

Title: No clean rooms, no hotel business: Subversion tactics in Las Kellys' struggle for dignity in hotel housekeeping

Abstract: This article examines the struggle of room attendants in Spain for dignity in hotel housekeeping. We focus on Las Kellys' collective action to counter stigma as well as dignify the work of room attendants. To do so, we conducted qualitative, digital ethnography, comprising 40 semi-structured interviews, online observation and documentary analysis, and we based our analysis on the political notion of 'subversion tactics' and a multi-level conceptualisation of dignity in tourism employment. Our analysis reveals that Las Kellys deploys three subversion tactics that impinge on three different but interrelated levels: room attendant as a skilled and rewarding job (occupational level), housekeeping as the heart of the value chain (organisational level), and Las Kellys as a socio-political agent (socio-political level).

Keywords: hotel housekeeping, room attendants, dirty work, subversion tactics, collective action, dignity at work.

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the precarious jobs that abound in the tourism industry (Robinson et al., 2019), the occupation of room attendant stands out for its harsh working conditions (Hsieh et al., 2013; Kensbock et al., 2016), low wages (Lloyd et al., 2013; Vanselow et al., 2010), high accident rate and occupational diseases (Buchanan et al., 2010; Mantovano, 2015) and low social recognition (Hunter Powell & Watson, 2006; Kensbock et al., 2013; Onsøyen et al., 2009). The traditional precarity of this job has been accentuated in a context of restructuring of the hotel industry in which employers have chosen to reduce labour costs by cutting the workforce, reducing wages, and resorting to external labour and service suppliers (Bernhardt et al., 2003; Vanselow et al., 2010). Although labour flexibility is not new in the industry (Adler & Adler, 2003), there has been an upward trend in the use of agency staff (Lai et al., 2008; Lai & Baum, 2005), outsourcing (Cañada, 2018a; Seifert & Messing, 2006) and piece-rate pay (Oxenbridge & Moensted, 2011; Warhurst et al., 2008) as a means to adapt to fluctuations in demand, reduce labour costs and increase profitability. In Spain, the 2012 labour market reform favoured the spread of outsourcing in hotels as an attractive means to reduce labour costs (Cañada, 2018a). Numerous studies show that these measures have seriously worsened the working conditions of room attendants (Knox, 2010; McNamara et al., 2011; Soltani & Wilkinson, 2010).

Precarisation and low status go hand in hand. It is no coincidence that the decline in working conditions has been more pronounced in subordinate occupations such as room attendant (Cañada, 2018a). Despite belonging to the largest department in hotels, the work of room attendants is a demanding activity, poorly paid, subject to autocratic management and generally undervalued (Kensbock et al., 2013, 2016). As a consequence, most room attendants feel invisible, marginalised and ignored as a community of value (Hunter Powell & Watson, 2006; Kensbock et al., 2013; Onsøyen et al., 2009).

Their lower position within the organisation mirrors broader differences in status within society, especially in upscale hotels, where the difference in status between guests and workers is more pronounced, and staff are required to be subservient during service

1 interactions (Kensbock et al., 2014). In a work-centred society where social status is mainly
2 derived from occupational status, room attendants' low social status has to do with the fact
3 they undertake low-status work –cleaning– traditionally performed by lower class people and
4 regarded as unskilled, degrading and 'dirty' (Robinson et al., 2016).

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6 Despite working in an environment that systematically denies their dignity, room attendants
7 have found ways to handle their disadvantaged position and dignify their job. Building on
8 previous literature about the efforts of women in feminised, dirty jobs to achieve dignity at
9 work, the purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive picture of this struggle for
10 dignity by means of heeding processes of meaning making and workers' demands articulated
11 through collective action and adopting a multi-level approach in our analysis. To do so, we
12 examine the collective struggle of room attendants in Spain.
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15 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS: SUBVERSION TACTICS FOR DIGNITY AT WORK

16 17 18 *2.1. Hotel housekeeping as feminised, dirty work*

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20 The concept of 'dirty work' refers to occupations and tasks that are viewed as physically,
21 socially and/or morally tainted (Kreiner et al., 2006). As Ashforth and Kreiner (2014a)
22 suggest, physical taint is associated with garbage, bodily fluids, death and dangerous or
23 noxious conditions; social taint is related to servile roles or regular contact with stigmatised
24 people; and moral taint refers to activities that violate social, ethical, and/or religious norms.
25 People performing dirty jobs, aware of their occupational stigma, face difficulties building a
26 sense of meaning in work and a positive self-identity, which becomes even more problematic
27 when carrying out a low-status dirty job (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013).
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31 Both meaning and stigma are subjective and socially co-constructed, therefore, they are
32 heavily influenced by historical trends, cultural values, and demographic variables (Ashforth
33 & Kreiner, 2014b). While the rise of hygiene deepened the stigma of occupations associated
34 with physical dirt, economic development fostered specialisation and devolving of low-skilled,
35 menial tasks to paid professionals, who are typically members of lower classes (Ashforth &
36 Kreiner, 2014b, pp. 425–426). The marginalisation of cleaning work represents a
37 paradigmatic case here: cleaners, tainted by both physical and social stigma, are rendered
38 invisible via organisational practices and social representations of dirty work that reflect and
39 reinforce power dynamics and class divides (Herod & Aguiar, 2006; Rabelo & Mahalingam,
40 2019).
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45 Cleaning involves tasks that are culturally associated with women and the domestic realm
46 where caring has traditionally been performed. Historically linked to 'feminine work' and the
47 private sphere (Pérez & Garazi, 2014), hotel housekeeping has been constructed as an
48 extension of women's domestic activity into the public sphere. The cleaning chores of a room
49 attendant rely on the know-how acquired by women in the domestic sphere through gender
50 role socialisation, however, these competences are not recognised as professional skills but
51 rather are naturalised as inherent female skills (Hunter Powell & Watson, 2006). Gendered
52 division of labour draws on the gender stereotyping of skill and behaviour: caring, empathy
53 and docility are expected in women; physical strength and authority are required in men.
54 Occupational gender segregation in hospitality fosters the clustering of women in low-status
55 jobs, particularly in cleaning, customer service and lower clerical positions, which provide
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1 lower wages, greater instability and little chance of promotion (Burrell et al., 1997; Campos-
2 Soria et al., 2011). Not only are occupations segregated by gender but spaces also conform to
3 a gendered division: while male cleaners primarily work in shared spaces, female cleaners
4 generally work in private spaces (Puech, 2007). As a result, housekeeping is a female-
5 dominated department; “when men are employed in housekeeping they are generally carrying
6 out specific functions such as laundry portering, and are not engaged in the traditionally
7 female job of ‘chambermaid’” (Burrell et al., 1997, p. 173).
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10 Intersectional studies in hospitality (Mooney, 2018) reveal that division of labour and
11 occupational segregation are not only based on gender stereotypes but also on assumptions
12 about naturalised social attributes of specific ethnicities and nationalities (Dyer et al., 2010;
13 McDowell et al., 2007). Migration status and the associated vulnerability also influence
14 managerial assessment about the suitability of certain ethnicities and nationalities for different
15 positions in the hotel (Dyer et al., 2010; Zamudio & Lichter, 2008). As a consequence, the
16 composition of the workforce changes significantly depending on whether the job is on the
17 frontline or backstage and whether it involves direct interaction with guests: migrant and
18 minority ethnic women tend to undertake backstage jobs such as cleaning, where an ‘invisible’
19 performance is expected (Adib & Guerrier, 2003). In this way, vulnerable groups (e.g., lower
20 class people, women, migrants, ethnic minorities) disproportionately cluster in low-status
21 dirty jobs reinforcing ideologies about the natural suitability of certain demographic
22 categories to this kind of work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b, pp. 432–434).
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26 As previous research has suggested, room attendant is a feminised, low-status dirty job
27 (Hunter Powell & Watson, 2006; Kensbock et al., 2014; Nimri et al., 2020). The work of
28 room attendants carries a double stigma: physical, as it involves both dealing with human
29 bodily fluids and noxious conditions; and social, as it entails a servile role in relation to others.
30 Hence, room attendants face pervasive stigma and lack occupational prestige, which hampers
31 the development of a positive meaning and identity related to work. Pervasive stigma and low
32 occupational status coupled with precarious working conditions and low pay deprive hotel
33 housekeeping of dignity.
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36 37 38 *2.2. The struggles for dignity at work and the case of room attendants* 39

40 Human dignity has been conceptualised either as unconditional and universal, and so as an
41 inherent attribute of all human beings, or as conditional and earned, therefore as an attribute
42 that human beings earn through socially valued actions (Hodson, 2001; Pirson, 2019). Both
43 interpretations entail “the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to
44 appreciate the respect of others” (Hodson, 2001, p. 3), and both are relevant to labour
45 organisation, which should protect the various vulnerabilities linked to the unconditional
46 dimension of dignity and promote the human capabilities related to the conditional dimension
47 of dignity (Pirson, 2019).
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51 However, dignity can be protected, promoted, but also denied at the workplace. Building on
52 the framework of ‘decent work’ (International Labour Office, 2017) and other models of work
53 quality, Bolton (2010) develops a multidimensional view of dignity in labour that
54 encompasses objective factors (equal opportunity, safe and healthy working conditions,
55 collective voice, security of employment, just reward) and subjective factors (meaning,
56 autonomy, respect, development). Both dimensions of dignity in labour may be compromised
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1 by detrimental institutional arrangements and workplace practices such as mismanagement
2 and abuse, overwork and exploitation, limitations on autonomy, and contradictions of
3 employee involvement (Hodson, 2001).

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5 But workers are not mere victims of undignified working conditions; instead, they are prone
6 to defend their dignity. Scott (1985) shows how precarious workers, those lacking the
7 institutional means to act collectively, usually employ subtle tactics of everyday resistance,
8 ranging from slowdowns and informal boycotts to pilfering and gossiping, rather than
9 engaging in direct confrontation through formal collective action. Hodson (2001) elaborates
10 on these small scale practices identifying four main ways by which workers protect their
11 dignity: (1) active and passive resistance, which fits with the weapons of the weak described
12 by Scott; (2) organisational citizenship behaviour, which comprises the positive actions that
13 employees proactively undertake to improve productivity, cohesion and meaning in the
14 workplace; (3) construction of autonomous meaning systems that allow feelings of pride and
15 self-respect –which Ashforth and Kreiner (2013) call occupational ideologies; and (4)
16 development of supportive coworker relations that foster cohesion, solidarity and mutual
17 defence.
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22 Research demonstrates that women in feminised, dirty jobs are not mere victims of stigma
23 and/or undignified working conditions but they tend to use the aforementioned tactics to build
24 their own occupational esteem and defend their dignity across various labour settings (Bolton,
25 2005; Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Stacey, 2005). In terms of hotel housekeeping, some studies
26 illustrate how the relationships of mutual support between room attendants constitute a
27 significant coping resource (Kensbock et al., 2016; Onsøyen et al., 2009). Other studies
28 emphasise the value of the counternarratives through which room attendants develop positive
29 meaning in work. These counternarratives may be individually performed in the process of
30 shaping an alternative working identity, not prescribed by the organisation (Adib & Guerrier,
31 2003), but they may also be collectively articulated in order to subvert social representations
32 of dirty work. In this respect, research shows how room attendants refuse the ‘servant stigma’
33 and take pride in their job based on their useful service to hotel guests (Hunter Powell &
34 Watson, 2006), their professionalism, expressed in their commitment to efficiency and high
35 standards of cleaning, and their wide repertoire of (unrecognised) skills, especially those
36 associated with emotional labour (Kensbock et al., 2016; Nimri et al., 2020).
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42 While the preceding literature offers a worthwhile account of the efforts of women in
43 feminised, dirty jobs to achieve dignity at work, we ascertain that it focuses exclusively on
44 workers’ small-scale practices and privileges the processes of meaning making, leaving aside
45 workers’ demands articulated at the organisational and societal levels through collective
46 action. The studies that tackle the collective action of women in feminised, dirty jobs either
47 fall outside the field of tourism and hospitality research (e.g., Briskin, 2012; Fulladosa-Leal,
48 2017) or fail to provide a comprehensive picture, that is, to integrate the micro, meso and
49 macro levels (Baum et al., 2016) in their accounts of several collective struggles concerning
50 housekeeping departments (Cañada, 2018b; Liladrie, 2010; Puech, 2007; Seifert & Messing,
51 2006). Hence, the extant literature in tourism and hospitality research tends to frame female
52 workers’ struggles for dignity in two ways: as small-scale processes of meaning making, or as
53 processes of collective action for improved working conditions.
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57 Nevertheless, we have observed that the struggle for dignity of room attendants in Spain
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1 requires a different approach since their collective action goes beyond processes of meaning
2 making and/or advancing demands for improved working conditions. Our data show that their
3 collective struggle impinges on three different levels: occupational, organisational, and socio-
4 political. For this reason, our analysis relies upon the political notion of ‘subversion tactics’
5 (Gálvez et al., 2021) and a multi-level psychosocial conceptualisation of dignity in tourism
6 employment (Winchenbach et al., 2019).

7 8 *2.3. Subversion tactics and dignity in tourism employment* 9

10 We examine the collective action of room attendants in Spain which has crystallised in an
11 autonomous movement, known as Las Kellys, comprised of and led by room attendants
12 themselves. Las Kellys has been fighting for dignity in hotel housekeeping over the last few
13 years, managing to introduce some key demands into social and political debates, such as
14 workload reduction, bans on outsourcing, and recognition of occupational diseases (Cañada,
15 2018b), although with very limited impact on working conditions so far.

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17 The notion of ‘subversion tactics’ stems from de Certeau’s (2011) differentiation between
18 ‘tactic’ and ‘strategy’. In his view, a ‘strategy’ is the set of discursive practices and actions
19 undertaken in institutions and organisations that determine a subject’s field of play, and a
20 ‘tactic’ is a calculated course of action that operates in response to an existing strategy. While
21 strategies impose the rules of the playing field, tactics are actions that individuals deploy in
22 order to make way for life within institutions and organisations.

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24 By subversion tactics we refer to the set of disruptive discourses, assessments and practices by
25 means of which people seek empowerment with regard to their social situation, and
26 eventually, create alternative values and norms that challenge the basic structure of
27 domination. We therefore focus on the subversion tactics Las Kellys deploys in order to
28 counter imposed devaluation and marginalisation and dignify the work of room attendants,
29 embracing both processes of meaning making, and workers’ collective demands articulated at
30 the organisational and societal levels through socio-political action.

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32 Beside this, the adoption of a multi-level psychosocial understanding of dignity at work
33 (Winchenbach et al., 2019) allows us to explore how Las Kellys’ subversion tactics impact
34 the occupational, organisational, and socio-political levels of tourism work. Hence, by
35 integrating the micro, meso and macro levels in our analysis (Baum et al., 2016), we can
36 provide the comprehensive picture that is absent in preceding research on collective struggles
37 of women in feminised, low-status jobs, especially in the field of tourism and hospitality
38 research.

39 40 *2.4. Study methods* 41

42 This study is part of a qualitative research project. Qualitative research aims to describe and
43 explain the ways in which people interpret and manage their daily practices in a given context
44 (Miles et al., 2020, p. 21). Our qualitative study uses digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2015) as
45 a methodology to account for social practices mediated by digital technologies. The use of
46 three data collection techniques, semi-structured interviews, observation in social media and
47 documentary analysis, has allowed us to triangulate the information in order to increase the
48 reliability and credibility of our findings (Miles et al., 2020, pp. 305 –307). However, to
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1 convey the analysis in this article, we exclusively use quotes from interviews. The research
2 design has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Open University of Catalonia.

3 We established the basic selection criteria: study participants were to be room attendants
4 involved in Las Kellys. Starting from there, we used a snowball strategy to build the sample
5 of interviewees (Patton, 2002, pp. 237–238). We contacted key people from the most
6 important room attendants' associations, Las Kellys Association and Kellys Unión, to present
7 the research to them. Some of them volunteered to participate and, in addition, they offered us
8 the telephone numbers of other members of their association. Potential participants were
9 contacted by phone and it was found that they met the selection criteria.
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12 In total, we carried out 40 semi-structured interviews with members of both associations: 26
13 members of Kellys Unión and 14 of Las Kellys Association. All the participants were women,
14 aged between 24 and 61 years, although the vast majority of them were between 40 and 59
15 years old, and all but one were originally from Spain and Latin America: Argentina (1),
16 Bolivia (1), Colombia (2), Dominican Republic (3), Ecuador (3), Honduras (1), Peru (2),
17 Romania (1), Spain (25), Uruguay (1). Of the 40 interviewees, 27 had a permanent contract,
18 12 had a temporary contract and one was in a situation of permanent disability. By the same
19 token, 29 were hired directly by the hotel, while 10 carried out their work through an
20 outsourcing company. The room attendants that make up the sample worked in 3, 4 and 5-star
21 hotels located in 13 Spanish provinces.
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26 Observation in social media covered all the publications made during 2020 on the Facebook
27 pages and public groups of 17 local associations of Las Kellys Association and Kellys Unión,
28 as well as the Facebook pages of Kellys Federadas and Plataforma Estatal de Camareras de
29 Pisos. For the documentary analysis, we selected public documents from the same
30 organisations.
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33 Data collection on Facebook and document selection lasted between April 2020 and March
34 2021. Interviews took place between May and November of 2020, lasted between one and
35 two hours each and were conducted in Spanish using videoconferencing software. All
36 interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviewees voluntarily participated
37 and signed an informed consent document.
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41 The interview guide comprised several open questions covering the following topics: room
42 attendant job duties, labour conditions, work organisation in the housekeeping department,
43 workplace relationships, impact of work on personal and family life, opinions on gender
44 differences, and involvement in Las Kellys.
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47 The empirical material was subjected to a thematic analysis with the help of ATLAS.ti 9. This
48 method of analysis was chosen because of its flexibility and usefulness when working with
49 large qualitative data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Taking the proposal of
50 Braun and Clarke (2006) as a reference, our thematic analysis was developed in three general
51 stages: familiarisation, codification and theming. The first stage consisted in transcribing,
52 organising the information, and identifying excerpts of content relevant to our research aims.
53 At the coding stage, we proceeded to classify these extracts in a systematic way. Finally, the
54 theming phase consisted in the inclusion of the codes within possible themes, their revision
55 and the definitive definition of the analysis themes, which resulted in the following findings.
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2.5. Findings: Subversion tactics for dignity in hotel housekeeping

Below we present the subversion tactics Las Kellys deploys in order to counter stigma and dignify the work of room attendants. As said before, by subversion tactics we refer to the set of disruptive discourses, assessments, and practices by means of which Las Kellys seeks to empower room attendants with regard to their socio-labour situation and challenge the status quo in hospitality labour. Throughout the analysis we cover the interplay between processes of meaning making and workers' demands articulated through collective action and highlight their subversive capacity in the face of current institutional arrangements and workplace practices. We have identified three main subversion tactics that impinge on three different but overlapping spheres: room attendant as a skilled and rewarding job (occupational), housekeeping as the heart of the value chain (organisational), and Las Kellys as a socio-political agent (socio-political).

2.5.1. First subversion tactic: Room attendant as a skilled and rewarding job. The first subversion tactic consists in dismantling the prevailing discursive practices on cleaning work as unskilled and unrewarding. This tactic implies two shifts in regard to mainstream ideas around cleaning jobs, and impinges on the occupational identity of room attendants. We explain these shifts below.

a) From unskilled job to skilled, professional job. The first shift consists in the refusal of the customary depiction of room attendant as unskilled job while underscoring the professionalism and expertise of these cleaning workers:

We must start to lose the negative connotation that the description “the one who cleans” implies as something derogatory. No, I'm the one who cleans. And I also do it well, and I disinfect well so that the people who come here do not get any disease, do not get anything [...] I think there has to be a change... Regarding society there has to be a change of mentality. In other words, jobs have to be measured by how important they are in our society and not by how they are... by the training they have and by how they are paid. That also has to be taken into account, I'm not saying it isn't, but depending on the need. In other words, women's jobs have always been very precarious, valued very little... (Kelly 1, Girona).

The opinions of these professionals show that sanitation and disinfection tasks are essential, more than ever in times of a pandemic, but also stress the importance of the skills necessary to interact with guests. Therefore, Las Kellys places the hard skills involved in cleaning tasks, which are those that have always been considered the more important, on the same level of importance as the soft skills, such as caring, charm, and politeness, through which they contribute to the comfort and well-being of guests:

There are people who... It has even happened to me with colleagues... who think that we are simply cleaners. That our work is worth nothing, that you are just another cleaner. And then, however, there are many people who perfectly value both cleanliness and personal respect. Think of the fact that when we enter a room, guests have their personal belongings there. They can have jewellery, they can have money, they can have laptops, tablets, mobile phones, which they often leave on the beds we clean... You don't see the mobile phone and it flies off (laughs)... And you fly off behind after it (laughs)... You have to be aware of many things so as not to break anything belonging to the guest, as well as not making them think you have invaded their privacy (Kelly 10, Granada).

1 By making visible the room attendants' hard and soft skills, Las Kellys aims to
2 delegitimise the traditional devaluation of housekeeping work, considered as a mere
3 extension of the domestic activity of women. In this way, room attendants distance
4 themselves from the servant role assigned by the patriarchal ideology to build an
5 image of a cleaning professional who offers quality service to the guest.
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7 *b) From alienating job to rewarding job.* Here we observe an attempt to move away
8 from the perception of cleaning work as monotonous and unpleasant coupled with a
9 re-conceptualisation in which commitment to work and reward are central. Despite
10 their precarious labour conditions, interviewees appeared to be genuinely engaged
11 with their work and stated that they were satisfied as much with a job well done as
12 with guest recognition:
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15 A room attendant is a woman who has to work hard her day to day, who has to work hard to
16 get there, who apart from everything in her job, actually likes what she does. You might think
17 I'm lying, eh? What I am telling you is very surprising because, as I already told you, the work
18 is hard but seeing the guest happy is the thing that satisfies us the most. That is the aim of the
19 job: having a perfect room for when guests arrive and they are delighted by the state of it. That
20 is a room attendant for me: being aware of the guest being happy, more than your bosses...
21 Your commitment is to the guest, at least for me. And they appreciate it, huh? They appreciate
22 it. It's like when you give a child a very nice toy. When they see the room in such a perfect
23 state they go: "Oh, thank you! Very, very good!" (Kelly 8, Malaga).
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26 As is clear from this testimony, Las Kellys suggests that a service relationship does
27 not necessarily imply a servile relationship. Room attendants reject the discursive
28 practices that see cleaning work in hotels as a form of servility and resignify it in
29 terms of professionalism and quality. Las Kellys gives strength to this resignification
30 through guest testimony, who frequently thank them for the work that goes on behind
31 a clean room.
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34 Both shifts, from unskilled to skilled job and from alienating to rewarding job, constitute not
35 only resignification practices but also subversion practices since they have a direct impact on
36 the occupational identity of room attendants and, eventually, seek to alter working conditions.
37 In this regard, Las Kellys has managed to create a sense of worth and self-pride in
38 housekeeping work, but just dealing with stigma is not enough when precarious working
39 conditions persist. At this point is where the first subversion tactic (occupational level)
40 engages with the second one (organisational level).
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44 *2.5.2. Second subversion tactic: Housekeeping as the heart of the value chain.* The second
45 subversion tactic consists in countering the devaluation and marginalisation of the
46 housekeeping department through the visibilisation of its central role and actual value for the
47 hotel industry. This tactic entails two shifts in regard to the position of housekeeping within
48 hotel organisation, thus affecting the organisational level. We explain these shifts below.
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51 *a) From the lowest level to the centre of the organisational ecosystem.* The
52 housekeeping department, often marginalised and mistreated in hotels, takes centre
53 stage in Las Kellys' reassessment of the industry. Hotels rent rooms; without a
54 cleaning service, there are no clean rooms; therefore, the hotel business cannot operate
55 without housekeeping. According to Las Kellys, housekeeping is at the very basis of
56 business and, rather than the ugly duckling among the hotel's departments, should
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receive greater consideration on the part of management; however:

We should be considered as vital employees, yet we are not. We are not. We are the last rung of the ladder, the last link in the chain and we should be the first. If they don't have a clean reception, they can't treat the guest as they should at reception. If the buffet service does not have a clean bar, clean windows, clean tables and everything else clean, good service cannot be given. If the rooms are not clean, the guest will not be happy. Cleanliness is the starting point and everything else follows. Therefore, I don't understand why we are the last link. I don't understand it (Kelly 9, Balearic Islands).

Room attendants stress the fact again and again that housekeeping is central to the mission of the hotels but still remains neglected by management. Its central role in hotel operations has always been far from evident, even further since practices such as outsourcing became a trend in the industry, delving into the marginalisation and the invisibilisation of this occupational group. In Las Kellys' view, outsourcing, particularly prevalent in the housekeeping department since the 2012 labour market reform, has been the catalyst for the workload increase that room attendants have endured over the last decade (Cañada, 2018a). Abusive practices linked to outsourcing, more widespread in mainland Spain than in the Canary Islands, where local collective agreements limit its scope, have made a decisive contribution to a remarkable professional and wage devaluation as well as a significant loss of rights, eventually resulting in the exclusion of room attendants from decision-making forums and the intensification of workforce fragmentation. Given that the work carried out by room attendants is essential to hotels' economic activity, Las Kellys posits the outsourcing of the housekeeping department as an illegal transfer of workers that must be prohibited:

Outsourcing is what we call an illegal assignment of workers. Outsourcing seems fine to me if they are swimming pool personnel. You can have outsourced a company that takes care of swimming pools, maintenance personnel, lifeguards... because that personnel is not part of the structure of that economic activity. But having the housekeeping staff outsourced means outsourcing the hotel's own structure, its essence, because what a hotel sells is clean rooms. It does not sell anything else. I mean, if it doesn't sell clean rooms, it's not a hotel. It is a restaurant, a cafeteria, whatever you want, but it is not a hotel. If the essential element is the sale of clean rooms, and the department which cleans those rooms, which is the essence and the structural base of this element, is outsourced, then it is an illegal transfer of workers (Kelly 2, Seville).

Through this movement from periphery to the centre of the organisational ecosystem, Las Kellys intends to attack outsourcing practices in hotels and erode management discourses around the benefits of flexible labour. In doing so, Las Kellys portrays outsourcing as a form of mistreatment that, besides worsening working conditions, denies the essential role of housekeeping in hotel business.

b) Room attendants as a community of value within the company. In accordance with this (uncovered) centrality of the housekeeping department, room attendants are framed in Las Kellys' discourse as a community of value to which management owes a debt but also from which the organisation may obtain precious resources for improving the guest experience:

Since we are room attendants, we are always the lowest of the low. I always say it: they always

1 put us in the lowest part of everything. And it's not fair. It is not fair because I believe that we
2 are an important pillar of companies, hotels, because we dedicate ourselves to the most private
3 aspect of the guest's trip, which is his/her room. We know if the guest sleeps, if the guest does
4 not sleep, if the guest is dirty, if the guest is clean. I mean, we know everything. Who better
5 than us knows a guest? And that part the hotels don't understand. They should give us more
6 priority so we can better serve the guest: fewer rooms, less workload and treat them royally
7 (Kelly 6, Barcelona).

8 Las Kellys' rhetoric places great importance on the fact that room attendants, as
9 professionals, possess valuable know-how that must be preserved and promoted,
10 mainly through more reasonable workload distribution, and therefore a reduced work
11 pace, as well as the inclusion of their voice in decision making forums. Las Kellys
12 proclaims that excessive workloads have severe implications on room attendants'
13 well-being: on one hand, sustained increase in workload over the last years has
14 resulted in an accelerated pace of work, exposing room attendants to a greater risk of
15 occupational accidents and diseases, mainly musculoskeletal conditions, as the intense
16 pace makes it very difficult to observe the safety and ergonomic recommendations; on
17 the other hand, this enforced work pace also prompts unhealthy habits, such as
18 skipping breaks and lunch time, due to lack of time to get all the work done within the
19 established time limits. Likewise, work overload has an adverse impact on service
20 delivery. Las Kellys states that the disproportionate number of rooms assigned every
21 working day to each room attendant, in many cases irrespective of the size and
22 characteristics of the room, has an undeniable effect on service quality and, therefore,
23 on the guest experience:
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28 Our knees are crushed from hitting the beds to push them to the sides, to be quicker. If I do it
29 properly, if I have to bend down to get into the bathtub to clean, then I'm slower. If I do it and
30 if I don't take, for example, the entire packets of sheets to put them in the trolley and I have to
31 take them in groups of five, I'll never finish loading the trolley. All of this creates more stress
32 for me because I need to be quick. So, of course, you have to have a logical time to do things
33 normally and calmly. They don't think either... Because they want a very personalised service,
34 they even want us to learn their surnames and greet guests by their surname, and that you treat
35 them royally. How am I going to stop to greet the guest and say his/her name if I don't even
36 have time to scratch an itch? (Kelly 12, Malaga).
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39 In addition to workload reduction, the interviewees claimed for a voice in the
40 decisions that affect the housekeeping department. In their view, being ignored in the
41 decision making has direct implications for workloads; for instance, the refurbishment
42 of rooms frequently turns into the introduction of items, such as heavy mattresses,
43 shower enclosures, and various objects of decoration that sacrifice workers' comfort
44 for the sake of customer satisfaction. Something similar has happened with the
45 implementation of cleaning protocols during COVID-19 pandemic, which has
46 provoked strong criticism from Las Kellys due to the absence of room attendants in
47 the development process.
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51 On another note, the room attendants we interviewed also drew attention to a couple of
52 issues that reveal the neglect of the housekeeping department by management. Firstly,
53 while some room attendants had no complaints on the availability of proper working
54 equipment, many others expressed concerns about the poor state of working materials
55 and the scarcity of tools. Secondly, the absence of opportunities for career
56 development also emerged as an issue. Many interviewees reported that professional
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1 training programmes are needed in hotels, especially for the often-neglected area of
2 housekeeping, where chances for career development are extremely scarce.
3 Interestingly, though the wage issue came up every now and then during the
4 interviews, salary seems to be a secondary consideration on their list of priorities. This
5 is explained by the fact that Las Kellys' struggle against wage devaluation is
6 channelled into the banning of outsourcing and having all room attendants under the
7 protection of hospitality industry collective agreements, which would offer them the
8 possibility of a fairer wage.
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10 Overall, as in the first subversion tactic, both shifts of the second tactic not only resignify
11 hotel housekeeping but also seek to subvert a number of organisational working practices in
12 hospitality. As we have seen, Las Kellys has advanced a series of key demands that address
13 iniquitous organising practices, comprising workload reduction, a ban on outsourcing, having
14 a voice in decisions that affect the housekeeping department, availability of proper working
15 equipment, and the implementation of professional training programmes.
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19 *2.5.3. Third subversion tactic: Las Kellys as a socio-political agent.* The third subversion
20 tactic consists in breeding a socio-political subject able to engage in legitimate collective
21 action in order to dignify hotel housekeeping and, more broadly, care work. This tactic
22 encompasses two shifts in regard to the social position of female, low-status workers which
23 have an impact on the socio-political level.
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27 *a) From subaltern occupational group to empowered interlocutor.* Thanks to Las
28 Kellys, the working community of room attendants has built a dignified occupational
29 identity and has eventually become a socio-political agent in the Spanish public arena
30 striving (sometimes achieving) to engage in dialogue with employers, trade unions,
31 and policy makers. At the same time, Las Kellys has turned to hotel customers and the
32 general public in order to gain their complicity, which has been accomplished to some
33 extent thanks to a propitious socio-cultural environment and the aid of social media
34 and traditional mass media. Besides a committed professional equipped with
35 (unrecognised) valuable skills, a Kelly appears as an empowered room attendant who
36 has become aware of the potential of her working community and collectively fights
37 for dignity in her occupation:
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41 For me, being a Kelly is fighting for our rights, helping our colleagues, opening the eyes of all
42 the room attendants in Barcelona, and throughout Spain. That we are not alone, that we have
43 colleagues who can encourage us, that we have colleagues who can give us advice, that we are
44 all one, that we all have to be united, that we cannot become downhearted, that we have no
45 reason to keep our heads down but to feel proud of ourselves and raise our head and say here
46 we are: "I am a human being, I am a person, value me as I am." And that is what Las Kellys is
47 fighting for, for room attendants to feel proud of being room attendants and for the
48 Government to recognise that we are an engine that keeps running (Kelly 16, Barcelona).
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51 Beyond the organisational level, Las Kellys demands political, legislative and
52 administrative action to eradicate work overload and dubious practices linked to
53 outsourcing. In particular, Las Kellys calls for a ban on the outsourcing of a
54 company's main activity, such as cleaning rooms in the case of hotels, which requires
55 the repeal of the 2012 labour market reform, and the modification of article 42 of the
56 Statute of Workers' Rights. In relation to this demand, Las Kellys has proposed some
57 promising initiatives such as the Kelly Law, which aims to ban the outsourcing of
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1 structural services, and a seal of quality for rewarding hotels that implement good
2 labour management practices. However, both these initiatives are currently at a dead
3 end: the seal of quality, approved in 2018 by the Catalan Parliament, has not been
4 developed at all, and the modification of article 42 of the Statute of Workers' Rights is
5 still pending action by the central Government.
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7 In addition to policy and legislative action, Las Kellys considers it imperative to
8 strengthen the monitoring mechanisms that enable the detection of exploitative
9 practices and prevent fraudulent behaviour. In this respect, Las Kellys calls for, on the
10 one hand, the implementation of individualised occupational risk programmes at every
11 hotel as a means to achieve a rationalisation of workload that takes workers' wellbeing
12 into account; and, on the other, more effective labour inspection to detect social
13 security fraud and illegal labour management practices. These measures would render
14 hotels accountable in terms of both occupational risk management and employment
15 quality, and would help to put an end to work overload and abusive practices:
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19 Restaurant waiters, for example, there are people who have three shifts... There are people
20 who do this, no; the vast majority do this. And that is not legal, but they do it anyway. Well,
21 for all these cases there should be more labour inspection. More labour inspection. It is not
22 right for a room attendant to be leaving her workplace one hour later almost every day. That's
23 an hour that is not paid, huh? [...] An hour before your work, or half an hour before, and you
24 have to leave an hour or an hour and a half later. So, there should be more labour inspection,
25 apart from reducing the work overload that we have (Kelly 8, Malaga).
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27 In the same way, on the basis of the high incidence of musculoskeletal disorders, Las
28 Kellys requires the Spanish Government to recognise all room attendants'
29 occupational diseases, inter alia, carpal tunnel syndrome, De Quervain's tenosynovitis,
30 trigger finger, tennis elbow, golfer's elbow, and shoulder bursitis. This struggle for
31 recognition of their occupational diseases is intertwined with the demand for early
32 retirement. As physical exhaustion is intense in the field, it is commonplace for room
33 attendants to approach retirement age in poor physical condition; for this reason, Las
34 Kellys calls for having the option of early retirement, like other workers in unhealthy
35 jobs, such as miners and firefighters.
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39 *b) From dignity in hotel housekeeping to dignity in care work.* Drawing upon their
40 empowered position, room attendants involved in Las Kellys set themselves up as
41 advocates of all room attendants' labour rights but also as defenders of dignity in
42 feminised, dirty jobs related to care work, especially female cleaners and home care
43 workers:
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47 I am convinced that if there were the same number of female room attendants as there were
48 male room attendants, we would never be in this situation [...] Of course, because there is
49 discrimination here. It is not about money but simply that the most feminised groups,
50 unfortunately, are the most precarious. Everything that concerns caring, everything that has to
51 do with what is believed or what has been believed about what women have through their
52 genetic makeup, is not valued at all. The day that people stop taking what women give for
53 granted, society will value the work that women do for free, when it has to be paid for. So,
54 cleaning is something that... Let's see, it's not that they don't pay us because I'm paid
55 according to the collective agreement, but they don't give it the value it should have (Kelly 2,
56 Seville).
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1 This quote clearly states the discomfort among most room attendants with respect to
2 the devaluation of the work that has been socially constructed as ‘feminine work’,
3 mainly care work. In this sense, Las Kellys publicly exposes the link between
4 precarisation and female-dominated occupations, and points out that, ultimately,
5 advocating for dignity in (paid and unpaid) care work implies facing the pitfall of a
6 work organisation based on meritocratic rationality and patriarchal ideology.
7

8 To sum up, while the previous subversion tactics impinge on the occupational and
9 organisational levels, respectively, this third tactic impinges on the socio-political level. By
10 means of this tactic, Las Kellys emerges as an empowered socio-political agent that engages
11 in legitimate collective action in the Spanish public arena in order to dignify hotel
12 housekeeping and, more broadly, care work. In short, through the politicisation of (paid and
13 unpaid) care work, Las Kellys advocates for placing value on jobs, inside and outside
14 hospitality, according to a criterion of social necessity.
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17 *2.6. Discussion: From dirty work towards dignified cleaning work through collective action*

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20 Our study adds to preceding research on room attendants’ narratives against stigma (Hunter
21 Powell & Watson, 2006; Kensbock et al., 2016; Nimri et al., 2020), but at the same time it
22 broadens and deepens our understanding of the struggle for dignity in hotel housekeeping and,
23 more generally, in feminised, low-status jobs for the following of reasons. Firstly, we pay
24 attention to the way discursive practices against social devaluation support and legitimise
25 collective demands and socio-political action. Secondly, we draw on the political notion of
26 ‘subversion tactics’ (Gálvez et al., 2021) to understand the processes of empowerment and
27 collective mobilisation of this subaltern occupational group. Thirdly, we adopt an explicit
28 multi-level framework of dignity in tourism employment (Winchenbach et al., 2019) to
29 register the various spheres (occupational, organisational, socio-political) on which those
30 subversion tactics have an impact; therefore, we follow the multi-level approach advocated by
31 Baum et al. (2016) in tourism workforce research.
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36 The first subversion tactic –room attendant as skilled and rewarding job– impinges on the
37 occupational identity of room attendants by means of countering mainstream discourse on
38 cleaning work as unskilled and unrewarding. As Winchenbach et al. (2019) argue, dignity of
39 occupational identity is a critical component of workers’ experience, but people in lower
40 hierarchical or less skilled occupations, often subjected to precarious working conditions,
41 have less chances to build positive professional identities. In this regard, despite pervasive
42 stigma and low status of room attendants, Las Kellys has managed to generate a sense of
43 worth and self-pride in housekeeping work in two senses: on the one hand, Las Kellys
44 confronts the classist and sexist deskilling of hotel housekeeping while underscoring the hard
45 and soft skills involved in the delivery of a professional cleaning service; on the other hand,
46 Las Kellys rejects the ‘servant stigma’ conceptualising the relationship between room
47 attendant and customer as a service relationship rather than a servile relationship. However,
48 just managing stigma and building a dignified occupational identity are not enough when
49 undignified working conditions and low pay persist. Here is where the first subversion tactic
50 interlocks with the second tactic.
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56 The second subversion tactic –housekeeping as the heart of the value chain– addresses the
57 organisational level through confronting the devalued and marginalised position of the
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1 housekeeping department within hotel organisation. As Winchenbach et al. (2019) suggest,
2 dignity at work may be protected and promoted through organisational practices such as safe
3 and healthy working conditions, fair remuneration, manageable workload, autonomy, equal
4 opportunity, recognition of contribution, participation in organisational matters, and
5 workplace relationships based on respect and trust, but dignity may also be denied by
6 hazardous working conditions, low pay, work overload, constraints on autonomy, insecure
7 work agreements, suppression of collective voice, strict hierarchies and disrespect. As we
8 have seen, Las Kellys' collective action addresses several of these factors, including workload
9 reduction, ban on outsourcing, having a voice in decisions that affect the housekeeping
10 department, availability of proper working equipment, and implementation of professional
11 training programmes, relying on the essential contribution of room attendants to hotel
12 business. In line with Pirson's (2019) advocacy of humanistic management, we may interpret
13 Las Kellys' set of demands as a call for recognition and protection of room attendants as a
14 community of value as well as promotion of their professional capabilities at the workplace.
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18 The third subversion tactic –Las Kellys as a socio-political agent– exceeds the organisational
19 context and impinges on the socio-political arena since it entails the emergence of a new
20 socio-political subject able to engage in collective action for social recognition and improved
21 working conditions. Stigma and meaning in work are influenced by historical trends, cultural
22 values, and demographic variables (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b). In the same manner, the way
23 social agents assess workplace dignity is influenced by the socio-economic and policy context
24 (Winchenbach et al., 2019). Las Kellys, overcoming many socio-cultural, economic and
25 political constraints, inter alia, low social standing, iniquitous treatment at workplace, and the
26 weakening of labour institutions, has managed to make its own place in the Spanish public
27 arena. The name 'Las Kellys' is an acronym of the phrase "las que limpian", a colloquial
28 expression used to describe cleaning ladies. Las Kellys has taken a typically pejorative label,
29 such as "las que limpian", and transformed it into an empowering tool: rather than being just a
30 woman in a cleaning job, "la que limpia", a Kelly appears now as a key professional in the
31 hotel industry equipped with (unrecognised) valuable skills and, further, an empowered
32 worker who is ready to engage in collective struggle. This mutation reflects a progressive
33 process of politicisation of housekeeping work that goes beyond the organisational context to
34 challenge the social standing of care work (Briskin, 2012), which is mainly undertaken by
35 female, low-status workers. Las Kellys, as a socio-political agent, is trying to raise social
36 awareness on this matter and promote changes in organisations, policies and, ultimately,
37 social values.
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44 With regard to de Certeau's (2011) understanding of tactics in relation to strategies, it is our
45 claim that the three subversion tactics operate in response to two specific strategies that
46 simultaneously devalue hotel housekeeping work, namely: the classist stigmatisation of
47 service work, more specifically, cleaning work, and the sexist deskilling of care work. Las
48 Kellys' subversion tactics converge to undermine the stereotyping of hotel housekeeping as
49 an unskilled, servile job, and strive for the social revaluation of the occupation. Both physical
50 and social stigma of housekeeping work are contested by Las Kellys' collective action: what
51 is demeaning for room attendants is not cleaning the dirt (physical taint) or serving others
52 (social taint) but to do so under precarious working conditions and lacking the respect of
53 management, co-workers and customers. Hence, cleaning work is not a degrading task for
54 them but a necessary activity for hospitality which involves skilled work, professionalism,
55 and commitment. More broadly, Las Kellys underscores the social necessity of cleaning work,
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considered here as a form of care work, which is largely devolved to a feminised labour force.

To close this section, we should mention that this paper contributes to the current conversation about decent work in tourism and hospitality (Cañada, 2018a; International Labour Office, 2017; Robinson et al., 2019; Winchenbach et al., 2019). Our analysis of Las Kellys' struggle for dignity illustrates the labour problems that afflict this sector, especially in relation to women in jobs at the lower end of the occupational scale (International Labour Office, 2017).

3. CONCLUSION

In our analysis of Las Kellys' subversion tactics against stigma, devaluation and marginalisation, we have identified three main tactics that impinge on three different but interrelated levels: room attendant as a skilled and rewarding job (occupational level), housekeeping as the heart of the value chain (organisational level), and Las Kellys as a socio-political agent (socio-political level). The first one consists in dismantling the prevailing opinion on cleaning work as unskilled and unrewarding, allowing room attendants to resignify their job and build a positive occupational identity. The second one consists in countering the marginalisation of the housekeeping department in the organisational hierarchy, enabling room attendants to underscore their central role in business and demand organisational change. The third one consists in breeding a socio-political subject able to engage in legitimate collective action in order to dignify hotel housekeeping and, more broadly, feminised care work, permitting room attendants to advocate for revaluation of occupations according to a criteria of social necessity. The aforementioned subversion tactics operate in response to the classist stigmatisation of service work, more specifically, cleaning work, and the sexist deskilling of care work, and converge to undermine the stereotyping of room attendant as an unskilled, servile job.

This study has exclusively considered the point of view of room attendants involved in Las Kellys across Spain. Thus, we encourage our fellow researchers to explore how other stakeholders, such as hotel managers, trade unions, and customers, perceive Las Kellys' struggle for dignity. Moreover, further research is needed to examine the forms of mobilising and organising of this occupational group, with particular attention to their relations with trade unions and the feminist movement. In the same way, to contrast the findings presented here, further studies could be conducted about other low-status dirty jobs, with emphasis on feminised, low-status dirty jobs, and in other countries, for instance France, where room attendants have mobilised against outsourcing in recent years.

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