

# Men doing women's dirty work: Desegregation, immigrants and employer preferences in the cleaning industry in Norway

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The literature on gender desegregation has documented the gendered nature of employment hierarchies and opportunities, but less work has examined how the influx of immigrants in the labour market might affect employment hierarchies and gender segregation. This study examines employers' perceptions of 'the suitable cleaner' – a traditionally female-dominated occupation that has received a substantial number of male immigrant workers. Departing from the notion that men in female-dominated occupations are advantaged by a 'glass escalator' effect, we analyse how employer preferences position different categories of workers as hireable. Building on interviews with employers in the Norwegian cleaning industry, the study demonstrates how three different but intertwined logics define employer preferences: *effectivity demands*, *professionalization* and *devaluation*. While the first logic favours men as workers and the second devalues 'female' competence, opening the occupation for men, the third logic favours immigrants, combined positioning immigrant men on top of the hierarchy of suitability.

## KEYWORDS

employment hierarchies, gender desegregation, glass escalator, immigrant status, skills

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite advances in gender equality, like women's increased achievements in employment and higher education, labour markets in the western world continue to be distinctly segregated by gender (England, 2010). Although the gender segregation patterns at large appear stable, several occupations have actually become less gender-segregated (England, 2010; Jensberg, Mandal, & Solheim, 2012; Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012). These changes have primarily been driven by women moving into traditionally male-dominated occupations and fields, and have therefore been conceptualized as a 'one-way street' (England, 2010): women, but not men, are perceived to make non-traditional choices and cross gender boundaries. To explain this, scholars highlight the devaluation of jobs, skills and attributes culturally defined as feminine (England, 2010; Reskin & Roos, 1990). Women simply have clear incentives to move into male-dominated fields and occupations, and, while women gain from making gender-non-traditional choices, men lose (England, 2010).

While the literature on desegregation has come a long way in documenting the *gendered* nature of employment hierarchies and opportunities, less work has examined how the influx of *immigrants* in gender-segregated occupations might change the nature of employment hierarchies and the distributions of opportunities. This study shifts the attention to desegregation processes at the lower end of the occupational hierarchy in which immigrants – women and men – are entering traditionally female-dominated, low-skilled work. Feminist scholars have shown how the social attributes that are mapped onto individual workers are crucial in positioning some workers as more suited than others to perform different types of work and tasks (McDowell, 2009). The aim of this study is to unpack the production of such hierarchies of suitability and its implications for gender (de)segregation processes in one part of the Norwegian labour market. This study examines employers' perceptions of 'the suitable worker' and asks: How are skills valued and gendered in a traditionally female-dominated occupation facing a changing gender and ethnic composition of workers, how do these valuations position different categories of workers as suitable and what implications does this have for occupational (de)segregation?

While much of the existing literature on desegregation has examined men's and women's opportunity structures in the labour market, thus studying the supply-side (e.g., England, 2010; Reskin & Roos, 1990), we analyse demand-side processes. We argue that to understand changes in the gender-segregated labour market, we need to address employers' demands for particular kinds of labour (Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012). Processes of desegregation reflect that employers are changing the composition of their employees in particular jobs and occupations. Especially in entry-level jobs without formal requirements, hiring practices are almost exclusively open to employers' discretions and perceptions of soft skills (Shih, 2002). Moreover, we argue that, to explain both change and stability in occupational patterns, we need to move beyond a mere focus on gender and seek to understand the intersecting structures of gender, class, immigrant status and race (cf. McCall, 2011).

Following this line of reasoning, we zoom in on the individual firms where hiring decisions are made. Using qualitative interviews we examine Norwegian employers' judgements and perceptions about who is a good and suitable worker in the cleaning industry. This is a traditionally female-dominated industry that has seen a significant influx of immigrant men, making it particularly suited for studying processes of occupational desegregation and how jobs come to be marked in terms of categories such as gender and immigrant status.

Theoretically, we contribute to the literature on gender desegregation by bringing together two distinct research traditions that seldom engage with one another: research on gender desegregation and research on employers' perceptions of skills in immigrant labourers. From this position, the study provides new theoretical insights and empirical knowledge about the relationship between employer preferences and gender desegregation. Employers do not only differentiate between men and women workers; their perceptions of native versus immigrant workers are also a central factor in shaping how workers are allocated to different types of work.

## 2 | INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE GLASS ESCALATOR

The 'glass escalator' is a concept that captures men's advantages in female-dominated professions (Williams, 1992). In contrast to women's experiences with the 'glass ceiling', where processes of discrimination prevent them from accessing top positions in male-dominated professions, men do not suffer from being the gender minority. Quite the contrary, men earn more, work in the most prestigious fields and are often pushed into management positions in female-dominated work (Evans, 1997; Simpson, 2004). A key argument in the literature on men in female-dominated work is that men benefit from their token status because men, and the qualities associated with men, are more highly valued than qualities associated with women (Williams, 1992).

Although the concept of the glass escalator has been influential in understanding the experiences of men who do women's work, studies building on this perspective have been criticized for implicitly assuming a racial homogenization of male workers in women's professions (Wingfield, 2009). As Wingfield (2009) argues, the mechanism of the glass escalator is not just an effect of gender advantage but of racial privilege as well. An important insight from this intersectional critic is that gendered hierarchies in the labour market are deeply intertwined with racial and ethnic inequalities. An extensive body of empirical work demonstrates how discrimination and inequality on the basis of ethnicity and race remain pervasive in western labour markets (Quillian, Pager, Hexel, & Midtbøen, 2017). Even in an egalitarian Scandinavian context, ethnic minorities experience a glass ceiling that prevents them from accessing top positions, regardless of their formal qualifications (Carlsson & Rooth, 2007; Midtbøen, 2016). Thus, it is essential to understand how race and gender intersect to determine *which men* will ride the glass escalator.

## 3 | EMPLOYER PREFERENCES AND THE HIERARCHY OF SUITABILITY

Most of the literature on men in women's work takes a supply-side perspective, describing how men experience, cope and act as the gendered minority in women's work (Hussein & Christensen, 2017; Williams, 1992, 1995; Wingfield, 2009). In contrast, we turn to the demand-side and examine employers' ideals of the good and suitable worker and the relation between value and gender in occupations that have transformed from being female-dominated to including substantial numbers of men. Our starting point is that to understand processes of desegregation and the opportunity structures that constrain or privilege (certain) men in women's work, we need to address the particular demands and preferences of employers and how such work is labelled.

Organizations' demand for labour and particular types of workers is central in shaping segregation patterns in the labour market (Acker, 1990). As Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey (2012, p. xxix) note: 'Organizational decision-makers hire, fire, pay, promote, supervise, and manage — that is, they create the distribution of people across jobs and the rewards associated with employment.' The allocation of different groups to different positions in the labour market is strongly related to processes of categorical inequality (Massey, 2007; Ridgeway, 2011). The definitions of *who* is qualified and *what* it means to be qualified for a job are closely linked to stereotypes about categories such as gender, ethnicity and immigrant status, and these shape employers' judgements about the suitability of particular workers and workplace performances (McDowell, 2009).

Studies of change and stability in the composition of the workforce offer two main explanations for how and why certain bodies become associated with certain types of work. The first explanation points to the mechanism Ashcraft and Ashcraft (2015) have termed 'bodies that define work' and refers to the nominal association between bodies and work. When niches within the labour market are filled with workers who share a trait, such as gender or immigrant status, these niches become associated with that particular social group, thereby casting members of the group as particularly suitable for the kind of work in question (Carter, 2003). Following this argument, the social identity of an occupation as 'women's work' will shift as the number of men in the occupation increases.

The second explanation points to the mechanism Ashcraft and Ashcraft (2015) have termed 'work summons bodies' and highlights how the relationship between bodies and work is influenced by occupational content, such as the

task and skill requirements of the job. Re-coding of tasks and new skills requirements may influence what kind of workers employers see as suitable. The re-definition of skills in previously white male working-class occupations can be seen in relation to the changing ethnic composition in these jobs. Studies show that employers increasingly prioritize *soft skills* over other hiring criteria in the low-paid and low-skilled parts of the labour market (e.g., Moss & Tilly, 2003; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). Moss and Tilly (2003, p. 44) define soft skills as 'skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge'. The assessment of these kinds of skills is inherently subjective and coloured by employers' perceptions and attitudes toward potential workers (Shih, 2002). Research from the United States has thoroughly documented that African Americans, and African-American *men* in particular, are seen by employers to possess few desired soft skills, while newly arrived Latino immigrants are viewed as having good work ethic and are preferred over natives and other immigrants in low-skilled work (Moss & Tilly, 2003; Shih, 2002; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). Similarly, in Norway, employers have been found to operate with specific ethnic employment hierarchies where immigrant workers are preferred over natives in certain types of low-skilled work (Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018a, 2018b).

Employers' preferences and demand for soft skills are not only related to stereotypes about different ethnic or racial groups, but also to stereotypes attached to workers' *immigrant status* and their specific position as new arrivals. Immigrants are often seen as less demanding than natives, and employers tend to see them as flexible, hard-working and docile (Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018b; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). Immigrants' willingness to take low-status jobs is often interpreted as a sort of skill or 'work ethic' rather than reflecting their vulnerable situation in the labour market (Wills et al., 2009). Thus, while immigrant workers can suffer from discrimination and negative stereotypes in high-skilled work (cf. Carlsson & Rooth, 2007; Midtbøen, 2016), employers tend to prefer such workers at the bottom of the labour market.

To explain new divisions of labour and employment hierarchies, it is thus necessary to analyse the *intersection* of gender and immigrant status in relation to *specific* occupations and *local* opportunity structures in the labour market (cf. Brah, 1996). We argue that the valuation or devaluation of female or male skills depends on *how* a specific occupation is gender-labelled as well as how such labelling intersects with other categories of difference. In order to shed light on such context-specific processes, we analyse in depth how gender and immigrant status come to play in employers' judgements of skills and the suitability of different types of workers in cleaning, an entry-level occupation that has gone from being highly dominated by women to seeing a major influx of men.

## 4 | CLEANING IN THE NORWEGIAN CONTEXT

Norway represents a context characterized by a generous and redistributive welfare state as well as a highly regulated labour market, providing strong worker protection. Another characteristic that distinguishes the Norwegian context is its high levels of gender equality, both in terms of gender-equal practices and policies and in terms of a strong gender-equality ideology (Aboim, 2010). However, despite high gender-equality ambitions, Norway has a strongly gender-segregated labour market, with high numbers of women working in the public sector in health, social work and education, and high numbers of men working in the private sector in manufacturing and finance (Reisel & Teigen, 2014).

Norway has a relatively short history of immigration. In the late 1960s, a substantial number of labour migrants arrived in response to increasing demands for unskilled labour. While the access to labour migration was strongly restricted in 1975, Norway received successive groups of refugees and immigration through family migration has continued until the present. After the European Union enlargement in 2004, large numbers of free-moving labour migrants from Central and Eastern Europe came to the country (Brochmann & Kjeldstadli, 2008). In 2017, immigrants and their children made up almost 17 per cent of the Norwegian population (Statistics Norway, 2017). Immigrants are concentrated in unskilled work and are overrepresented in industries such as cleaning and public transportation, as well as in the taxi industry (Reisel & Teigen, 2014).

Cleaning, the industry that we examine in this study, has traditionally been one of the most women-dominated occupations in the Norwegian labour market and it has now become one of the largest employers of immigrants (Reisel & Brekke, 2013). The percentage of native women has decreased over the past 20 years at the same time as the percentage of immigrants – both women and men – has increased (Reisel & Brekke, 2013). Analyses based on administrative register data made available by Statistics Norway<sup>1</sup> show that the percentage of women in cleaning has decreased from 90 per cent in 2000 to 78 per cent in 2014, while the percentage of immigrant men has increased from 6 to 16 per cent in the same time period. The development of desegregation is much more pronounced in the capital, Oslo, where cleaning has become a gender-balanced occupation (54 per cent women in 2014) and where over 40 per cent of workers in the cleaning industry are now immigrant men. Thus, in Oslo, where our study is situated, cleaning appears to have undergone something akin to a gender switch; immigrant men have nearly taken over a traditionally women-dominated occupation.

Public and private companies are increasingly outsourcing their cleaning services, instead of employing their own cleaners. This has led to a massive increase in companies providing cleaning services in Norway, and competition in the industry has toughened (Andersen, Bråten, & Trygstad, 2016). Cleaning is a work-intensive industry. How effective the work can be done and at what price are key factors in companies' competitiveness. Accordingly, the workload for individuals in the industry is increasing, and cleaners are among the most exposed groups when it comes to self-reported health problems (Andersen et al., 2016).

In Norway, several measures have been enacted to improve the wage and working conditions for cleaners and to contribute to more equal conditions of competition between providers. This was largely a response to an inflow of 'unserious' actors in the market who underbid established actors with low prices and poor/unlawful working conditions (Andersen et al., 2016). As of 2012, any provider of cleaning services has to be authorized by the Directorate of Labor Inspection, and it is prohibited to buy cleaning services from non-authorized providers. One condition for being authorized is that the provider can document that the workers are paid according to a set minimum wage.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the cleaning industry in Norway has become highly regulated, and provides better wages than many other comparable entry-level service occupations.

## 5 | DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

The study takes a demand-side perspective on gender segregation and consists of qualitative case studies of firms – and employer preferences – in the Norwegian cleaning industry.

### 5.1 | Sample

The sample consists of five mid- to large-sized firms that provide cleaning services for the company market in the Oslo area. Thus, we are not concerned with cleaning conducted in, for instance, private homes or hotels. We targeted serious actors that pay taxes and provide wages and working conditions according to the established regulations. We further sought to have a mix of public and private firms. Two of the firms are owned by public hospitals and are organized as separate entities that provide cleaning services. The three remaining firms are private and are either specialized in cleaning services or have cleaning services as one of their primary offerings. The private firms have a mix of private and public clients. They mainly clean office spaces but also clean, for instance, shopping malls, trains and construction sites. The private firms employ between 120 and 440 cleaners each, while the two public firms employ over 450 cleaners. In total, the firms in the study employ almost 1400 cleaners. This represents one fifth of the number of individuals registered as working in the occupation in Oslo in 2014.

After gaining an overview of the relevant firms in the Oslo area, we contacted them through top management. We presented the study as a study of skills and recruitment processes in the cleaning industry, and did not particularly emphasize gender or ethnicity. The recruitment of firms was unproblematic as all firms we contacted were

interested in participating in the study. At each firm, we interviewed those responsible for the recruitment of cleaners and those responsible for the day-to-day follow-up of employees. The informants were either recruited directly as we contacted the firms or through top management. In total we interviewed 11 managers, six women and five men, where two had immigrant background. The informants all had significant experience (5–30 years) in the industry, and several had started as cleaners and climbed the career ladder in the company.

## 5.2 | Data collection

The interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2016, and were semi-structured, lasting between one and two hours. They were recorded and transcribed. The interview guide covered topics such as recruitment processes and hiring decisions, the skills needed for cleaning and the employers' experiences with different types of workers. We also gathered valuable data through informal conversations with top managers and workplace observations.

We interviewed two to three managers at each firm, usually at the same time, with the exception of one firm where we interviewed one manager. By interviewing several representatives on the employer-side together, we were able to exploit the dynamic between the different positions in the firm to tease out perceptions and stereotypes about different groups of workers. Contrary to what we had expected, the interviewees – both those interviewed together and those interviewed individually – were very explicit in categorizing different types of workers, and the data are rich in blatant group stereotypes.

## 5.3 | Data analysis

In the analysis we were concerned with how employers defined the skills and attributes necessary and valuable in cleaning, and how their notions of who is qualified and what it means to be qualified for a job might be linked to *gendered* and *ethnified* concepts of work. Besides being informed by these theoretically grounded questions, the coding process was empirically driven. The three overarching themes – effectivity demands, professionalization and devaluation – were developed on the basis of the following initial descriptive codes: recruitment, core skills, changing requirements, gendered competence and ethicized competence. The initial codes were expanded with subcodes during the coding processes, and later came to form the basis for the three overarching themes.

We treat the employers' demarcations between different skills and employees as a case of employer selection and control. Thus, we believe that our analyses offer an understanding not only of how employers justify their previous hiring practices but also of how cultural notions of gender and immigrant status/ethnicity constrain employer preference and choice. We are primarily concerned with the categories of difference of gender and immigrant status. Immigrant status is of course intertwined with ethnicity and race, especially considering that many of the immigrant groups in Norway are (visible) racial and ethnic minorities. When we choose to focus on the distinction between natives and immigrants it is because we are primarily concerned with the significance of the vulnerable labour market situation that often characterize immigrants, regardless of their ethnic background.

## 6 | THE SUITABLE CLEANER

When describing the 'ideal worker' in cleaning, the employers highlighted three different but intertwined logics that define the skills and attributes they are looking for in their workers: *effectivity demands*, *professionalization* and *devaluation*. First, the employers emphasized that the increased effectivity demands in the industry have led to toughened working conditions, making cleaning physically demanding work. Second, there has been a professionalization of cleaning that requires the right competence of techniques and machineries, rendering the tacit knowledge of the

'old cleaning ladies' outdated. While the first logic positions cleaning as a *man's* job, the second logic opens the occupation for men as the 'female' knowledge of cleaning becomes devalued. Third and last, the employers depicted cleaning as devalued and unattractive work. Within this logic cleaning is positioned as an *immigrant* job – that is, only immigrants have the right morale and attitude to appreciate cleaning as a proper job and to accept the working conditions in such low-status 'dirty work'.

## 6.1 | A man's job: Effectivity demands

Cleaning has traditionally been a women-dominated occupation and has accordingly been seen as women's work. As much care work, cleaning involves tasks traditionally placed on families, mainly women, and that are situated between women's unpaid work and low-paid work (Hagemann & Roll-Hansen, 2005). However, as noted above, professional cleaning is no longer solely women's work; especially in Oslo, there has been a substantial influx of male (immigrant) workers.

The 'gender switch' in cleaning is reflected in the workforce of the firms in this study. The employers described the gender composition of their workforce as ranging from 'over 50 per cent men' to 'hardly any women'. The 'gender switch' is also reflected in the employers' image of the typical cleaner: in most cases they either implied or explicitly expressed that cleaning is a male profession. One of the employers in the private sector even questioned whether cleaning was ever a female occupation: 'We've never experienced that there were many women. We were puzzled by what you said, that this was typically a woman's occupation.' For this interviewee the male presence in cleaning is natural and taken for granted. The other employers, however, describe visible changes in the gender composition in cleaning over the past decades.

The shifting gender of the cleaning workforce may partly reflect the composition of available employees, an explanation put forth by one of the employers in the private sector. While he held that a gender balance would be good for the company, he noted that 'We can't magically make them [women cleaners] appear.' Together with his colleague, he believed the lack of female cleaners is a purely supply-side problem. However, when asked about the gender composition in the job applications they receive, the picture changed:

*A: Both men and women apply for work. But you have to look at how demanding the work is. Can you take on a woman?*

*B: Again, if we take on a woman, quite quickly they find out that it's too heavy, it's too much. And then they give up.*

*A: We've misjudged a couple of times. We want to balance [the gender composition], but they themselves say that it's demanding and that they can't do it. So, we've looked at what kind of customer it is, and we don't make that mistake again. Like [working at] shopping malls, women can't do that. It's too hard.*

In other words, the lack of female workers does not mean that there are no women seeking cleaning work. In this case, the skewed gender balance rather appears to be the result of the employer's perception that women are unsuitable for the work because of the physical demands.

When the employers position women as unfit for cleaning – despite having female applicants for cleaning jobs – it suggests that the changing gender composition in cleaning does not merely reflect the availability of workers; it also, at least in part, appears to reflect selection processes on the demand-side. All the firms in this study describe having a large supply of potential workers. One of the employers, for instance, explained that they used to have 30 people at the door every day looking for work. To be able to manage the number of job applicants, they now lock the office doors and require that all applicants use their electronic recruiting portal. Importantly, the employers in all the firms highlighted that they receive applications from *both men and women*, mostly with an immigrant background

(as we will return to later). This implies that the employers' gendered understandings of who is suitable for cleaning might be central for understanding the gender composition of workers.

The physical demands of cleaning are key factors in the employers' judgements of suitable workers and in positioning cleaning as a man's job. When one of the interviewees in the private sector was asked to elaborate on the claim that cleaning is a 'physically hard job', she replied:

Have you never washed before!? [Laughing] You're walking and standing and mopping floors, toilets, four hours in a row. Emptying trash. You use your body all the time. Many of the jobs we often think are better for men because of the physique. But if you have an office space where you're pottering around, it's okay with a cute girl or a woman. But cleaning work is heavy. It's a heavy job. There are lots of strain injuries. [...] It's not for the old cleaning lady. It's a tough job. You have to be physically fit.

Here, the line of reasoning quickly transitions from describing cleaning as a physically demanding job to concluding that it is therefore more suitable for men than for women. There is no room for 'the old cleaning lady' in today's market. A couple of employers from another private firm painted much the same picture. At their workplace, most of their staff are (Tamil) men, and they also argued that cleaning requires a male physique:

*A: The competition is much tougher than it used to be. It's a more physical job. Tamil women, I don't know if you've seen them? They're 150 cm and weigh 45 kilos or something. The trash might weigh more than her. She can do it, but it's easier for men.*

*B: Even with technical aids and lifts and things like that, at the end of the day it's a tough job.*

Across the interviews, the employers emphasized the increased pressure in the industry due to intensified competition, and this is deeply intertwined with how the employers understood cleaning in masculine terms. At the same time, the employers distinguished between different types of cleaning work. While women were considered clearly unsuited for some types of particularly demanding cleaning work (concrete examples given included washing trains or shopping malls), they can do other types of work (like 'pottering around in an office'). However, even office cleaning, which several of the employers held as suitable for women, was described as potentially 'too tough' for women. The employers' gendered judgements of suitability are very explicit: although cleaning might have been a female occupation, men are better suited for the work in today's market.

The gendering of skills seems to vary between organizational fields, in particular between the private and public firms. While the employers in the private firms explicitly emphasized men as better suited for cleaning than women, the employers in the public firms did not express the same gendered understandings of suitability. One of the employers in the public sector even held that cleaning is not for men:

For me, cleaning is not suitable for boys. That occupation is much better for girls. Girls are better at washing. I have many boys working for me, and I see that the woman is tidier. It's more suitable for girls. Now, I have some girls, and they're tidier than the boys in the break room. If there's a bottle on the table in the break room, women see it and take it. Boys don't. Girls see more and tidy more.

However, the interviewee was immediately challenged by her colleague who claimed that the men working for her are just as good as the women. They keep the break room tidy, and they even bought flowers for the room. Although the employers in the public firms expressed different gendered conceptions of suitability than those in the private firms, gender was also for them clearly present in their assessments of suitability. It is worth noting that when women were seen as better suited for cleaning, the emphasis was put on their innate 'tidiness', the ability to see and act on mess and untidiness. For men, it was more often their physical strength that deemed them suitable for the occupation.

The differences in perceptions of skills between public and private firms can be interpreted in light of both their differing situations regarding the intensity of competition and the role of technological developments in the industry. While the employers in the private firms described a clear toughening of the working conditions in the industry due



to intense competition, the employers in the public firms stated that work has become physically *less* straining with the aid of new methods and technologies. Although the private firms similarly benefit from technological developments in the industry, the increased efficiency demands and intensified competition appeared to clearly outweigh the effects of technological aids. The public firms did not appear to be under the same severe pressure to become more effective. For instance, they described having calculated slack into the cleaners' work schedules to cover unforeseen situations the cleaners might encounter during their workday.

The interviews suggest that it is not first and foremost the technological competence (e.g., machinery-oriented cleaning) that stereotype cleaning as a man's job. Rather, it is the employers' perception of worsening working conditions and increased effectivity demands in the cleaning industry that connects cleaning to masculinity. Only men are seen to be able to handle the new pressure and physical demands. The differing working conditions in the two sectors of the cleaning industry shape employers' skill perceptions. When the physical demands are perceived as being high, cleaning becomes understood as a man's job. Although this study is not suited to make general conclusions about the differences between private and public firms, the analysis highlights how the local context shapes the perception and valuation of skills.

## 6.2 | Goodbye, old cleaning lady: Professionalization of cleaning

In addition to increased effectivity demands and a toughened workload due to intense competition, the employers describe the *professionalization* of cleaning as a significant change in the industry over the past few decades. Cleaning has become a *profession*. For instance, it is recognized as a study subject, and it is possible to obtain a craft certificate in cleaning. The employers described how 'modern cleaning' requires the right competence. In contrast to before, when everything was washed with the same standard detergent, the cleaners now have to master a range of 'techniques' suited for different types of surfaces. Cleaning now requires practice and training in detergents, dosages and methods. Accordingly, the employers placed great weight on internal training, although exactly how comprehensive and standardized these training regimes are for new staff varied across firms.

When the employers draw boundaries between cleaning in the old days and nowadays, they use the image of the *old cleaning lady*. This gendered symbol captures skills and experiences that are seen as outdated and backwards. As one of the employers stated:

In the old days the cleaning lady wrung the wash cloth and you couldn't walk on the floor for two hours. It was still wet. Now we use splash bottles and mop. We have so many different techniques. Different surfaces require different treatment. In the old days we used green soap everywhere.

Another employer in one of the public companies even believes that it is only now, with modern cleaning, that cleaning can be regarded as an occupation:

When I started in the seventies, we all looked at cleaning as unskilled work. You didn't need formal skills. This reflected the old cleaning lady. [...] Now we see it as an occupation.

Previous research has argued that the professionalization of the cleaning industry has marginalized the tacit knowledge of women. Skilbrei's (2009) study of ethnic majority women in the 1990s demonstrated how professionalization and the toughening of the cleaning industry was a threat to the women working in cleaning. As Skilbrei (2009, p. 89) argues:

With the increased focus on technique, you lose the feeling that handiness is important, and if the cleaner's assessment of what is to be done is replaced with detailed cleaning plans, the importance of the tacit knowledge also disappears. When the trained eyes and nimble-fingers lose their meaning, the women become exchangeable.

The women Skilbrei interviewed 20 years ago represent 'the old cleaning lady' who several of the employers in this study regarded as unsuitable workers in today's market. They are examples of workers who have learned to do things

'the wrong way' and who are difficult to use in 'modern cleaning'. As one employer bluntly stated: 'It would've been a crisis to have the cleaning lady [as an employee].' This apparent crisis is not solely due to the increased workload in the industry; it also refers to the type of competence the cleaning lady is seen to inhabit. Even the employers in the public firms, which have been shielded from many of the toughened working conditions, highlighted how the professionalization of cleaning and the standardized procedures and formalized techniques leave no place for the tacit knowledge of the old cleaning lady. The old cleaning lady seems to have become the image of what modern cleaning is not. When 'female competence' is no longer valued, the profession becomes open to male workers. Women have thus lost their traditional advantage, creating room for men, who are seen as able to learn and acquire the technical skills required in 'modern cleaning'. When they, in addition, have the physical strength that enable them to endure the toughened working conditions in the industry, men become preferred over women.

However, the hierarchy of suitability is not only defined in gendered terms. We now turn to the third logic of skill perception and suitability – namely, devaluation, which demonstrates how *immigrant status* is also a central marker of suitability. It is not men in general employers prefer but immigrant men.

### 6.3 | An immigrant job: Soft skills and devaluation

The professionalization of cleaning entails a strong emphasis on technical skills and internal training, but it does not necessarily entail a valuation of formal skills. In fact, the employers questioned whether formal qualifications are a good indication of skill and suitability; one employer in the private sector articulated:

You're not necessarily a quick and skilful cleaner just because you have a craft certificate. It's about interest, whether you're friendly and helpful. [...] A good cleaner looks respectable, smells good, is happy and service-minded. If no one likes you, it doesn't matter that you're doing a great job. [If you are likable,] the customers won't get angry at you if you forgot the bin.

Rather than formal skills, the employers value and emphasize *soft skills*, like being service-minded, friendly and helpful. The employers described having the right soft skills as essential for considerations of suitability, while technical skills can be learned through internal training schemes. Previous research has similarly demonstrated how soft skills are central in employer demands in low-skilled work (Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018a; Moss & Tilly, 2003). Moss and Tilly (2003, p. 44) group soft skills into two clusters, *interaction* and *motivation*, where interactional skills include friendliness, teamwork, ability to fit in, and appropriate affect, grooming and attire, and motivational skills include enthusiasm, positive work attitude, commitment, dependability and willingness to learn. This distinction between two different but intertwined aspects of soft skills is highly present in our material. The employers in this study emphasized interactional skills as central in their judgements of the suitability of different workers. A cleaner should be service-minded, pleasing and likable. In the public firms that cater to hospitals, this competence also includes caring for patients – for instance, by taking the time to talk to or help patients if needed (interactional skills). Another aspect of soft skills central to the employers' demands is the willingness to do the job. The focus on willingness is about having the right attitude (motivational skills), as one of the private employer's explained:

What matters when we hire is the attitude. Formal skills, a craft certificate, that's nice, but we're looking for the human behind [the skills]. If you don't speak Norwegian but truly want to become a cleaner – we take them. We look at how they clean, how they dress, that you get a positive feeling when you talk to them. When you ask them to do something, they should say, 'Yes, I will', and not sigh. You should not sigh at work. It's all about attitude. If you are like this [imitating a cleaner hanging over the mop], that's ... you can see it in their body language. He doesn't have to smile while he's cleaning, but he must be willing to do the job. If he smiles, it's a bonus. It's like an X-factor. It's not easy to describe, but they have to have the will.

The employers look for people who have the right motivation and values. This is a cleaner who 'likes to work under stress', who always says yes and who is truly dedicated to cleaning. In the quote above, we see how body language and ways of being (not hanging over the mop, not sigh) become important signals of competence and willingness.

Not all workers are seen to possess the right soft skills. In the next section we examine the interaction between soft skills and immigrant status.

## 6.4 | Immigrants have the right mentality

Although not all of the employers identified cleaning as a purely male occupation, they all agreed that it is an *immigrant* occupation. None of the firms had more than a handful of native workers, if any at all. When we asked about the ethnic composition of the workforce, one of the interviewees replied, 'They are all Norwegian', which was followed by a long pause before both interviewees burst out laughing. 'I just wanted to see how you reacted', one of the employers said. 'We have one Norwegian [out of 120 employees], that's it.' The idea of having a predominantly native workforce is so unthinkable that they treated our question as a joke. The employers held that 'everybody today knows how the business is'; meaning that cleaning is done by immigrants.

The employers' perception of cleaning as an immigrant job can be interpreted as a reflection of the supply of workers. As Waldinger (1994) argues, the changing position of immigrant workers within an industry must be seen in relation to the relative supply of native workers with whom they must compete. Different groups have different opportunity structures in the labour market. Immigrants gain access to and cluster in the parts of the labour market with low status when native workers allocate to better paid jobs and opportunities. Thus, when the employers in this study are mainly recruiting cleaners with immigrant backgrounds this could merely reflect who they have to choose from.

The employers pointed to the low status of cleaning to explain why they hardly have any natives among their staff. They held that natives prefer other types of service work, even if they pay less. As one employer said: 'Kids earn more here than working in a store, but for them it doesn't have enough status.' Another employer made a similar point: 'It's about that mentality. This is not an occupation for Norwegians. There are hardly any occupations left for Norwegians. They prefer just sitting in an office.'

Nevertheless, when the employers hold that natives are not willing to work in cleaning, they simultaneously render natives as unfit employees. In other words, the devaluation of cleaning is linked both to the (lacking) supply of native employees and to a clear scepticism from the employers toward the natives who do apply for cleaning work. As one employer in the private sector explained:

We've tried employing many Norwegians, but they're lazy. They'd rather go to the welfare services than take a job cleaning. [Asks colleague:] Do you remember the ones we hired? They didn't show up to work. Problems from day one.

The employers saw natives as demanding; they avoid cleaning because of the low status, and the ones who do enter the occupation are not the top pick. Thus, natives are seen as lacking essential soft skills, like motivation and the right attitude, making them unsuited to adapt to the tough demands in the market. Immigrants, on the other hand, are viewed as possessing these qualities. They have the right attitude, which is a prerequisite to acquiring the right competence; one employer in the private sector noted:

When it comes to this group [Tamils], everything is good. They're service-minded, easy to collaborate with, honest. [...] If we had placed Norwegians in the same jobs, they wouldn't have the same honour. Tamils have pride built into their body. No matter what kind of job they do, they will do it well.

Although the overwhelming overrepresentation of immigrants in cleaning may to a large degree reflect the supply of workers and the fact that natives are avoiding the occupation, the employers' perceptions of suitability that render natives unfit for cleaning can also shape hiring decisions, thus contributing to upholding cleaning as an immigrant job.

The companies in this study recruit employees from different ethnic networks. When they stereotype Tamils, Sudanese, Poles, etc. this reflects their experiences with certain immigrant groups. We did not find shared stereotypes of different immigrant groups or clear ethnic employment hierarchies across the companies. However, across companies we find a preference for willing and hardworking immigrant workers. The employers in our study favoured workers who are willing to do the dirty job and have the right attitude while doing it. Immigrants' willingness to accept low-status work and poor working conditions is understood as a valued soft skill and interpreted as a good work ethic and motivation. Group stereotypes about happy and hardworking immigrants and lazy Norwegians may trump actual individual characteristics in hiring decisions and play a significant role in the allocation of certain groups to different jobs (cf. Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018a). Although it varies which immigrant groups the employers have in their workforce, and although they rank these groups differently in terms of suitability, immigrant workers are consistently favoured over natives because they are seen to possess the right soft skills in terms of willingness to do the job.

The strong focus on the motivational aspect of soft skills might, at least partly, reflect employers' needs to manage and control. Employers may prefer to hire immigrants because they are cheaper and more flexible as a result of having fewer alternative options in the labour market. From this perspective, 'exploitability' is the key characteristic that makes employers favour immigrants (Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018b). The understanding of cleaning as devalued and unattractive work positions it as an immigrant job. As opposed to natives, immigrants are seen to have the right morale and attitude to appreciate cleaning as a proper job. They not only accept working at the bottom of the labour market in a low-status job with poor working conditions, according to the employers, they even take pride in it.

## 7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The concept of the glass escalator provides important insights that illustrate how organizations are gendered and that this gendering affects men and women in quite different ways. While women face a glass ceiling in male-dominated work, men gain opportunity and advantage in female-dominated work (Williams, 1992). Yet, important intersectional critique of the glass escalator questions its generalizability to all men, and demonstrates that race and gender intersect to determine *which men* will ride the glass escalator (Wingfield, 2009). This article advances the intersectional critique and more broadly contributes to the understanding of labour market desegregation by turning the focus from the supply-side perspective on workers' experiences to a demand-side perspective on employer's hierarchy of suitability. We demonstrate how employers' recruitment processes and ranking of different workers are crucial in shaping segregation patterns in the labour market. Furthermore, we show that in order to explain how opportunity structures may constrain or privilege different categories of men in women's work, it is necessary to analyse the intersections of gender and ethnicity in relation to *specific* occupations and *local* opportunity structures in the labour market. While immigrant workers can suffer from discrimination in some parts of the labour market, they are preferred by employers in other locations.

Building on Norwegian employers' preferences and considerations of suitability, this article unpacks the processes and logics behind gender desegregation in the cleaning industry. Departing from a 'gender switch' in cleaning, we asked how gender and ethnicity affect employers' perceptions of suitability and influence their decisions about who to hire. The analysis demonstrates that employers' ideals of value and competence must be seen in relation to three distinct yet intertwined logics of suitability; they prefer workers who are perceived as both capable of handling increasing demands for effectiveness and professionalization, and who are motivated and willing to do the job despite the devaluation of the occupation. A central finding is that the hierarchy of suitability is not only defined in gendered terms. The employers do not only prefer men in cleaning, they prefer *immigrant men*.

The employers had relatively few female cleaners and hardly any native cleaners in their workforce. The lack of female and native cleaners could be conceptualized as a supply-side problem, reflecting the availability of different kinds of workers. Structural and historical changes in the industry, in terms of demands for effectiveness and the devaluation of cleaning, have influenced the composition of workers. However, the employers in our study do in fact

choose from a diverse pool of potential workers that includes both women and natives. Thus, we show that factors on the demand-side, like employers' preferences and recruitment practices, must be taken into account to fully grasp the processes of gender desegregation in the cleaning industry.

By examining the employers' concepts of suitability, this study sheds light on how gender and ethnic stereotypes are central in hiring decisions and play a significant role in allocating specific groups to cleaning. When cleaning is no longer seen as a job for female workers, it might reflect the mechanism Ashcraft and Ashcraft (2015) have termed 'work summons bodies': occupational content influences what kind of workers that are seen as suitable. The intensified competition in the industry and subsequent effectivity demands has made cleaning more physically demanding work, shaping employers' perception of cleaning as a man's job. In addition, the professionalization of cleaning has replaced the tacit knowledge of 'the cleaning lady' with standardized procedures and formalized techniques, further opening up the occupation to men.

A central argument in this article is that in order to understand the changing relations of inequality at the bottom of the labour market, we must apply an intersectional lens to the processes of gender segregation, examining also the role of immigrant status as a category of difference. While the increasing effectivity demands and professionalization of cleaning contribute to favouring men and to positioning women and female skills as unsuitable for cleaning, the employers' valuation of soft skills favour immigrants over native workers. Immigrant status becomes a proxy for soft skills, particularly those related to motivation, in the recruitment process. The employers see immigrants as willing to make an effort and as proud of their work. Natives, on the other hand, are seen to lack these essential soft skills (cf. Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018a). Thus, the intersection of gender and immigrant status is key in employers' judgements about workplace performances; (immigrant) men are seen as capable of handling the tough working conditions in the cleaning industry, and the technical skills required in 'modern cleaning' can be learned through training. Due to their physical strength and willingness to work in low-skilled jobs, immigrant men are seen as the suitable cleaner in a tough and devalued industry.

This article contributes to the existing literature on gender segregation in the labour market by showing that the gender revolution at the bottom of the labour market does not necessarily take the form of a one-way street: not only women are driving processes of gender desegregation; changing gender relations are also a result of immigrant men who are taking over women's dirty work. Although immigrant men are favoured over other groups of workers in certain parts of the labour market, this is not a glass escalator for male immigrants. Given the limited opportunity structures in the bottom of the labour market, their situation is rather characterized by being the somewhat less disadvantaged among the disadvantaged.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>From the Norwegian wage statistics.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/registre/renholdsregisteret/godkjenningsordning-for-renholdsvirksomheter/> (accessed 2 November 2017).

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