and moral harassment, recurrent disrespect of labor laws, low wages and permanent instability becomes acceptable. One of the aims of this study was to denounce such state of affairs, in the hope that the public universities may include in their contracts of services and institutional policies greater guarantees to the workers who are led to accept unacceptable work conditions.

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