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Clean pure white and definitely upper class

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## *Introduction*

When examining the immigration of workers into Ireland many different lenses could be adopted: economic, gender, racial, political. Each lens offers a different perspective, highlighting some issues and down-playing other issues. For instance the economic lens, which has been the lens favoured by the Irish government, emphasises labour shortage problems in keeping the Celtic Tiger show on the road. At the same time the economic perspective diverts attention from the problems faced by immigrants in trying to integrate into Irish Society (Conlon, et al. 2005). Rather than adopting one of the usual lenses used in the social sciences (gender, class or race) in this paper I adopt a 'cleaning lens'. Focusing on the activity of cleaning rather than the socio-economic characteristics of individuals or the societal goal has the advantage of bringing into focus a multi-dimensional view of what is happening in Ireland today and what might happen in the near future. Looking at Ireland through the lens of cleaning, draws attention to cleaning as a socially constructed process and not something that is an essentialist, natural process. Adopting a cleaning lens also throws light on the usual sociological divisions (gender, class, race) and these will be highlighted throughout the paper.

In the first section of the paper I briefly go over the empirical basis of the paper. In section two I examine the amount of cleaning that is done across countries. In section three I look at the link between race and cleaning. In section four I turn to look at cleaning in Ireland and I speculate how cleaning will be shaped in the future.

## *Section 1: The research*

The research for this paper is based on two sources, first interviews with the employers of cleaners in late 2005. The second piece of research was interviews with the owners of contract cleaning companies in 2004. However, this research provides a background for thinking about processes rather than empirical support for these processes, so it is only referred to in passing.

## *Section 2: paid housecleaning varies across societies*

Gershuny (2000) distinguishes two types of regime: The *liberal market* and *social democratic* regime (these are loosely linked to Esping-Andersons characterisation of welfare regimes and include working hours, job flexibility, the gender pay gap, childcare provision, maternity and parental leave provisions). The liberal market regime is characterised by high income inequality, long work hours and it is difficult for women to combine home life with a full-time career especially as there is little public provision of social supports. The only way women can effectively do so is to outsource and commodify large sections of home life. The greater the inequality of hourly pay between domestic workers and those who employ them, the easier it is for a high-income household to meet its housework needs from the market. This has the effect of stimulating the market to provide a range of services, so that in the US there are now services that offer to pick up dog excrement.<sup>1</sup> Under the liberal regime there is no incentive for men to change their behaviour and long work hours is a legitimate excuse to avoid domestic work (Gershuny 2002). In this regime, a male breadwinner or 'one and a half earner' model develops as men are pushed into long overtime hours and women into a restricted pattern of career development. Gardiner confirms this insight for Britain (2000). She argues that there are increasing class differences in the use of such services, so that well-paid fathers are increasingly likely to delegate their domestic role to a market provided source rather than increase their household work when their wives return to paid work (Gardiner 2000).

Therefore under the liberal regime there are incentives to concentrate hours in the paid workforce and commodify core household tasks. This results in those at the top end of the distribution being able to command the time of those at the bottom end by employing them to provide services. This bifurcation process can be summed up in 'time poor and income rich versus the overworked but underpaid'. One of the ways the wealthy have to command the time of the poor is to employ them as cleaners. That people who work as cleaners may be time poorer than the people who employ them is disregarded.

In the social democratic regime work hours are shorter, so women can compete effectively on the labour market and balance work and home life with the help of flexible workplaces, socially provided supports and help from their male partners. Under this regime men are challenged to change their attitudes to

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.poopbutler.com/> for an example.

domestic work and long paid work hours are not a legitimate excuse for avoiding responsibilities in the home. Services are exchanged between people with different types or levels of human capital but the very lowest skilled services remain unpaid because the income dispersion is not high enough for some groups to buy the time of others. Therefore the social democratic model has a higher quality of work and life, with greater gender equity and a relative lack of poorly paid, objectionable work. The state plays a crucial role in balancing the production and consumption of citizens and this entails a high level of state provided 'caring' services (Gershuny 2002).

Research shows that the proportion of women employed as domestic workers in American cities is strongly and independently correlated with two factors: household income inequality, and the percentage of the labour force who are African Americans and Latinas, or foreign born (Milkman, et al 1998). Women from these subordinated racial or ethnic groups face discrimination in the labour market, and therefore are "more likely to seek employment as domestics... because their other occupational options are generally inferior to paid domestic labor" (Milkman, et al 1998, p495 see also (Meagher 2000b)). This stands out against Sweden, which has more equally distributed income and state support and provided services including for child care, the proportion of women employed as housecleaners is "so tiny that it is not even published in the Swedish census" (Milkman, Reese, and Roth 1998, 492-3; (Meagher 2000a).

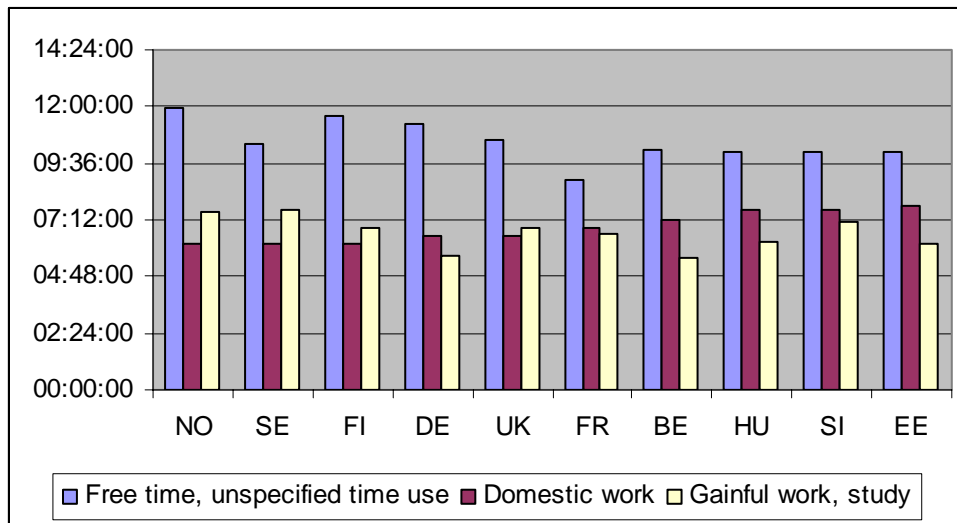
Thus an institutional analysis of cleaning highlights the different institutions and norms that exist in different societies and this has impacts on the type of work available for different sub-groups of the population (Gershuny 2000; Gershuny 2002).

"On one hand, the existence of markets for domestic labor is predicated upon inequalities of race, ethnicity, class and gender, and its further expansion may threaten important social and cultural values. On the other hand, if those concerned with justice and human flourishing were to stop buying housework, they are likely to harm themselves and, more importantly, others, at least in the short term" (Meagher 2000a).

So far this discussion has presumed that across societies and class groups the same amount of housework is done. This is not true and the amount of

housework (and leisure time) varies across EU countries. Figure one highlights that the total amount of domestic work per day varies by 1 hour and 41 minutes in the 10 countries Eurostat examined (Eurostat 2004).

**Figure one: division of non-sleeping time among persons aged 20 to 74 per day.**

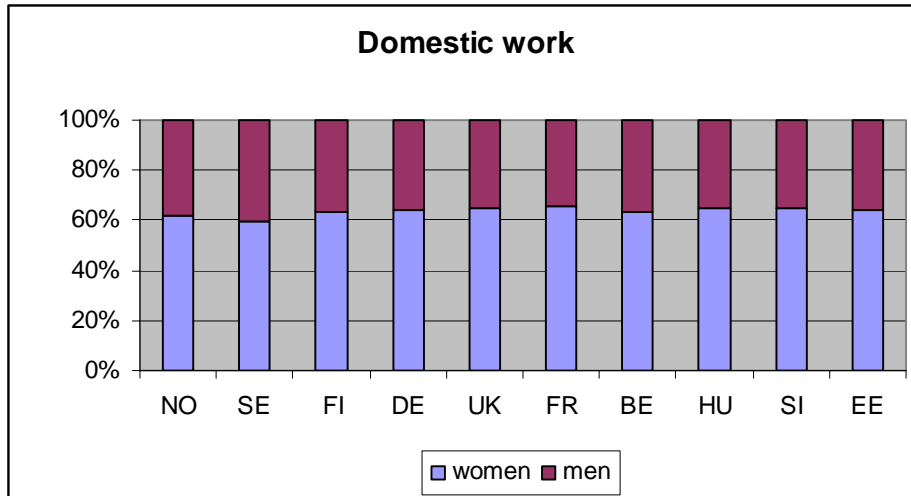


**Source: Own calculations from Eurostat (2004)<sup>2</sup> (time spent sleeping not shown)**

This difference in time spent in domestic work is not linked to time spent in gainful work or study (figure one), but does result in more leisure hours for the men and women who do less domestic work. This breakdown does hide an interesting gender inequalities, the amount of domestic work varies little between men across counties, there is just 22 minutes difference between the men who do the most housework (Belgium men at 2 hours 38 minutes per day) and those who do the least (Finnish men at 2 hours 16 minutes per day) (see figure two).

**Figure two: division of domestic work between men and women aged 20 to 74**

<sup>2</sup> BE Belgium; DE Germany; EE Estonia; FR France; HU Hungary; SI Slovenia; FI Finland; SE Sweden; UK United Kingdom; NO Norway



**Source: Own calculations from Eurostat (2004)**

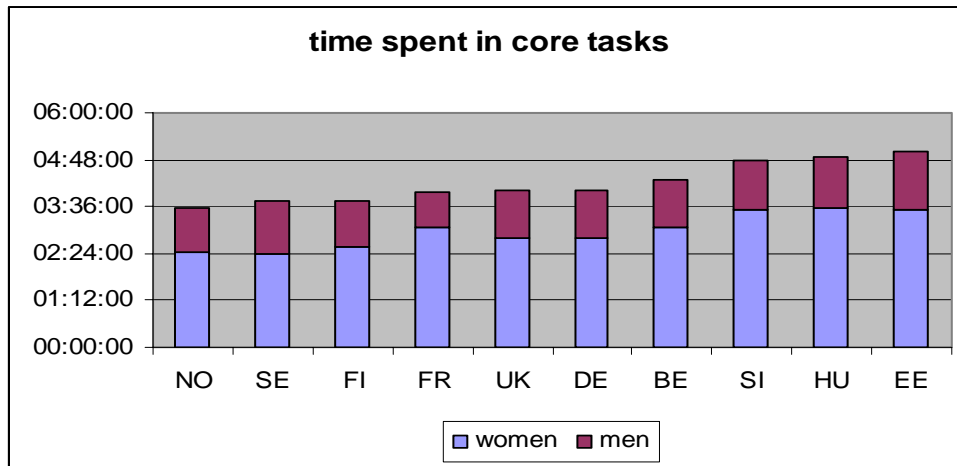
Therefore the differences across the countries examined is not because men do *more* domestic work but because women do *less* domestic work in some countries. Scandinavian women spend less time doing housework than women elsewhere in Europe – indeed Swedish women spend 3 hours 42 minutes in domestic work (and have 5 hours and 3 minutes of free time) compared to 5 hours and 2 minutes of housework by Estonia women (who have 4 hours 36 minutes per day of free time).

Thus women perform between 60% and 66% of all domestic work in the countries included in this comparison (Sweden is the most equalitarian and France and Slovenia are the least). Most time on domestic work is spent by women in Estonia, Hungary and Slovenia at around five hours per day. Less than four hours per day is spent on domestic work by women in Sweden, Norway and Finland. Men's share is the biggest in Sweden but not because Swedish men spend more time in domestic work but because Swedish women spend less time. Indeed it is in some of the most unequal countries (Estonia, Slovenia, Hungary and Belgium) where men spend the most time daily on domestic tasks.

Nor is this division because of childcare (which is counted under domestic work) which is socialised in the Nordic countries. Figure three just looks at time spent in 'core tasks' these are: food preparation, dish washing, cleaning and upkeep, laundry and ironing, and other domestic work. Again it is clear that Nordic countries – spend less time doing the core tasks every day.



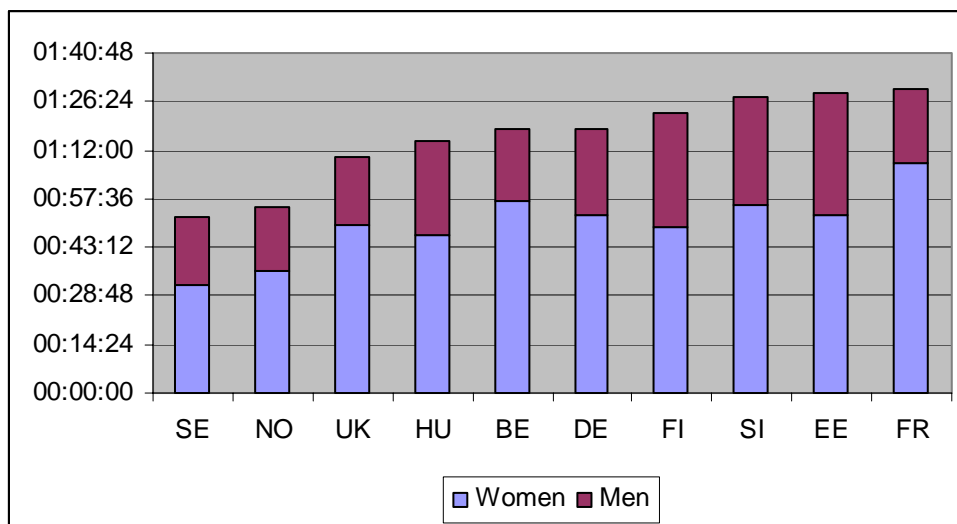
**Figure three: Breakdown of core domestic work between men and women aged 20 to 74**



**Source: Own calculations from Eurostat (2004)**

Once again it is clear that across the countries examined variation among men is very minor. This becomes particularly clear when cleaning and upkeep is examined (figure four). There is a 38 minute difference between the country which spend least time on cleaning (Sweden) and the country which spend the most per day (France).

**Figure four: Breakdown of 'Cleaning and upkeep' between men and women aged 20 to 74**



**Source: Own calculations from Eurostat (2004)**

This analysis has revealed cross-cultural variations in how much domestic work is done. Given that comfort and cleanliness constitute examples of non-negotiability their meaning and importance being simply taken for granted it is unlikely that homes are simply dirtier in the countries with less house spent in domestic work (Shove 2003). The questions are: why does cleaning vary across countries and how is it linked to the differences Gershuny outlined for European countries? Without a detailed time budget survey for all European countries it is difficult to give a definitive answer. However, given that there is less total housework in countries classified as *social democratic* suggests the pressure to share housework translates in a total reduction in housework. This is in contradiction to the increase equality in housework that Gershuny predicted. The fact that there is pressure to share housework for men means that women get more free time but also that housework gets structured that there is less total housework. The rather awkward result from this analysis for feminists is that when men get pressured to pull their weight – things get organized very differently. Just as the design of doors changed to allow access to pushchairs when women started to qualify in numbers as architects, so homes are built to be efficient and easy to clean when men take co-responsibility for them. We could also speculate that when women work outside the home in fulfilling jobs the home as a source of identity declines and therefore the necessity for elaborate home furnishing that advertise a women's competence as a homemaker may also decline. Oh course, there is not a perfect correlation – France in particular seems to be an outlier with both high relative total domestic work and relatively high inequality between men and women. What is clear however is that gender relations and social organisation of work time interact to produce clusters of institutional characteristics and these interactions and institutions influence the total amount of time spent in domestic work and the likelihood of hiring a cleaner.

It is important to note that housewives are not the only ones interested in the manufacture of a clean home – soap manufacturers, urban planners, utilities appliance manufactures and architects are also implicated in an extensive canvas of commercial and state involvement. Plus concepts of cleanliness are translated into expression of civic pride and societal well being and justify collective forms of housekeeping such as street cleaning and rubbish collection (Shove 2003). This again can act to increase or reduce the individual's housework burden and the number of cleaners employed outside the home.

With the societal shaping of cleaning in mind it is worth turning to look at how immigration into Ireland will shape the face of cleaning. Reflecting on house cleaning brings into focus the differences between regimes and allows us to explore how racial and ethnic differences might interact with other societal institutions to shape cleaning in Ireland.

### ***Section 3: Race and cleaning***

Cleaning, of the body or of the home, can be thought of as a backstage operation which prepares individuals for the front-stage performance, it creates and sustains the setting (Goffman 1959; Shove 2003). Done properly cleaning allows the individual to appear spontaneous and natural and to 'fit in' with societal norms and expectations of society. Yet societies vary. Not just in the amount of time devoted to housecleaning as we have seen but in the amount and type of inequality. These inequalities are crucially important in defining who works for whom and what work is done. They are therefore worth exploring a bit further.

Describing people things or practices as dirty or clean is not a socially neutral process as (Shove 2003) highlights. Rather such labels play a role in elaborate classificatory schemes built around distinctions such as age, race, class and gender. Indeed Mary Douglas talked as defilement as the routine policing of social boundaries - dirt is disorder, but there is nothing inherently dirty about dirt. Rather what counts as dirt is socially constructed (Douglas 1966). Shove argues that the saying 'the great unwashed' highlights these distinctions - the idea that other races, or class groups are dirty or even smell, creates barriers in a divided society and serves to create those boundaries. Debates about providing bathrooms in working class homes capture some of the flavour of this concern - the fear was that the working class would not, and could not, use bathrooms properly and would instead use bathrooms for storing coal (Shove 2003). Indeed the smell of immigrants is often a root objection to their entry into a country. In contrast *upper class-ness* is associated with a lack of smell, so that any smell marks the bearer as indefinably inappropriate. Of course, the association between a lack of smell and membership of higher social classes is new; previously someone who was a member of the elite would have had an elaborate perfumed smell. Thus not only does cleanliness and smell mark boundaries but these boundaries shift:

“Distinctions between the rural and the urban, the civilized and the barbaric, the familiar and the foreign consequently condensed into a newly discriminating language of cleanliness” p 100(Shove 2003)

Once the boundaries between ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ are constructed it is a question of how the boundaries are maintained – or put another way: who does the dirty work?

“I wheel my two-year-old daughter in a shopping cart through a supermarket and a little white girl riding past in her mother’s cart calls out excitedly, “Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid” (A black mother cited in Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003: 92)

This quote neatly encapsulates the classed and racial nature of cleaning in the US where the quote originates, where housecleaning is done by one class for another, by one racial group for another and (though this is less clear from the quote) by a woman for women and men. Until recently the comment about one racial group providing another with housecleaning services did not apply in Ireland. In a racially homogenous state, white working class women provided cleaning services for white middle-class men and women. With migration of different ethnic and racial groups into Ireland the possibility arises that cleaning becomes as much as a racial ghetto in Ireland as it is in the US.

Immigrants (regardless of racial or ethnic group) are often attracted to cleaning as an occupation, whether it is in the private or public sector. Cleaning is an entry level job that rarely needs qualifications; therefore it is open to all immigrants regardless of education level or recognition of their home qualifications. Indeed often cleaners don’t even need to know the native language to work as cleaners. Finally the cleaning job is often hidden from immigration control and tax authorities. This was clearly illustrated in Ken Loach’s film *Bread and Roses* where illegal immigrants got jobs in a contract cleaning company through relatives but had to endure exploitation as a result. So on one hand cleaning work often appeals to immigrants and they are ‘pulled’ into this occupation because of its hidden nature and the low level of qualifications

On the other hand, immigrants or at least non-white immigrants are often ‘pushed’ into cleaning because they are excluded from certain occupations. Front-line service workers are often recruited because they echo what customers are or because they reflect what customers want to look or be like. The frontline worker is the ‘ideal’ that a customer can try and achieve, thus non-white service

workers are at a disadvantage compared to white workers in serving white customers. The exception to this is where exoticism adds to the service experience. So ethnic restaurants are staffed with the appropriate ethnic or racial staff, and lap dancing clubs aim for a 'full menu'. These exceptions aside customer facing jobs are less available for immigrants in Ireland particularly if they are black.

This means that immigrants are both pushed and pulled in cleaning work whether it is cleaning private houses as a sole operative or working for contract cleaning companies.

Ireland's immigration policy has exacerbated these pull and push factors. Loyal (2003) points out that Ireland's Celtic Tiger economy created a dual market structure in which secure, high-skilled well-paid jobs exist alongside unskilled badly-paid jobs. Loyal points out that the majority of work permits have gone to non-African and non-Asian low-skilled migrants because of a racialised attempt by the state to regulate internal ethnic and religious diversity (Loyal 2003).

From the early 1990s, the number of work permits in Ireland rose constantly to reach 47,551 by 2003. Circumstantial evidence from the early 2000s suggests that cleaning is over-represented in the jobs immigrants into Ireland work at. Ruhs highlights that 38.6% of work permit holders work in 'other services' (which covers the cleaning industry). Conlon et al (2005) found of a study of refugees that 19% worked in 'other services' – this compares to 8.9% of the general population (see table one, (Conlon, et al. 2005). For Conlon et al (2005) all the respondents in this category of sector for whom data was available were cleaning or security staff. Therefore legal immigrants into Ireland are disproportionately represented among cleaning staff. The representation among illegal immigrants is liable to be even higher for the reasons outlined above and if we could get figures for the numbers of immigrants working as house-cleaners it is likely that this over-representation would be further underlined.

**Table one: Categories of Employment Held by Irish Population Compared with Survey Respondents**

	<i>QNHS Q2 %</i>	<i>Study Group (n=63) %</i>
<i>Managers and Administrators</i>	17.6	6.3
<i>Professional</i>	10.8	7.9
<i>Ass. Professional and Technical</i>	8.8	12.7
<i>Clerical and Secretarial</i>	12.8	14.3
<i>Craft and Related</i>	12.8	1.6
<i>Personal and Protective Services</i>	9.6	17.5
<i>Sales</i>	8.2	7.9
<i>Plant and Machine Operatives</i>	10.5	12.7
<i>Other</i>	8.9	19.0

Source: Conlon et al (2005)

Ireland, therefore, is both intentionally and accidentally importing cleaners. And who gets to work as cleaners among the immigrant groups will vary along ethnic and racial lines.

There is a further link between race and cleaning – and that is the notion that ‘white’ is clean. This has two meanings, first the straightforward common sense idea that when something washes white it is clean. Second and more pernicious is the analogy between cleanliness and racial whiteness and therefore that white people have a monopoly on, or special insight into, cleanliness. This association was certainly alive and explicit at the high point of British colonialism as the following quote demonstrates:

"The first step towards lightening The White Man’s Burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. Pears’ Soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place – it is the ideal toilet soap. (Pears’ Soap 1899) p 137 (Schülting 2001).

This quote highlights that the civilization process and empire building was associated with bringing cleanliness (read whiteness) to the natives. Soap was

credited with not only bringing moral and economic salvation to the lives of Britain's great unwashed but also embodying the spiritual ingredient of the imperial mission. This prioritises a certain notion of cleanliness and privileges certain knowledges on what counts as clean. One that was not available to the working class or to the colonies. Burke describes how missionary reformers bent on spreading the benefits of civilisation around the globe did so through the routes and norms of personal hygiene - cleanliness was a means of imposing social order and discipline – control over the body and its bodily fluids were associated with civilisation and control over nature (Burke 1996).

Yet salvation was available to both the working class and citizens of the colonies, if and only if they adopted cleanliness and servitude. The dirty masses could be saved through elbow grease. Of course, there was a link between servitude and slavery; echoed even today in the way companies promote themselves: "We scrub your floors the old-fashioned way, on our hands and knees" (cited in (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003 p85).

#### ***Section 4: Ireland: cleaning and race***

The fact that immigrants into Ireland may be disproportionately working in cleaning may not matter if cleaning provides a spring-board for the immigrants into other jobs. After all Irish stories of men who worked on the roads in Britain but who are now multi-millionaires are legion. Mobility through Irish society for the new immigrants may over-come any initial disadvantage. This ability to be mobile *through* Irish society and not just mobile *into* Irish society is influenced by many factors. Yet we will not know if there are crucial differences between the two processes for some time but there are some hints now.

For instance in the research on contract cleaning companies, the companies reported recruitment through gate-keepers (Collins 2005). That is Chinese (as it was in this case) intermediaries approached cleaning companies and offered to recruit labour for the companies. The companies jumped on these offers with alacrity because of the labour shortages at the time. Interestingly the companies didn't check whether these practices were exploitative until much later and only then because they feared being implicated in breaking the law. Management of the companies discovered that the gatekeepers had been taking a cut of the first week's wages to put the Chinese cleaners in touch with the company. Thus it is

in the interest of gatekeepers to keep a steady supply of cleaners available for the contract cleaning companies.

A second example is the recruitment of house-cleaners. The recruitment of house cleaners is often done through word of mouth by both the cleaners and their employers and this was reported in the interviews with the employers of cleaners. In addition cleaners often recruit replacements for themselves if they want to have some time off. Cleaners also like to work in the workplace equivalent of ethnoburbs. That is workplaces employing only one people from one ethnic or racial group. In these ethnic enclaves, workers monitored each others work, provide replacements and cover for each other. Yet the flip side of these ethnic enclaves is a pressure for people to remain in these ghettos.

A third incident shows that this initial channelling of migrant workers towards the cleaning industry may be more long-lasting. Many of the cleaners do not speak English and the companies communicated to non-English speaking workers through a cleaner who had proficiency in English. Thus there was no incentive on the side of the cleaning company or cleaners for the workers to learn English – thus their employment in the cleaning industry may be perpetuated.

Against this was the enlargement of the European Union – which made workers from Accession States much more attractive to hire as employees vis-à-vis non-European workers because in the former case there was no need to apply for a work permit. Thus employment of cleaners for the contract cleaning industry shifted from Chinese to Polish workers. How ‘sticky’ Polish workers are in comparison to Chinese or African workers is an open question.

### *Conclusion*

Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003) have argued that the lifestyles of the First World are only made possible by a global transfer of the services associated with a wife’s traditional role – child-care, home-making, and sex – from poor countries to rich ones. Without this global transfer of labour (or as Ehrenreich and Hochschild have sometimes termed it ‘love’), the West would not be able to maintain our affluent and carefree lifestyles (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003 p8). Increasingly domestic workers are migrants from the global South – working in the North to feed families and children left at home. In support of their argument they cite that half of the world’s 120 million legal and illegal



migrants are believed to be women. So for example, of the 792,000 legal household workers in the US, 40% were born abroad (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003 p5 and p16). And this global flow of people is closely associated with domestic work. In Ireland immigrants come from not only from the Global South but also from the European fringes (See Timonen 2005).

Yet Ireland is not a tabula rasa, completely unformed waiting for immigrants to come and clean our homes. It is rather a State where inequality runs deep, the government provides little support for men and women to combine their different roles, and where notions of what counts as clean has been formed by a deep historical and indeed advertising legacies. This means that cleaners, particularly immigrant cleaners, are faced with expectations and preconceptions that may have no objective bearing on their lived experience.

Likewise cleaners do not come into Ireland as atoms – but rather come into Ireland through social networks or attach themselves to networks quickly on arrival. This networked (or embedded) nature of immigrants can be initially positive, serving to provide the immigrants with information and access to jobs. However, these networks can also be a shackle keeping immigrants in cleaning ghettos.

Thus we have a situation where embedded expectations meet embedded immigrants, with a range of outcomes possible. In future our homes may be clean whether they are ghettos of pure white and upper class-ness remains to be answered.

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