

LIVES Impact



Work Precarity Among Paid Domestic Cleaning Workers in Switzerland: An investigation of working conditions and access to protective resources

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In Switzerland, paid domestic cleaning workers face precarious working conditions that threaten their economic stability, physical and psychological safety, and social recognition. This study delves into the challenges these workers encounter daily, revealing the urgent need for enhanced labor protections and supportive resources to mitigate their vulnerabilities and foster a more secure and dignified work environment.

Work precarity, a work-related psychological state of insecurity, instability, and powerlessness, is a growing concern worldwide (Allan et al., 2021). Structural forces such as globalization, digitalization, or the weakening of social and labor protections contribute to workers' feelings of insecurity associated with negative outcomes such as poor mental health (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017). Despite being employed, precarious workers may face low volume and discontinuity of work, economic insecurity, insufficient power to improve their working conditions, and a lack of physical or psychological safety (Allan et al., 2021; Blustein et al., 2022). Socially undervalued occupations characterized by non-standard and informal arrangements are particularly prone to precarious working conditions (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017). Such occupations are predominantly relegated to underprivileged and minority workers, including women and individuals with an immigrant background (Flores et al., 2021). ➔

Paid domestic cleaning (PDC) is an illustrative case of precarious and socially stigmatized work (Bosmans et al., 2016). The International Labor Organization (2023) recently reported major difficulties associated with cleaning in private households worldwide, such as working conditions marked by demeaning tasks (e.g., contact with waste), power imbalances (e.g., servile relationship with employers, lack of labor protection) and insecure arrangements (e.g., low and uncertain wages, informal or unstable contracts). In Switzerland, this occupational sector still lacks legal and social visibility, depriving workers of the minimum labor regulations that are generally applicable in the country (Bonvin et al., 2021; EAER, 2022).

This study used semi-structured interviews to explore the work experiences of 21 women and three men working in PDC in the cantons of Geneva and Vaud. Participants were recruited through the networks of two welfare associations and interviewed in their homes, in university facilities or online. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 60 years ($M=43.6$), worked in PDC for 2 to 19 different employers simultaneously ($M=6.3$), had Swiss citizenship (four), a work or refugee permit (17), or were undocumented (3).

- **Lack of labor protections and rights:** Inability to access basic social benefits (e.g. sick leave, paid holidays), due to employers' non-compliance with labor laws or informal working arrangements.
- **Lack of social recognition:** Consideration of PDC as invisible and socially undervalued work due to disrespectful treatments by employers or disapproval by significant others.
- **Lack of physical and psychological safety:** Exposure to physical risks (e.g., physical overload, use of toxic products) or psychological harm (e.g., abuse, intimidation, or humiliation by employers).

One of our participants, Emilie, was recommended by her physician to stop working due to a complicated pregnancy. She well illustrates how PDC workers compromise their health to cope with precarity:

"If I stop working, I won't earn any money, as it's (paid) by the hour. So, I worked until two weeks before she was born, with difficulty, but I worked."

Key findings

The table below summarizes our key findings on participants' experiences, focusing on (a) perceived conditions in PDC, (b) reported work-related outcomes, and (c) their resources and vulnerabilities. We then describe these findings in more detail and illustrate them with quotes from our interviews with PDC workers.

Themes	Subthemes
Conditions	Insufficient and insecure income Lack of labor protections and rights Lack of social recognition Lack of physical and psychological safety
Outcomes	Health impairments Stigma internalization Attitudinal ambivalence
Resources and Vulnerabilities	Behavioral and psychological resources Limited work volition Inconsistent social support Inconsistent institutional support

1. Precarious working conditions

In line with existing literature, work in PDC is associated with high levels of economic, legal, social and physical vulnerability. The main dimensions identified in our study are:

- **Insufficient and insecure income:** Permanent insecurity regarding the ability to secure a decent living, due to fluctuating income and unstable contractual arrangements.

2. Negative work-related outcomes

We have identified specific risks to the mental and physical health of PDC workers:

- **Health impairment:** Widespread physical and mental health issues (e.g., musculoskeletal disorders, stress-related illnesses, psychological distress), due to the demanding nature of PDC work combined with deficient protections.
- **Internalization of stigma:** Undermined self-esteem, or feelings of being socially and professionally downgraded, due to negative societal views.
- **Attitudinal ambivalence:** Mixed feelings about PDC work (e.g., finding satisfaction while feeling undervalued; pursuing activity, yet wishing to change jobs), due to limited work alternatives or opportunities to engage in career development activities.

Our study shows that, in addition to health problems, working in PDC can lead to a demeaned and downgraded professional identity. Zacharie, who has another job while working in PDC to make ends meet, felt ashamed to tell his coworkers about his side activity:

"(My colleagues) don't know I wash dishes or do cleaning work. I don't give them all the details. I said that I work for a private individual and sometimes I give private lessons." ➔

3. Limited protective resources

PDC work seems to operate as a “precarity trap” due to intersecting factors:

- **Behavioral and psychological resources have limited impact to compensate vulnerabilities:** Personal coping strategies (e.g., multiplying employers to ensure income stability, attributing psychological meaning and purpose to activities) are insufficient to escape precarity, in the face of low qualifications, lack of language proficiency, or precarious legal status.
- **Limited work volition:** hindered access to opportunities for career change and development, due to structural barriers
- **Inconsistent social and institutional support:** Insufficient or ineffective support from family, employers, or institutional actors.

Participants reported feelings of helplessness and inability to move beyond their actual situation to attain better work and life circumstances, as depicted by Carla:

“Now it’s too late. I can’t see myself as a cleaner when I’m fifty, but I’m sure I’ll carry on cleaning because I won’t be able to study.”

Policy Recommendations

We observe that the existing labor laws and regulations in Switzerland do not compensate for the specific precarious conditions in the paid domestic sector (e.g., isolated work, multiple and informal contracts, poor knowledge and implementation of regulations). This is well illustrated by Martina:

“There are laws in Switzerland to regulate cleaning work, but they (employers) don’t follow them. [...] With these people, we’re helpless. I’ve tried to find help, to contact organizations that deal with this in [town]. But the last time I went there, the (administrative) lady told me, “Madam, if you want to stay and work in Switzerland, this is how it works.”

Improving the working conditions and supporting the career development of PDC workers require multidisciplinary actions by political, associative and career-related actors in the following fields:

- **Strengthening labor protections:** Political actors should focus on measures to better monitor employers’ compliance with labor laws and reinforce authorities in charge of mediating employer-employee relations, regardless of workers’ legal status.
- **Supporting workers’ collective initiatives:** Welfare associations and parapublic institutions provide critical help

to PDC workers by delivering legal and social assistance. Further initiatives should aim at supporting workers’ efforts to develop collective organizations, which could contribute to reducing their social isolation and increasing their sense of agency.

- **Increasing the accessibility of career guidance services:** Public career guidance services in Switzerland provide free and lifelong services. Such services support workers’ efforts to secure and improve their employment stability and to develop meaningful careers. However, multiple precarity-related barriers (e.g., risk of income loss, work overload, or care duties) can hinder PDC workers’ access to such services. Career guidance institutions should take structural barriers into account and develop inclusive and accessible services, for example by extending office hours, providing financial incentives for beneficiaries to participate in interventions, or developing collaborations with public and parapublic partners, to work on parallel issues with workers exposed to precarity (e.g., access to social assistance while working on career planning).

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