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The (Un)productivity of Reproductive Work and the Woman's Exhaustion in Contemporary Times

A (Im)produtividade do Trabalho Reprodutivo e a Exaustão das Mulheres na Contemporaneidade



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ABSTRACT

Objective: we aim to discuss the (im)productivity of reproductive work, potentialities and limits of capital expansion on this work to change the oppression that manifests itself in the conditions of exhaustion of women in contemporary times. **Theoretical approach:** starting from a Marxian perspective, we believe that debates about the productivity of reproductive work should overcome analyzes based on the immediacy of this work and apprehend the determinants that involve the absorption of work by capital as productive, reproductive or unproductive work. **Methods:** we collected secondary statistical data provided by IBGE, Sebrae and the British Cleaning Council, the analysis was based on historical materialism. **Results:** we demonstrate that capital has productively appropriated reproductive work, however, such appropriation has not meant changing the conditions of sexual division of labor and women's exhaustion. **Conclusion:** we conclude that instead of the transmutation of reproductive to productive work being an advance towards the emancipation of women, it has been a source of greater exploitation of their workforce and of exhaustion, since such appropriation does not overcome the exploitation that engenders the universality of oppression under capitalism, according to the needs of valuing value.

Keywords: productive and unproductive work; reproductive work; sexual division of labor; social reproduction theory; women.

RESUMO

Objetivo: debater a (im)produtividade do trabalho reprodutivo, potencialidades e limites da expansão do capital sobre esse trabalho para alterar a opressão que se manifesta nas condições de exaustão das mulheres na contemporaneidade. **Marco teórico:** partimos de uma perspectiva marxiana, consideramos que os debates acerca da produtividade do trabalho reprodutivo devam superar as análises baseadas na imediatividade deste trabalho e apreender as determinantes que envolvem a absorção pelo capital de um trabalho enquanto trabalho produtivo, reprodutivo ou improdutivo. **Métodos:** coletamos dados estatísticos secundários disponibilizados pelo IBGE, pelo Sebrae e pelo *British Cleaning Council*, a análise foi realizada com base no materialismo histórico. **Resultados:** demonstramos que o capital tem se apropriado produtivamente do trabalho reprodutivo, no entanto, tal apropriação não tem significado alteração das condições de divisão sexual do trabalho e exaustão das mulheres. **Conclusão:** concluímos que ao invés de a transmutação de trabalho reprodutivo a produtivo ser um avanço para a emancipação das mulheres, tem sido fonte de maior exploração de sua força de trabalho e de exaustão, uma vez que tal apropriação não supera a exploração que engendra a universalidade de opressões sob o capitalismo, conforme as necessidades de valorização do valor.

Palavras-chave: trabalho produtivo e improdutivo; trabalho reprodutivo; divisão sexual do trabalho; teoria da reprodução social; mulheres.

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INTRODUCTION

In capitalist sociability, the sexual division of labor takes on specific forms as a result of the needs posed by the process of valorization of value. The advent of capitalism breaks with the unity between production and reproduction verified in pre-capitalist societies and creates distinct boundaries to social relations (Kergoat, 2009; Montenegro, 1981; Saffioti, 2001). Activities related to the production of products for exchange appear transferred to the public sphere and produced as the responsibility and natural calling of the man, while activities related to the reproduction of individual life and workforce appear kept in the private sphere and produced as the responsibility and natural calling of the woman. Thus, the sexual division of labor in the particularities of capitalism is related to the division of where men and women should act, and also to a hierarchy of jobs (Hirata & Kergoat, 2007), since the work of reproduction is considered as a job that does not produce surplus value — the ultimate end of capital.

Considering that the relationship of women's exhaustion is associated with the issue of the sexual division of labor and women's responsibility for care activities (Federici, 2017, 2019), the (un)productivity of reproductive work is a constant debate in the field of feminism (Benston, 1969; Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Federici, 2017, 2019; Kergoat, 2009; Maruani, 2019; Saffioti, 1976; Toledo, 2005), and has gained visibility in economic and social debates (Coffey et al., 2020). It questions the (un)productivity of this work in capitalist relations of production and advocates the need for socialization, wage payment, or transfer of these activities to the productive sphere as an essential condition for changing the relations of oppression experienced by women.

We will attempt to discuss in this paper how, in the capitalist system of production, activities related to the reproduction of the workforce are historically related to a quantum of work performed outside the sphere of production and realization of value, even though it is necessary for it. We will see that it is not the nature of the work that determines whether it is productive or unproductive, but the way it is appropriated in the capitalist production process (Marx, 2013). Therefore, in order to expand the limits placed on exploitation, capital expands, modifying not only the productive technical bases but also the relations of production and work inherent in them. We will demonstrate the movement of capital expansion over reproductive work with the emergence and growth of private institutions in recent decades. These are companies that outsource domestic services: cleaning services, laundry, care of children and

the elderly, etc., which aim to make a profit by carrying out the functions necessary for the reproduction of the workforce, previously performed by women within the unit producing the commodity workforce, the family, without the intention of self-valorization of capital.

In this context of the expansion of capital over the activities that produce use values carried out in the family unit, we understand that reproductive work is carried out not only for the purpose of reproducing the workforce, but above all as a producer of surplus value. Therefore, a process of industrialization of reproductive functions is observed. In the meantime, this paper aims to discuss the (un)productivity of reproductive work and the potential and limits of the process of expansion of capitalism on this work to change the concrete conditions of oppression that are manifested in the conditions of women's exhaustion in contemporary times.

For this purpose, we will first carry out the theoretical debate discussing the categories of work, productive, unproductive, and reproductive work, and the (un)productivity of reproductive work for capital. Secondly, the methodological path is reported, of which we highlight the collection of secondary data made available by the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics [IBGE]) in the *Cadastro Central de Empresas* (Central Company Registry) and *PNAD Contínua* (Continuous PNAD), by *Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas* (Sebrae, 2014), by *Federação Nacional das Empresas de Serviços e Limpeza Ambiental* (Febrac, 2012), from the *startup Franchise Help* (2018), and also by the British Cleaning Council (BCC, 2019). Thirdly, we analyze the data in order to discuss the capitalist expansion of reproductive work, as well as the potential and limits of such expansion for a change in the relationship of oppression experienced by women. Lastly, we present the conclusions.

Productive, unproductive, and reproductive work in the particularities of capitalism

The productive nature of work in general

Work consists of a process in which the human being consciously sets in motion the natural forces that concern his own corporeality, which, in turn, is already the result of a development of sociability, to make changes in nature in order to meet his own needs. In this process, human beings not only modify nature, but also modify themselves (Marx, 2013). It is through work that the material and spiritual wealth of humanity is produced

(note: wealth, not necessarily capitalist wealth, capital). It is through work that humanity self-produces. In this process of self-production, it expends physical-psychic energy that constitutes its corporeality and that needs to be replenished.

The work process abstracted from its determined historical form presents itself as the activity oriented to an end, the objects of work, and the means of work. From the point of view of their result, the means and objects of work appear as means of production, and work itself appears as productive work, since it is human activity for the purpose of producing use values that satisfy human needs — be they of the stomach or of fantasy.

However, this definition of productive work is not enough when considering it in its historical particularities, in the determinations established by the capitalist production process. “Here, use values are only produced because and to the extent that they are the material substrate, the supports of exchange value” (Marx, 2013, p. 263).

The capitalist production process does not cancel the conditions of the general work process: being a producer of use values; however, it determines that not all work is productive for it. To be productive, work must produce commodities in which use value, value, and surplus value are objectified. Therefore, considering the capitalist production process, we have that only the work that produces more value is productive, i.e., the work that is consumed in the production process with the objective of valorization of capital, in the same way that only that worker¹ whose employed workforce produces surplus value or is directly involved in the work process of a commodity full of surplus value is productive.

The productive and unproductive character of work for capital

In the process of capitalist sociability, work performed only as a producer of use values for consumption and not as a substrate of exchange value in a process of capital valorization — even if it represents the expenditure of physical-psychic forces — is not productive work for capital. What should be emphasized at this point is that such a differentiation is not related to the nature or content of the work, but to the way in which work is consumed in the capitalist mode of production, whether productively or unproductively. “Work of identical content can therefore be productive or unproductive” (Marx, 1978, p. 75).

“The same work, e.g., gardening, tailoring, etc., can be performed by the same worker in service of an industrial capitalist or a direct consumer. In both

cases, we are faced with a wage earner or day laborer, but one is a productive worker, and the other is an unproductive one, because in the first case, this worker produces capital and the other does not, since in one case his work constitutes a moment in the process of self-valorization of capital, and the other does not” (Marx, 1978, p. 76).

Another point that should be discussed when addressing the determined forms of work under capitalism is its unproductive character. Productive and unproductive work go hand in hand in the process of valorization of value, but unlike the former, the latter does not produce surplus value because it is not directly linked to commodity-producing work processes. In this case, these are works responsible for the metamorphosis of value in the sphere of circulation. These works satisfy a need of the valorization process, but do not incorporate value into the commodities, thus being a cost of production, therefore unproductive for capital (Maciel et al., 2021).

Work is not unproductive for capital only when it behaves as a cost of production; but also when it does not constitute the valorization process itself, as is the case exposed by Marx in the previous passage. An individual can bring the result of his work to the market (tailor, for example), he can spend his physical-psychic energy in order to produce something for exchange, but if this exchange is not a stage in a process of valorization of capital, this work is unproductive for capital. An individual can bring his workforce to the market to be consumed in a work process (gardener, for example) and at the end of the day receive for the services rendered, but if those who pay him do not aim to exchange the garden on the market in order to valorize their capital, but to contemplate it, this work is unproductive for capital.

Here it is necessary to note that the productive character of a work is not related to the materiality or immateriality of the result of the work. Some theorists, such as Lessa (2007), relate the production of capital only to the material production of commodities. However, Marx (2014) demonstrates the possibility of surplus value production, even if a material product is not produced separately from its process. The fact that the commodity cannot be separated from the act of production and that, consequently, the useful effect produced in the production process is consumed concomitantly with the production process itself, does not alter the fact that the production of surplus value can exist. Therefore, if the useful effect of a work manifests itself materialistically in a product or non-materialistically in a service, it is configured as productive work in capitalist production as long as it produces surplus value or serves the self-valorization of capital, and as unproductive work as long as it does not produce surplus

value, even though it is linked to the capitalist production process in its entirety.

Being productive or unproductive work for capital does not change the fact that it is an expenditure of physical-psychic energy from the perspective of those who work, both one and the other, there is wear and tear on the workforce (Ferraz & Maxta, 2022). As previously stated, it is energy that needs to be replaced; however, such replacement does not occur in the same sphere in which one works for capital. It is in this sense that the working class needs work that provides the conditions for the replacement of the workforce's energy, the workforce as a commodity, this is reproductive work.

Reproductive work: A side of human self-reproduction as work (re)producing the commodity workforce

As we have seen, in capitalist production, the ultimate end is not the production of use values but of surplus value. The production of surplus value is only possible if the holder of money finds a special commodity on the commodity market, a commodity whose own use value is a source of value creation. This commodity is the workforce. Therefore, the commodity workforce is essential to the capitalist production process. Only it has the capacity to be a source of value creation, and it is only through its exploitation that the capitalist is able to appropriate surplus value (produced by the workforce) and accumulate capital (Cisne, 2015).

Workforce refers to the complex of physical and mental capacities that exist in the corporeality of human beings and that they set in motion in the process of producing use values of any kind (Marx, 2013). Therefore, the re(production) of this commodity involves the socially necessary work for the reproduction of the individual himself as the bearer of a useful and concrete workforce.² On the one hand, as a living being carrying the workforce, the individual has vital needs, which must be met in order for the reproduction of his workforce to be possible, including food, health, housing, hygiene, clothing, for example; on the other hand, it involves work related to the development of the necessary skills required by a particular job, i.e., specific education and/or training.

The owner of the workforce is a mortal being, a being susceptible to illness and the wear and tear resulting from the intensity of the use of the workforce constitute one of the determining elements of this illness (Ferraz & Maxta, 2022; Moraes et al., 2018), especially when work intensity levels lead to exhaustion. Thus, in order for the commodity workforce to be constantly found on the market, it is necessary for it to perpetuate itself, i.e., it is

necessary for human beings (owners of the workforce) to procreate.

Therefore, the process of (re)production of the workforce is related to two aspects: the reproduction of the life of the existing workforce and the production of new workforce. In both cases, such production involves, on the one hand, the acquisition of commodities that satisfy needs for food, housing, clothing, education, vocational training (the value of these being the determining element of the value of the workforce) and, on the other hand, work that creates the conditions necessary for the consumption of the use values of these commodities purchased on the market.

Regarding the commodities coming from the market, a small digression is in order: these commodities are those necessary for female workers to reproduce themselves as a workforce, and not as human beings.

So, we can think of two female workers in a company. One works as a manager, the other is an outsourced worker who works cleaning the building. Abstracting the needs they have as human beings and thinking about the needs they have as a workforce (these are the ones that interest capital), these two women demand very different means of subsistence, from learning needs, education, and training to needs such as clothing. The female manager needs a degree course, probably a specialization course and several other courses and training to perform her function. She needs to 'dress appropriately' with clothes considered appropriate for the position she holds, she needs to follow a certain standard of beauty, imposed by a beauty industry. On the other hand, the outsourced worker who cleans the building does not need to have a degree or specialization courses to perform her job. The clothes considered 'appropriate' for her work are undoubtedly quite different from those considered appropriate for female managers. Therefore, in order to meet the needs of capital, female managers and cleaning workers need different means of subsistence as a workforce. The amount of work socially necessary for the production of the commodities that enable these women to reproduce themselves as a workforce is different, and consequently so is the value of their workforce.

Regarding the work that creates the conditions for the consumption of the use value of the commodities necessary for the (re)production of the workforce, it should be noted that this is essential work for the reproduction of the workforce operating within the family unit. The production of food, hygiene items, clothing, and housing commodities is not enough on its own; there has to be the work of preparing food so that workers can eat, the work of cleaning housing, of keeping clothing clean so that its use values can be used according to the needs of the time. Following the same logic, the same happens when we think about the production of new workforces. Procreation alone

is not enough, and the production of goods necessary for the survival of these individuals is also not enough. There is a need for work related to education, food, hygiene, in general to the care demanded by these human beings who are the bearers of the future workforce that capital demands (Souza, 2020).

The working class, in order to conserve its labor capacity and produce new workforces, demands work to be performed in a private sphere of consumption (Marx, 1978). The commodities necessary for the reproduction of the labor force are found in the market, but their consumption occurs outside it and in general, the realization of this consumption requires social work that is productive in its universal conception but is not productive for capital. It is a work that consumes the use value of the commodities acquired in the market, but this use is not subsumed in another process of valorization (although it can be, as we will see later). The work involved in the consumption of these commodities is to immediately satisfy human needs, which in the case of capitalist historical determination, translates for the working class into (re)production of the workforce. It is in non-productive consumption — although it may be, as we will see — from the perspective of value that the commodity whose essential characteristic is to valorize capital is reproduced.

The ways of realizing this non-productive consumption of commodities are constituted according to the same interest that constitutes the ways of realizing productive consumption: reproducing the working class as a class to be exploited by capital. It is in this movement that we have the production of multiple forms of oppression of women, since historically they have been made the 'natural responsible' (Federici, 2019; Kergoat, 2009) for this part of the general social work, despite the fact that they are also productive or unproductive workers when inserted in capitalistically exploited activities. Thus, we have that reproductive work is produced in capitalist sociability, through the sexual division of labor, as a 'duty' of women, even when they perform work outside the home (Cisne, 2015; Saffioti, 2001). Such reality is expressed in the data that will be analyzed.

Even if the debate about the importance of reproductive activities for the capitalist system has been intensified, these activities remain, according to Kergoat (2009), Hirata and Kergoat (2007, 2008), Hirata and Guimarães (2012), Maruani (2019) and Federici (2019), invisibilized and considered of less importance. In addition, according to Federici (2019), such activities were placed on the margins of the debate even by Marx. According to the author, Marx (2013) would have analyzed the capitalist mode of production considering that the activities that support the reproduction of the workforce

as of little importance to capitalists. However, as Ferraz et al. (2023) show, this analysis is not based on the writings of the author. Bringing a recovery of the criticisms made by Federici (2019) from Marx's own analysis regarding the process of capitalist accumulation, the authors demonstrate that the author addressed not only the activities related to the reproduction of the workforce but also the mode of reproduction of life. Karl Marx showed how the capitalist mode of production split the process of reproduction of human life, turning certain work processes into means of capital accumulation and others into means of workforce reproduction. Both, although split, are moments of the same movement: human self-reproduction. Our task is to free the former from submission to capital, so that the entire work process — including so-called reproductive work — is transmuted into a process of producing the humanization of humanity. Thus, we corroborate the authors on the need to return to Marx (2013) because in his writings we find the theory that best exposes the movement of capital.

We maintain that the process of oppression of women must be understood in its engendering with the process of reproduction of life, and that it thus takes on particular contours in capitalism. Such an apprehension is necessary to carry out the debate on the impossibility of concretely overcoming the reality of oppression of women without qualitatively changing the mode of production and reproduction of life based on the process of exploitation. Therefore, although we recognize the intellectual efforts developed by Federici (2019) and Goldman (2016), we will advance in the investigation on the subject to illuminate the limits of the solutions presented by them regarding the defense of the wage-earning of reproductive work or the inclusion of reproductive activities in the productive sphere as a way to overcome the reality of women's oppression.

Domestic work: Discussions about the productivity or unproductivity of reproductive work

The sexual division of labor expresses that women have the task of replacing a large part of the workforce that drives the capitalist economy, transforming raw materials into use values for their direct consumption: food, clothing, housekeeping, as well as the education of children (Montenegro, 1981). The reproductive work performed by women is essential for capital (Cisne, 2015). Capital benefits not only from the work directly exploited by it, but also from work located outside it and which is essential for the reproduction of the labor force that is available for capitalist exploitation because it is separated from the means of production.

There is no doubt that this work is fundamental to capital, as it is essential for the production and reproduction of the commodity workforce. But the question that has been the subject of several discussions is: after all, is reproductive work productive or not? Some theorists defend domestic work as productive, such as [Dalla Costa and James \(1972\)](#). The authors argue that the work performed by women in the home, by ensuring the condition of production and reproduction of the workforce, by helping to discipline current and future workforces, is acting productively for capital. However, all the discussion made by the authors to defend domestic work as productive work reveals confusion between the reproduction of the workforce and the production of surplus value. As we have already shown, all work is productive as a producer of use values, but for the process of valorization of value, only the work that generates surplus value to the use values — as a substrate — is productive.

There are also theorists who argue that domestic work in the capitalist economy is indirectly productive, as we can see in the placements of [Larguia and Dumoulin \(1972 apud Saffioti, 1976\)](#), [Toledo \(2005\)](#), [Teixeira \(2008\)](#) and [Figueiredo \(2011\)](#). For them, it is only through these hours of work performed in the sphere of domestic life that the worker can produce surplus value, so domestic work is transferred to the creation of surplus value in the sphere of production through wage labor inserted into the productive sphere. Although reproductive work does not directly produce surplus value, according to these authors, it indirectly produces it by maintaining and releasing the workforce so that it can produce. However, as in [Dalla Costa and James \(1972\)](#), the discussions carried out by these authors demonstrate confusion between the relationship of reproduction of the workforce and the production of surplus value, especially due to an imprecision in the understanding of what is the wage.

According to theorist Margaret [Benston \(1969\)](#), reproductive work does not produce commodities, it only produces use-value for consumption within the private domestic sphere itself, necessary for the reproduction and production of the workforce. On the contrary, commodities, which have both use value and exchange value, are produced in the male-dominated sphere of the economy. [Benston \(1969\)](#), therefore, does not defend reproductive work as productive, since it is related to the production of use values that are not substrates of exchange values. However, [Benston \(1969\)](#) does not go as far as to discuss reproductive work as unproductive work, as [Seacombe \(1973 apud Saffioti, 1976\)](#) does. For [Seacombe](#), since the distinction between the private (domestic) sphere and the sphere of production eliminates the chances of a direct relationship between domestic work and the production of surplus value, domestic work is unproductive work.

For [Saffioti \(1976\)](#), domestic work is neither productive nor indirectly productive. It is undeniable, therefore, the importance of activities related to the reproduction of the workforce in the capitalist economy, since it is responsible for the reproduction of the fundamental commodity of capital, the workforce; but, even so, it does not constitute productive work, according to the author, neither if it is carried out free of charge, nor if it is wage earned. According to this author, although waged, the domestic worker's workforce acts in a non-capitalist way, in a non-capitalist institution: the family. Thus, the workforce employed in so-called domestic activities is indispensable to capital because it is a necessary work for the self-production of the working class, but whether they are performed free of charge or paid, they are not work activities operating along the lines of the process of valorization of value.

Regarding the activities related to the reproduction of the workforce carried out by women in their own homes and without direct remuneration, although necessary for the (re)production of the commodity workforce, they are not part of the production of surplus value and therefore cannot be considered productive work. When transforming food purchased at the supermarket, for example, there is the realization of a work linked to the transformation of certain commodities for the realization of the consumption of their use value, thus, this work performed cannot be considered productive, since it is not linked to the production of surplus value in the productive sphere. Reproductive work thus performed is free labor for the working class that reproduces its servitude to the capitalist class. Therefore, like [Saffioti \(1976\)](#), we affirm that reproductive work has historically been absorbed in a non-productive way for capital, but we emphasize that it may become so.

What about the activities involved in the (re)production of the commodity workforce carried out in a waged manner, in the homes of others? As shown by [Saffioti \(2001\)](#), women, even when they perform a paid activity in the productive sphere, continue to be responsible for activities carried out in the sphere of private consumption. Some end up accumulating both functions (a phenomenon we now know as double working); others hire, for a wage, other women to perform, in their homes, some of the activities involved in the (re)production of the commodity workforce, which includes the workforce of the contracting party who is still responsible for the management work of the contractor.

Here, like the gardener in Marx's quote, the result of the hired women serves the consumption of the hiring family and not the process of valorization of some capital. The mere fact that reproductive activities are remunerated

does not change the character of the work, it remains non-productive for capital. The only difference posed by wage-earning is that now the result of the work done by this wage-earner is included in the cost of reproducing the workforces that make up the family group.

Thus, reproductive work, as it has historically materialized in the reproduction of capitalist sociability, despite being performed in a non-waged way, or even directly waged by another worker through income, is a work that is not productive to capital, since it does not directly produce surplus value.

Reproductive work is part of a quantum of general social work necessary for societal reproduction, in which what predominates is the production of use values for the satisfaction of the needs of present and future bearers of the workforce — and therefore reproductive work in and for the working class. In short: it is a social work necessary for the production and reproduction of the workforce in the act of consumption, a work whose useful effect makes up the process of production and reproduction of the workforce. However, like any work that produces use values, it is subject to a valorization process.

In order to expand the limits placed on exploitation, capital modifies not only the productive bases but also the relations of production and work inherent in them. And in this sense, we can see in recent decades a movement of expansion of capital on reproductive work, a commodification of this work. In this case, it is capitalists who hire female workers so that they can work in the homes of other families, and the purchase of this workforce aims for the worker to create a useful effect in which more value is embodied than the value of the workforce purchased by it. In this case, the work related to the activities involved in the (re)production of the commodity workforce is directly exploited by capital, a source of surplus value for the capitalist and therefore productive work for capital. Capital has been transforming reproductive work into more than a producer and reproducer of the workforce, but into value-producing work. After presenting the methodological path traced to obtain the data necessary to obtain a grasp of the reality, we will explain the implications of this advance for the working class and, in particular, for women of this class.

Methodological path

We return to the objective of this work, which is: to discuss the (un)productivity of reproductive work and the potential and limits of the process of expansion of capitalism on this work to change the concrete conditions of oppression that manifest themselves in the conditions of exhaustion of women in contemporary times.

To carry out the proposed debate, secondary data were collected that revealed aspects related to the sexual division of labor in Brazil. This data was collected through reports made available by the IBGE, these reports being the Continuous National Household Sample Survey — Continuous PNAD. However, the data analyzed by the IBGE in the Continuous PNAD report reveal data on female workers in general, and do not allow us to distinguish between waged workers who provide household services directly and workers who are hired by companies that offer these services. To analyze the expansion of the cleaning sector, we therefore resorted to other documents and reports. We searched the 'central company registry' for data on 'cleaning activities' according to the National Classification of Economic Activities (CNAE) classification. In the Central Company Registry, we also found the classification 'domestic services,' but all data were zeroed. When contacting the IBGE, we were informed that the data referring to 'domestic services' companies collected until 2017 — the last available survey — are compiled in the CNAE 'cleaning activities.' Still regarding the data made available by IBGE, we collected information available in the Annual Service Survey about the economic result of the sector referring to 'cleaning services in buildings and households.' In addition to the data provided by IBGE, we extracted data provided by the startup Econodata to analyze the number of companies registered in the CNAE 'cleaning activities' in 2019.

The expansion of the cleaning economic sector in Brazil is a relatively new phenomenon (Sebrae, 2014), and therefore we encountered some difficulties in finding consolidated economic reports about this sector in the country. Therefore, in addition to the analysis — although limited — of the sector in Brazil, carried out through the data that were collected, we seek to carry out an analysis of the expansion of this sector in the United Kingdom, where this sector is already consolidated and constantly expanding (BCC, 2019). This analysis was made possible by the report The Cleaning and Support Services Industry — Research Report — (BCC, 2019), made available by the council responsible for coordinating analyses regarding matters of interest to the cleaning industry in the United Kingdom, the BCC, through the contact made with the BCC by email.

The data collected were organized in Excel spreadsheets and analyzed using descriptive statistics, which seeks to organize, summarize, and describe a set of data in order to facilitate their understanding. Thus, we seek to describe and summarize the data related to domestic and care activities carried out in an unwaged or waged way by income in Brazil, the expansion of the cleaning economic sector, as well as particularities related to the workforce involved in the sector in the countries in

question. An analysis based on historical materialism was carried out; therefore, we sought to investigate the work and the workers not in their singular immediacy, but to apprehend the contradictions that involve the absorption of reproductive work in a productive way to capital. We recognize the existence of particularities between both realities, but we do not rule out the possibility that a more developed movement of capital indicates the tendency for its expansion in other parts of the globe.

Discussion of the data: Expansion of capitalist exploitation of reproductive work: change in the sexual division of labor and exhausting conditions for women?

We will seek to discuss in this topic the capitalist expansion on reproductive work, and analyze whether the condition of wage-earning and/or insertion of these activities in the productive sphere have generated concrete changes in the relations of oppression. For this purpose, we seek data related to the reality of reproductive work carried out in a non-waged or waged way by income in Brazil, and also subsumed in capitalist production.

Reproductive activities carried out in a non-waged or waged manner by income in Brazil

In 2012, the IBGE implemented a survey called Continuous PNAD to analyze data on the workforce in Brazil that had not been addressed by the surveys conducted until then. According to IBGE, the survey was designed to produce quarterly indicators on the workforce and annual indicators on permanent supplementary topics, such as 'other forms of work.' However, it is only since 2016 that data on time spent caring for people and household chores have been compiled.

The data in the 2019 Continuous PNAD — the latest published survey — show that women are the ones who do most of the 'household chores,' in their homes or in the homes of relatives, and also activities related to caring for people. 'Household chores' include the activities of preparing or serving food, setting the table or washing dishes; cleaning or maintaining clothes and shoes; making minor repairs to the maintenance of the home, car, and appliances; cleaning or tidying the home, garage, yard, or garden. According to the survey, in 2018, 92.2% of women performed these activities, while among men, it was 78.2%, a difference of 14 percentage points (p.p.). The difference in relation to previous years has decreased between women and men who carry out chores, with a difference of 17.9 p.p. in 2016 and 15.3 p.p. in 2017.

Analyzing only the percentage of women and men, the difference does not seem to be so significant, and the data point to a downward trend in this difference. However, when analyzing the hours spent on these activities, the data show that women spend on average twice as much time as men on these activities, regardless of whether or not they are engaged in paid work outside the home. Women who do not have paid work outside the home spend an average of 23.8 hours per week on 'household chores,' while 'men not in employment' spend an average of 12 hours per week. Among women and men who have paid work outside the home, the difference remains high, with women spending an average of 18.5 hours per week and men 10.3 hours per week.

Among the activities, the only one in which the percentage of women who perform (30.6%) is lower than that of men who perform (59.2%) was the activity of 'doing minor repairs or maintenance of the home, car and household appliances.' For the activities of preparing or serving food, setting the table or washing dishes (women 97.5%, men 69.4%); cleaning or maintaining clothes and shoes (women 93.4%); and cleaning or tidying the home, garage, yard, or garden (women 85%, men 73.4%), i.e., all have a higher percentage of women performing than men. This demonstrates the sexual division of labor being produced and reproduced within domestic units. It is worth noting that the first space of sociability of the child is the domestic space. It is the examples of the adults around them that will constitute the basic content of their subjectivities on which a whole system of common sense about the world will be erected.

In addition to activities related to 'household chores,' IBGE provides data in the Continuous PNAD report regarding the care of children, the elderly and the sick carried out in an unwaged basis. According to the survey, in 2018, the percentage of women who performed care activities was 37%, while that of men was 26.1%. Another relevant finding from the 2019 Continuous PNAD survey refers to the difference in the performance of the activities analyzed between single men living alone and those who are married. In 2018, activities such as preparing/serving food, cleaning dishes, setting the table were performed by 92.7% of men living alone, but only by 57.1% of those living with a spouse. Activities related to cleaning and maintaining clothes and shoes was performed by 88.6% of men living alone and by only 49.5% of married men; and lastly, activities related to cleaning the household were performed in 2018 by 85.7% of single men and by 66.8% of married men. If the reality of marriage brings a decrease in men who spend hours on 'household chores,' on the other hand, the percentage of women who perform the same activities is higher among married women when compared to single women, in all activities analyzed. It is interesting to note

how the institution of marriage can conceal a way of hiring a servant.

The data presented here already indicate a discrepancy in relation to the performance of reproductive activities by women and men. However, [Jesus et al. \(2023\)](#) suggest that this discrepancy is even greater. In a research entitled "An Empirical Method for Adjusting Time Use Data in Brazil", the authors propose a method for adjusting PNAD time use data, based on the relationship between the hours of direct and indirect care of a reference population. They argue that the data provided by the report are inaccurate, since the methodology used for collection requires respondents to go through a 'cognitive process' which can generate varied interpretations of the questions asked. Furthermore, those interviewed need to estimate the time spent on household chores during the reference week. At this point, they discuss that the estimation of time is sensitive to the level of education of the participants and that men tend to report more hours of housework for themselves, while women, on the contrary, may underestimate and report even less time than actually spent on household activities. By applying the suggested data adjustment methodology, the authors show that they found an increase in the average number of hours per day spent on unpaid household chores for both men (0.1 hour) and women (0.5 hour) aged 15 and over, suggesting that women spend even more time on reproductive activities than the data already showed.

Even with the limitations presented by [Jesus et al. \(2023\)](#), the data on activities related to 'household chores' and 'caring for people' in an unwaged way in Brazil, activities that are related to reproductive work, enable us to discuss two aspects: (1) the way they reinforce discussions about the sexual division of labor and the differentiation of activities that 'should' be performed by women and men in capitalism, carried out by several feminist authors, such as [Saffioti \(2001\)](#), [Montenegro \(1981\)](#), [Hirata and Kergoat \(2007\)](#) and [Kergoat \(2009\)](#); and (2) the responsibility of women to carry out activities of reproduction of the workforce even when inserted in the sphere of production and/or realization of value, as problematized by [Saffioti \(2001\)](#), since we have seen that the hours spent in these activities are greater among women when compared to men. Therefore, we see how the responsibility for reproductive activities imposed on women in capitalism, related to the particularity assumed by the process of oppression engendered by a process of exploitation ([Souza et al., 2021](#)), incurs in creating the concrete conditions to trigger the process of exhaustion of women. If working means expending energy that needs to be replenished, in capitalism, this expenditure is expressed as wear and tear of the workforce that, in turn, is reproduced in the sphere of individual consumption. Such (re)production, as we have seen, also demands work, thus demanding the expenditure of more energy. Thus, in general, women are required to

expend significantly more energy, since reproductive work is produced as their responsibility, despite the fact that these women and men perform paid work outside the home.

The Continuous PNAD report also enables us to analyze data related to domestic activities concerning the reproduction of the workforce on a waged basis by income. According to the report released by IBGE in January 2019, the population working under 'domestic employment' in 2012 was about 6.1 million (9.8% of the total employed population) and reached its lowest contingent in 2014, when this number decreased to about 5.97 million (9.3% of the total employed population). In 2018, this contingent reached 6.2 million workers, 10.1% of the total employed population.

Regarding gender and race particularities, according to PNAD data in 2018, the total population employed in domestic work was about 6.2 million, 92% of whom were women and 63% black women. Of the total population, 6.6% were employed in domestic work, and if the male population is considered, 1% were employed in domestic work; in the female population, the percentage of women employed in domestic work was 14.6%. Among men, 0.9% of white men and 1% of black men were employed in domestic work. Among women, the percentage of white women was 10% and black women 18.6%. The workforce employed in domestic work in Brazil is mostly female and black.

Regarding remuneration, IBGE data show that in 2018 the average remuneration in domestic work was R\$ 888, with the average among workers with a formal contract being R\$ 1,245, while the average among workers without a formal contract was R\$ 740. At first, analyzing the data for the period from 2012 to 2018, considering all domestic workers, the average remuneration increased by 10%, from R\$ 804 in 2012 to R\$ 840 in 2018; considering workers with a formal contract, the increase was 13%, from R\$ 1,099 to R\$ 1,245; and among workers without a formal contract, the increase was 11%, from R\$ 669 to R\$ 740. However, when deflating using the INPC (National Consumer Price Index) to analyze the real gains in remuneration in the period analyzed, we realized that, considering all domestic workers and workers without a formal contract, the average remuneration suffered a loss of 21%; for workers with a formal contract, the loss was 19%. In addition, according to the data provided by the Continuous PNAD, the average remuneration verified in domestic work is the lowest among all groups of activities analyzed by IBGE, both in the private and public sectors. Average remuneration in domestic work was, in 2018, 54% below the average remuneration of private sector jobs and 75% below the average remuneration of public sector workers. The low prices of this workforce are related to the very low value of the workforce involved in

the activities of reproduction of the workforce, since, on the one hand, it is a workforce that does not demand much time involved in training and specialization and, on the other hand, the historical aspects of oppression experienced in the process of consolidation of capitalism by imposing itself on slave relations of production allow an even greater lowering of the value of this workforce that, in general — not by natural abilities, but by a historical and social production —, is employed in the sector — women and black women.

Therefore, these activities that guarantee the reproduction of the workforce of a stratum of the working class, when paid, still restore the place of black women created in another form of production, but which capital has been able to appropriate according to its needs. It is clear that it is not a question of restoring slave labor, but of throwing into the condition of paid workers an ethnic group whose precarious living conditions of past generations mark future generations by engendering a minimum moral limit of needs for self-reproduction of this same group. It affects the general lowering of wages as a mechanism that acts as a lever for the process of valorization of value, even though such workers do not act as productive workers for capital.

However, as we have discussed, in addition to these aspects presented so far, capital has been transforming reproductive work into more than a producer and reproducer of the workforce, but into a value-producing work. What we need to discuss here is: Does this productive appropriation creates concrete conditions for changing the reality of oppression of women — and among its different manifestations, the sexual division of labor — that produces the exhaustion conditions of women in contemporary times?

The cleaning industry in Brazil and worldwide

According to [Sebrae \(2014\)](#), the segment of cleaning and conservation services is relatively new in Brazil, and it started about 30 years ago. However, in other places in the world, this segment has been consolidated for longer — for example, in the United States ([Franchise Help, 2018](#)) and in the countries of the United Kingdom ([BCC, 2019](#)). Still, in Brazil and worldwide, the cleaning services sector is considered one of the activities with the greatest growth potential ([BCC, 2019](#); [Sebrae, 2014](#)).

The cleaning and domestic services sector has really grown in Brazil, and can be observed by the opening of several companies and franchises across the country such as *Doutor Resolve Serviços de Diaristas*, a franchise network created by businessman David Pinto and launched in May 2013. The service is requested by the contracting party to the franchise, which is 100% responsible for hiring the worker ([Sebrae, 2014](#)).

A survey conducted by the Brazilian Franchising Association (*Associação Brasileira de Franchising* [ABF]) in 2014, which analyzed the businesses that require an initial investment of up to R\$ 80,000, pointed out that among those who opened more franchises in the country, two were companies in the cleaning segment that were among the top 5, the Mr. Limp network (2nd place), with 187 new units, and House Shine, with 161 units (5th place) (5º lugar) ([Sebrae, 2014](#)).

Data released by IBGE confirm the indications of growth of the cleaning sector in Brazil and allow us to observe aspects of the expansion of capital on cleaning work.

Regarding the number of companies, according to the National Register of Companies ([IBGE, 2017a](#)), in 2017 the number of companies related to 'cleaning activities'³ was 15,991, of which 9,486 were specifically related to 'cleaning in buildings and households'.⁴ According to the data, it is possible to perceive a growth trend, and between 2007 and 2017, there was an increase of 69% of companies related to 'cleaning activities' and 54% of companies specifically related to 'cleaning in buildings and households.'

According to data from the startup [Econodata \(2019\)](#), in 2019, the number of 'cleaning activities' companies reached 45,334, of which 23,830 are related to 'cleaning in buildings and households.' That is, between 2017 and 2019, there was a 183% growth in the number of companies related to cleaning activities and 151% in the number of cleaning companies specifically in buildings and households. The concentration of companies is significantly higher in the Southeast Region (50%), with São Paulo being the state with the largest number of 'cleaning in buildings and households' companies (6,583). When analyzing the GDP by the data provided by IBGE, in 2017, we see that the Southeast Region represents 53% of the total GDP of Brazil and that, considering the Southeast Region, the city of São Paulo represents 61% of the GDP of the region.

Data from the Central Company Registry ([IBGE, 2017a](#)) also inform us about the people employed by the cleaning services sector in Brazil – Table 1. In 2017, the number of people employed by the sector was around 805,301, 87% of whom were employed by the specific sector of 'cleaning in buildings and households.' There was a 16% growth between 2007 and 2017 in the cleaning sector in general and a 5% growth in relation to the specific cleaning sector in buildings and households. It is interesting to note that the total employed personnel faced a 9% drop between 2014 and 2017, although the number of companies grew by 7%, a factor that may be related to several aspects such as the increase in labor productivity or even the growth of informality in domestic work, since the data express the employed personnel registered by the companies.

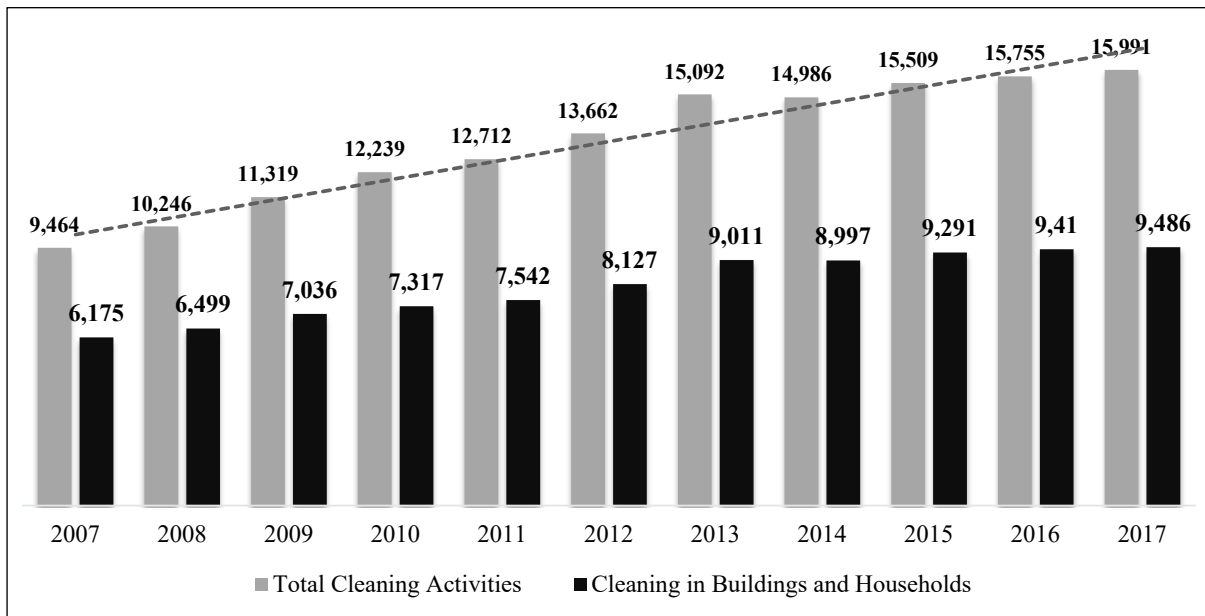


Figure 1. Number of cleaning companies in Brazil.

Source: Developed by the authors with data from the [Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística \(2017b\)](#).

Table 1. People employed in the cleaning sector in Brazil (2006-2017).

Year	Total cleaning activities	Cleaning in buildings and households
2006	646,143	622,524
2007	693,219	668,816
2008	721,098	694,909
2009	708,557	678,087
2010	782,938	739,753
2011	790,793	743,952
2012	834,736	777,314
2013	863,262	791,173
2014	885,367	801,556
2015	854,431	762,535
2016	817,922	726,927
2017	805,301	702,165

Note. Source: [Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística \(2017b\)](#).

In relation to the financial result, it was possible to analyze data on Gross Revenue related to “Building and Household Cleaning Services”, which are available in the Annual Survey of Services carried out by [IBGE \(2017b\)](#) (Figure 2). The turnover (gross revenue) of the sector showed a growth of 206% nominal between the years of the survey (2007 to 2017), with the nominal turnover of 2017 being about R\$ 31.7 billion. Analyzing the deflated data, we see

that even real turnover — discounting inflation — showed a significant growth (70%) between the survey years, and the services sector in general showed a growth of 77% in the same period.

It is interesting to note that in 2014, the year following the institution of the domestic workers’ PEC, there was a peak increase in nominal turnover (18%) and real turnover (11%) compared to the previous year, following the trends proposed by the Union of Housekeeping and Conservation Companies of Rio de Janeiro (SEAC — RJ) released by [Sebrae \(2014\)](#). The growth in turnover in 2014 compared to 2013 was above the average for the service sector, which showed an increase of 13% nominal and 11% real, and even higher than the growth in services GDP (5% growth) and total GDP (4% growth).

The increase in the search for domestic services provided by companies is related to the domestic workers’ PEC, since it establishes rights for workers, such as the reduction of working hours, payment of overtime and nighttime bonus, and mandatory FGTS collection. According to Sebrae, when hiring the service through a company, the employer is exempt from paying social and labor charges when performing the service. In addition, the management director of the National Federation of Service and Environmental Cleaning Companies (Febrac), José Carlos Barbosa Lopes, in addition to ‘getting rid of the risk’ of bearing the cost of notice, termination and other rights

— basic of any worker —, the hiring of domestic workers mediated by a company frees the contractor from a possible

‘embarrassment’ caused by a desire to replace this workforce, if it does not adapt to the person appointed for the job.

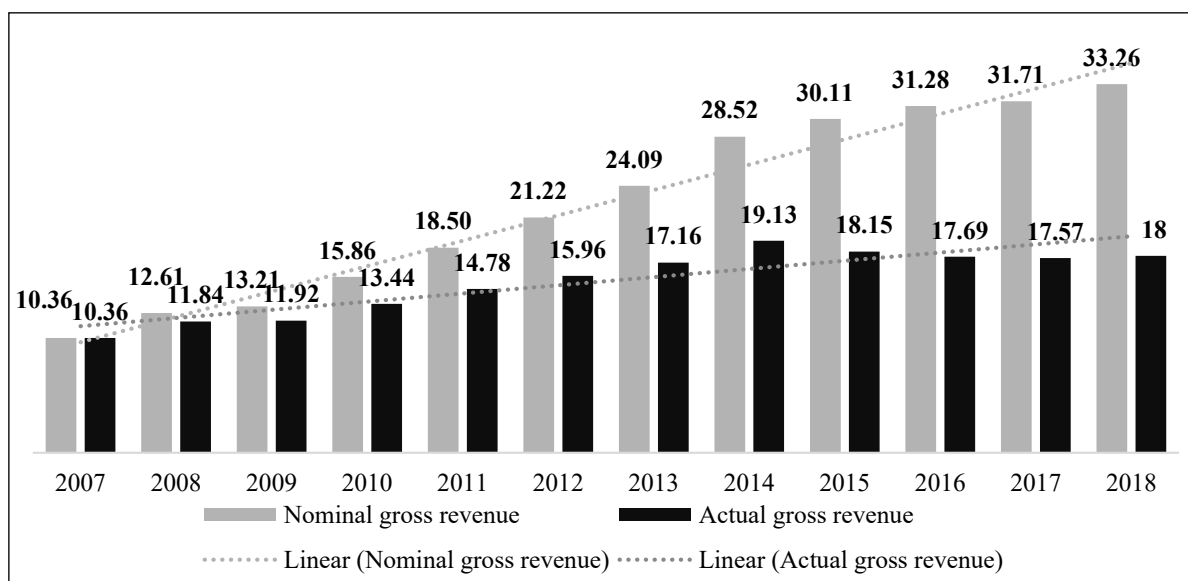


Figure 2. Revenue from cleaning services in buildings and households.

Source: Developed by the authors with data from the [Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística \(2017b\)](#).

As we have seen, the number of companies in the ‘cleaning in buildings and households’ sector increased by 54% in the research period and the number of female workers increased by only 5%, while turnover grew by 206% nominal and 70% real, which suggests that the growth in turnover between 2007 and 2017 was not only due to a growth in the sector but also to an intensification in work productivity. When analyzing the relationship between real turnover and the number of female workers, we can see that the productivity rate in the sector grew by 161% between 2007 and 2017. We can also observe how high productivity is in the sector, and in 2017 this rate was about 2502%, considering the turnover already discounted for inflation.

In Brazil, jobs related to cleaning and care have recently been productively appropriated by capital. Such late exploitation is rooted in two singularities of Brazilian capitalism resulting from the slave model that preceded it: (a) the insertion of black women in paid work through permanence in domestic activities due to the obstacles placed on black people for insertion into the capitalist labor market ([Fernandes, 2021](#)); and (b) the low value of the workforce engaged in domestic reproductive activities — due to its development having occurred in the continuity of the slave social relationship even though on the rupture of the slave productive economic relationship — safeguarded employers from greater individual investments, so that the social cost

of this activity does not demand its concentration under capitalist exploitation — which changes with the approval of the PEC of domestic workers, which, as mentioned, by instituting rights that discourage the increase in these costs, encourage the hiring of these jobs intermediated by companies.

However, the capitalist expansion of this cleaning sector is more consolidated in other countries that are not marked by such idiosyncrasies of Brazilian capitalism. In the United States, for example, the cleaning sector already had approximately 850,000 companies, which employed approximately 3.5 million workers, according to a survey conducted by the Franchise Help website in 2018. According to Allied Market Research, North America has the largest cleaning services market in the world, with the US indicating the highest penetration of cleaning services in the region. The cleaning services industry in the region is expected to continue growing in the coming years.

In the countries of the United Kingdom, the cleaning industry is already a consolidated and constantly expanding sector, with, since 1982, a council responsible for coordinating analyses regarding matters of interest to the cleaning industry, the BCC. Through a report provided by the BCC itself, carried out in 2019, it was possible to analyze the cleaning industry and its development in the countries of the United Kingdom.

The cleaning industry⁵ analyzed by BCC consists of four sub-industries, namely: cleaning activities, facility management, landscape services activities, and waste and resource management industry. According to the [BCC \(2019\)](#), considering the entire cleaning industry, it contributed about £49.9 billion to the UK economy in 2016. In terms of the number of businesses, the cleaning industry has grown every year, from 45,970 in 2010 to 63,490 in 2018, an increase of 39%. There are significant differences between countries and regions. In England, the number of businesses increased by 42%, and in London, the increase was 73% between 2010 and 2018. In Scotland, the increase was 28%, and in Wales 10%, while in Northern Ireland, the number of businesses decreased by 3% between 2010 and 2018.

The 'cleaning activities' sub-industry, which comprises cleaning activities in homes and domestic services, accounts for one-third (33%) of the total number of cleaning industry enterprises, i.e., 21,120 businesses in 2018. Between 2010 and 2018, the increase in the number of businesses was 50%, from 14,070 businesses in 2010 to 21,120 in 2018. In 2016, the sub-industry contributed around £7.8 billion to the UK economy, and 2,770 businesses were opened in the same year.

The forecasts presented by the [BCC \(2019\)](#) are that the cleaning industry will continue to grow in the coming years. By the year 2024, a total of 529,000 jobs are expected to be opened, 93,000 of which are due to expected growth in the sector and 436,000 to replace workers who have

left the labor market, either for temporary or permanent reasons.

Regarding the number of people employed in the sector, in 2018 there were 914,000 workers, with London and the southeast of England having the largest number of workers, 16% and 15% respectively. Meanwhile, Wales and Northern Ireland have the lowest number of female workers, 3% and 1% respectively. The number of people employed in the 'cleaning activities' sub-industry is 422,000, or 46% of the total number of people employed in the industry. Of these 422,000 workers, 62% are employed in operational cleaning activities and are domestic workers.

We will see some particularities of this workforce employed in the cleaning sector in Brazil and the United Kingdom.

Some particularities of the workforce employed in the cleaning sector

The cleaning sector in Brazil has been growing in recent years and, in 2017, already employed about 805,000 female workers. According to data from [IBGE \(2017a\)](#) – Figure 3 – between 2009 and 2017 the cleaning sector employed a higher percentage of women, with 58% of workers being women and 42% being men in 2017. When analyzing this proportion in the other sectors, the relationship is reversed, and in all years the percentage of male workers was higher than that of women, and in 2017, considering all sectors, 45% of workers were women and 55% men.

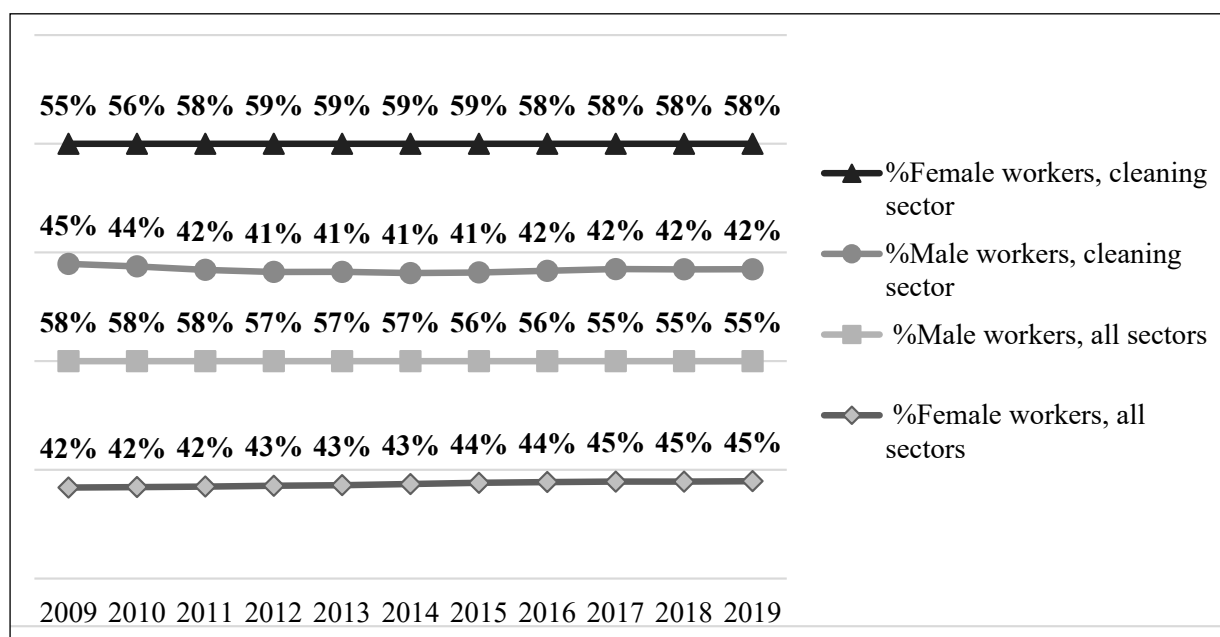


Figure 3. Women and men employed in the cleaning sector and other sectors.

Source: Developed by the authors with data from the [Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística \(2017b\)](#).

The percentage of female workers with higher education in the cleaning sector is historically very low, with only 4% of workers having higher education in 2019, compared to 23% across all sectors. In addition, while this percentage increased by 7% between 2009 and 2019 in all sectors, the cleaning sector remained practically constant (2% increase) – Figure 4.

Regarding remuneration, according to IBGE (2017a), the average monthly wage of both men and women in the

cleaning sector is lower compared to all sectors (Figure 5). Considering male workers, workers in the cleaning sector received between 2009 and 2017 an average of 53% less than workers in the sectors in general. Female workers working in the cleaning sector received on average 54% less than workers in other sectors. This data confirms the low remuneration of the workforce involved in this sector of both sexes.

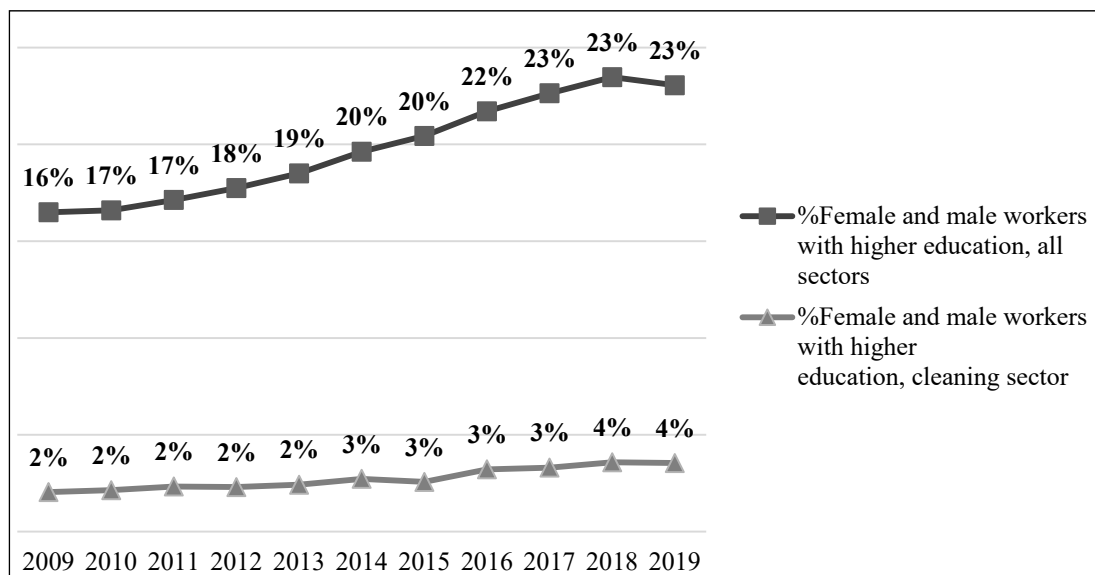


Figure 4. Women and men employed in the cleaning sector and other sectors.

Source: Developed by the authors with data from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (2017b).

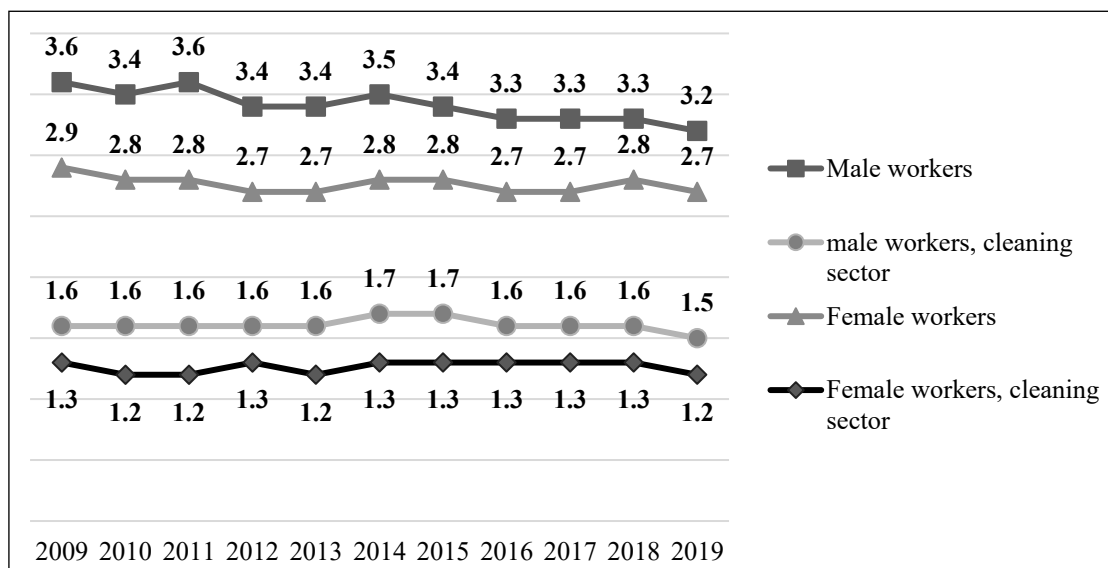


Figure 5. Average monthly wage of workers in the cleaning sector and other sectors.

Source: Developed by the authors with data from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (2017b).

Analyzing the wage differences between the different levels of education (Figure 6), considering all sectors, we find that female and male workers who do not have higher education historically receive an average of 68% less than those who do. In the cleaning sector, workers who do not have higher education earn an average of 62% less than those who do. If we compare the average monthly wage of female workers without higher education in the cleaning sector with the average monthly wage of female workers with higher education in other sectors, we find that the

latter receive 80% more. Taking into account female and male workers with higher education, the average monthly wage in the cleaning sector is historically 49% lower than in the sectors in general, while female and male workers without higher education in the cleaning sector are historically paid 39% less than in the sectors in general. The historical behavior of the average remuneration in the analyzed period suffered a drop in general, except for female workers without higher education in the cleaning sector, whose index remained constant over time.

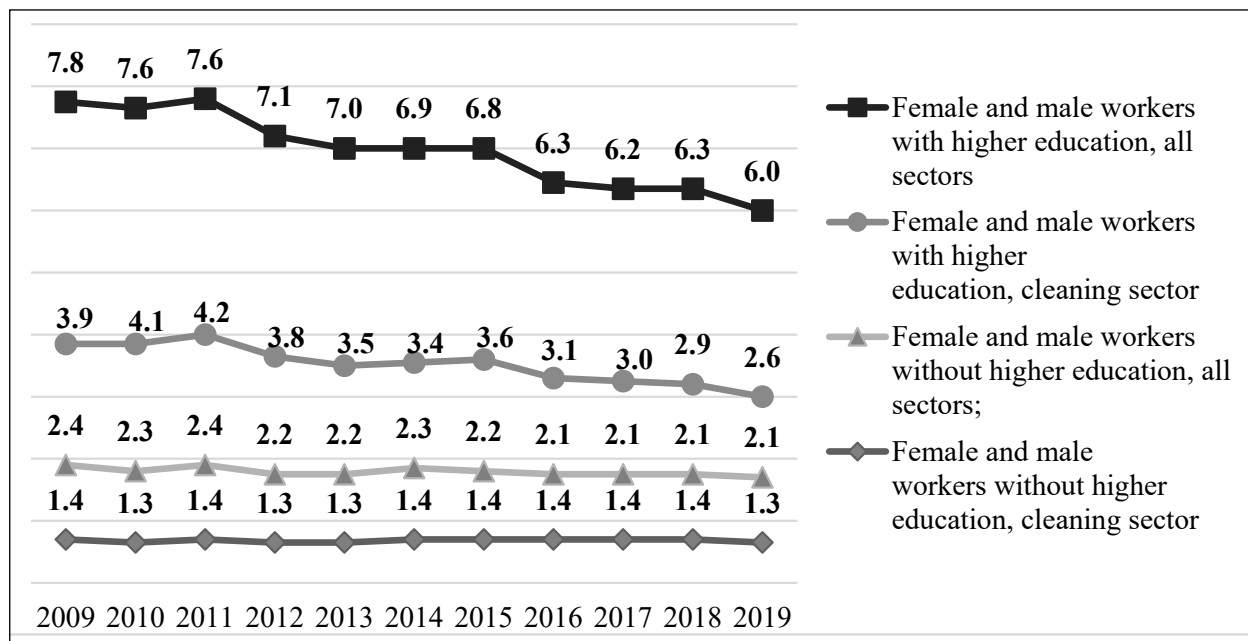


Figure 6. Average monthly wages of female and male cleaning workers and other sectors — by level of education.

Source: Developed by the authors with data from the [Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística \(2017b\)](#).

If we think that wages can vary for several reasons, one of which is the qualification of the workforce, we can think that the differences in wages found between the cleaning sector and in all sectors are consistent with differences in educational level. However, even among workers with the same level of education, wages in the cleaning sector are well below those found in other sectors. What could explain this phenomenon? The value of the workforce is determined by the value of the commodities that are indispensable for human beings to reproduce their capacity to work as a workforce ([Marx, 2013](#)) and, ultimately, not as a human being; such needs are historical and social. Therefore, in order to serve capital, the needs not only for training, but also for food, clothing and housing are not the same for female cleaning workers and female bank managers, for example. Likewise, they are not

identical between female managers of different economic sectors due to the complexities of planning, direction, command, and control resulting from sectoral specificities. Since the amount of work socially necessary for the production of these means of subsistence is different, consequently, the value of the workforce of these female workers is also different. In addition, the price of labor (expressed in wages) is an expression of the value of the workforce and can rise or fall below the value, influenced by moral, historical issues, and even by capital strategies ([Marx, 1978](#)).

We can see that the workforce employed in the cleaning sector in Brazil has in general a low level of education and remuneration below that of the other sectors, even if we consider female workers who have the

same level of education. What we have is a workforce, mostly of women, intensely exploited by capital. Is this reality a particularity of Brazil?

We will now analyze the particularities in the United Kingdom where the cleaning industry already employed about 914,000 workers in 2018.

According to the [BCC \(2019\)](#), the majority of people employed in the cleaning industry were in elementary occupations, i.e., operational jobs requiring little qualification. When comparing the cleaning industry to other sectors in the UK, we see that while 44% of the workforce in the cleaning industry is employed in operational activities, this percentage is only 11% in other sectors. The forecasts for the year 2024 are that this scenario will not change significantly. Of all the 529,000 open jobs expected by the industry, 50% are in elementary occupations.

When analyzing the 10 occupations that absorb the most workforce in the industry, we have 'cleaners and domestics' occupying the first position, with 260,000 people employed, 31% of the entire workforce absorbed by the sector. In addition, the categories 'cleaning and housekeeping managers and supervisors' and 'window cleaners' employ 29,700 and 28,400, ranking 3rd and 4th respectively, which allows us to discuss the large amount of workforce involved in housekeeping and cleaning activities productively absorbed into capital in the UK.

Regarding the gender breakdown, the [BCC \(2019\)](#) report also provides interesting data. When comparing the cleaning industry in general to the other sectors of society, the cleaning industry absorbs less female workforce than the other sectors, 45% and 47% respectively. However, when analyzing the sub-industries, the only one that absorbs a greater share of female workforce in relation to the male workforce is the sub-industry 'cleaning activities,' 64%.

The percentage of women and men employed also varies greatly in relation to the type of work. When analyzing the percentage related to operational activities, i.e., activities requiring low qualifications, it is higher in the cleaning industry (59%) than in other sectors (46%). It is also interesting to observe how the sexual division of labor manifests itself. The occupations that have a higher proportion of women compared to men are activities seen as typically female, such as administrative, secretarial, and relationship activities. On the other hand, directorship and management activities and machine operation have a higher proportion of men. Furthermore, according to the [BCC \(2019\)](#), the percentages of women to men vary significantly across specific occupations, with 81% of those

working as 'cleaning operatives and domestic workers' being women.

When analyzing the profile of occupations and workforce absorption in the cleaning industry, we saw that 44% are absorbed by operational activities, which generally require little qualification. Through the analysis of the level of qualification of the workforce in the sector, we can see that it is really low compared to the other sectors in the UK. On the one hand, while 14% of the workforce in the cleaning industry has no qualifications at all, this percentage is only 5% in the other sectors. On the other hand, in the cleaning industry, 22% of the female workers have a high level of qualification compared to 44% of the female workers in the other sectors. In the sub-industry 'cleaning activities,' the level of qualification is the lowest of the whole cleaning industry, with 55% being below level 2, i.e., having very little or no qualification and only 15% having a high level of qualification.

The report made available by [BCC \(2019\)](#) also provides data regarding the percentage of immigrants and natives working in the sector, since the United Kingdom, especially England, receives a high number of people seeking opportunities for better living and working conditions, including Brazilians. According to the report, in the cleaning industry as a whole, the percentage of female migrant workers is 19%, while in other sectors it is 17%. This percentage varies according to sub-industries. In the sub-industry of 'cleaning activities,' the percentage of immigrant women workers is the highest in the whole industry, reaching 28%.

It is interesting to note that, according to the [BCC \(2019\)](#), report, among the reasons why immigrants find more space in the cleaning industry when compared to other sectors is that there are few requirements and qualifications demanded by the sector, in addition to the fact that 'domestic qualifications' or domestic activities are not valued in the UK, which allows us to question the debate of intellectuals who argue that the 'devaluation' of domestic activities comes from the fact that they are not value-producing activities.

The analysis of the average wage of female workers also allows us to discuss the precariousness of work in the cleaning industry, especially in the sub-industry 'cleaning activities.' According to the data collected by the [BCC \(2019\)](#), the average hourly wage in the cleaning industry in 2018 was 23.6% lower than the average of the other sectors. The sub-industry 'cleaning activities' has the lowest average wage of the whole industry (17% lower than the industry average), being 36.7% lower than the average of the other sectors in the UK.

In addition, within the sub-industries themselves, average wages can vary by several factors, one of them being the specific activity performed. According to the [BCC \(2019\)](#) report, operational cleaning and housekeeping activities are the lowest paid of the entire industry, an average of £8.42 per hour, ranging from £7.80 to £11.09, with an average working day of 37.5 hours per week. Another interesting point to analyze is that, comparing the years 2017 and 2018, the cleaning industry showed an increase — although 26% below the other sectors — of 2% in the average salary. However, the sub-industry of 'cleaning activities' showed a decrease in average wage of 4.8%, from £9.57 to £9.11.

The data show that, while the cleaning industry in other countries of the world is more consolidated, the reality of the employed workforce has several common points. Both in Brazil and in the UK, most of the workforce involved in the cleaning sector is made up of women. In addition, there is a low level of education and qualification, and average wages are well below those of other sectors of the market. In the countries of the United Kingdom, it was also possible to verify a greater number of immigrant workers in the sector; we consider that the condition of vulnerability of the immigrant is what imposes on them the submission to precarious and poorly paid jobs. This condition is similar to the vulnerability still experienced by the black population in Brazil due to the particularity of their insertion in the world of wage labor imposed by Brazilian capitalist development. In the data from Brazil, we did not obtain information on the exclusive racial cut of the percentage of the workforce employed in the productive cleaning sector, but of the people employed in domestic work, 92% are women and, of these, 65% are black ([IBGE, 2021](#)). We can see that, even when absorbed productively, domestic work falls on the shoulders of working women — in Brazil, of black women, and in the United Kingdom, of immigrant women.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this paper we sought to discuss the (un)productivity of reproductive work and the potential and limits of the process of expansion of capitalism on this work to change the concrete conditions of oppression that are manifested in the conditions of women's exhaustion in contemporary times.

We have shown that it is not the nature of the work that determines it as productive or unproductive, but the way it is appropriated in the capitalist production process. In capitalism, historically the work involved in the reproduction of the workforce has been performed in a way that is not productive to capital; however, as capital

expands, it has productively appropriated even the activities considered most elementary related to the reproduction of the workforce, such as cleaning activities.

We have seen that such activities, when carried out free of charge, fall more heavily on the backs of working-class women. In the case of this work, when it becomes remunerated — by income or capital —, it continues to employ mostly women and with low remuneration. There are many factors responsible for determining the value of the workforce of these women. The determining factor is the quality of the workforce they sell — low skilled — and the condition inherited as a result of the global expansion of capital itself: descendants of enslaved peoples and immigrants.

The gratuitousness of reproductive work carried out within the family and guaranteed by marriage (formalized or not) and the low value of the workforce employed in this sector, made possible by the concrete conditions of reproduction of this workforce, constitute the materiality from which the imaginary 'inferiority' of domestic work emerges. Therefore, it is not the moral judgment of inferiority of domestic work that places women (and black and immigrant women) in a situation of exploitation-oppression, but the demands of the qualities of the physical-psychic labor capacities necessary for the realization of this work that creates, in the scope of the reproductive work of the working class, the repose of oppression to women and, in the scope of the submission of this work to the process of valorization, capitalist exploitation. Thus, the inclusion of reproductive work in the sphere of capitalist production is not enough to change the social imaginary of reproductive work as a less important job. This is because, in addition to the issues already discussed regarding the low value of the workforce involved in activities related to reproductive work, capital uses the moral issue and oppressions posed to pay even less and further exploit this workforce. After all, the analysis of the data related to the cleaning sector in Brazil and the United Kingdom allowed us to discuss that even if in appearance the expansion of this sector may mean the desired recognition of this work (mostly performed by women) because it becomes productive for capital, in essence, it reveals a workforce intensely exploited by capital.

If working means expending energy that needs to be replenished, in capitalism, this expenditure is expressed as wear and tear of the workforce that, in turn, is reproduced in the sphere of individual consumption, then we find the concrete basis on which the wear and tear of women develops as exhaustion. The process of exploitation of women's workforce productively or unproductively for capital imposes on them a wear and tear of physical-psychic energy that does not find concrete conditions

of replacement, since, by the numerous mediations of oppression, the realization of reproductive work imposes on women a continuity in the expenditure of energy resulting from the nature of the work aimed at reproducing the workforce of and in the family.

Thus, we demonstrate that, instead of changing the relationship of sexual division of labor, as Federici (2019) intended, or an economic and moral valuation, as advocated by Hirata and Guimarães (2012) and Hirata (2023), capital has been appropriating reproductive work for its self-valorization and expansion of the capitalist system. In other words, instead of the transmutation of reproductive work to productive work being an advance for the emancipation of women, it has been a source of increasing the possibilities of exploitation of their workforce and their exhaustion.

In the meantime, we place as a research agenda the need to advance in the radical critique of the sexual division of labor subsumed in the process of valorization of value and the sociability of capital to overcome both the appearance that inequality between women and men is determined by the obligation of women to perform reproductive work and the demoralization of this work and to overcome the insignia that the productive appropriation of reproductive work by capital would be sufficient to overcome the concrete conditions of oppression that generate the exhaustion of women in contemporary times.

Lastly, in concluding this paper, we cannot fail to point out that we are also exhausted, like all working women — although for each stratum of the class, exhaustion takes on specific contours; such contingencies do not invalidate the concreteness of exhaustion —, but sure that we are

working to produce knowledge that collaborates with the struggle to end oppression and exploitation, knowledge that demonstrates the historical need to build a mode of production where we can finally spend our physical-psycho energies on activities that are humanly productive and productively human.

NOTES

1. This text is written by women, reproductive work is an activity carried out mostly by women, so we chose to write the text in feminine character, except in cases of direct quotation. Men, please feel represented by the female gender bending. After all, we women also produce scientific knowledge.
2. Do not confuse the work necessary for the (re)production of the workforce and the work necessary to produce the goods necessary for the reproduction of the workforce, the latter is what determines the value of the workforce; the first case does not.
3. It includes cleaning activities in buildings and homes and other specific cleaning activities of machinery such as incinerators, boilers, ventilation ducts, air cooling and the interior of marine tanks, as well as immunization and urban pest control services.
4. It includes general cleaning activities carried out in buildings of any kind (residential and commercial) and in homes.
5. Throughout the analysis, we use the terms 'cleaning industry' and 'sub-industry' to maintain the terms used in the BCC (2019) report.

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