ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Gendered Labour, Survival and Identity: An Ethnographic Study of Indonesian Migrant Janitors in Malaysia's Cleaning Sector

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the gendered labour experiences, structural precarity, and everyday agency of Indonesian migrant janitors in Malaysia's commercial cleaning sector. While existing research on Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia has predominantly focused on domestic work, manufacturing, and construction, commercial janitorial labour remains comparatively under-researched, particularly from a gendered perspective. Drawing on Intersectionality Theory and Gendered Agency, the study investigates how gender norms, migrant legal status under the *Pas Lawatan Kerja Sementara* (PLKS), class, and occupational stigma shape workplace relations and workers lived experiences. A qualitative ethnographic approach was employed through four months of fieldwork from May to August 2026 across three private cleaning companies in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. Data were collected through approximately 280 hours of participant observation, 12 semi-structured interviews, 48 informal conversations, and three key-informant interviews with managers. Findings reveal a strongly gendered division of labour, whereby male janitors are disproportionately assigned physically demanding and hazardous tasks, while female janitors are concentrated in detailed interior cleaning and emotional labour. The PLKS system further intensifies vulnerability by restricting workers' mobility and enabling managerial coercion, including unpaid labour extensions and unsafe working conditions. The study also identifies a "visibility/recognition paradox," whereby workers experience social invisibility in corporate spaces but receive individualized recognition in private residential settings. Despite structural constraints, workers demonstrate agency through peer solidarity, re-signification of "dirty work" as skilled and honourable labour, and transnational family-oriented identities.

Keywords *Indonesian janitors, migration, gendered labour, identity, ethnography*

1. Introduction

Gender inequality remains a defining feature of globalized labor markets, dictating how work is segregated, valued, and compensated. Feminist labor sociologists demonstrate that employment structures are inherently gendered institutions, organized through social and bureaucratic processes that reproduce horizontal segregation, marginalization, and wage disparities (Acker, 1990, 2006; Connell, 2009, 2021). These structural inequalities are acute in low-wage commercial services particularly

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cleaning and maintenance where essential labor is economically undervalued and rendered culturally invisible (Dyer et al., 2011; Grimshaw et al., 2021).

The gendering of low-wage commercial work is inextricably linked to contemporary transnational migration. Recent scholarship on global care chains and labor regimes highlights how state migration policies and capital accumulation rely on a steady supply of racialized, gendered, and precarious migrant workers (Kilkey & Urzi, 2021; Parreñas et al., 2021; Piper & Withers, 2018). In South and Southeast Asia, low-skilled migrant workers are disproportionately funneled into 3D (dirty, dangerous, and demanding) sectors. While these workers underpin basic urban infrastructure, their lived experiences are mediated by intersecting axes of precarious legal status, low social class, and gendered social expectations (Elias & Sarkar, 2021; Koh, 2022).

The commercial cleaning sector represents a critical site of gendered migrant labor. Distinct from private domestic work, commercial janitorial labor operates under formal corporate management, strict efficiency metrics, and public exposure. Yet, it remains profoundly stigmatized. Hughes (1958) famously designated such tasks as "dirty work" occupations marked by physical, social, or moral taint. Modern organizational scholars emphasize that occupational stigma is not static; it is actively internalised, resisted, or re-signified by workers through gendered coping mechanisms (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Simpson et al., 2012). Because societal evaluations of manual labor align with normative ideas of masculinity and femininity, janitorial work acts as a key site where gender and occupational stigma continually interact.

In Malaysia, Indonesian migrant workers form the backbone of the low-wage labor force, maintaining key commercial, industrial, and residential sectors (Liow, 2021; World Bank, 2020). Despite their structural necessity, Indonesian janitors navigate hyper-precarious employment conditions, strict legal regulation under the *Pas Lawatan Kerja Sementara* (PLKS) temporary employment pass system, and pervasive anti-migrant discourse (Allerton, 2017; Low, 2021). Their workplace treatment and social mobility are conditioned by racialized and gendered stereotypes that dictate who is "naturally suited" for particular tasks.

Despite growing scholarship on Southeast Asian labor migration, Malaysian migration literature exhibits a persistent empirical blind spot. Extant research overwhelmingly focuses on Indonesian migrants in private domestic work (Chin, 2018; Kilkey & Urzi, 2021), manufacturing (Norshahril, 2020), or construction (Datta & Yeoh, 2023). Commercial janitors occupy a distinct intermediate position: unlike domestic workers who operate in hidden, private households, commercial janitors work in public and corporate spaces under institutional oversight, yet they remain largely excluded from systematic gendered analyses.

Addressing this empirical and theoretical gap, this ethnographic study investigates the gendered daily lives of Indonesian migrant janitors within Malaysia’s commercial cleaning sector. Specifically, the study addresses three research objectives:

1. To examine how gender norms shape the division of labor, daily tasks, and workplace dynamics among Indonesian migrant janitors in Malaysia's cleaning sector.
2. To analyze how gender intersects with migrant legal status, class, and occupational stigma to influence workplace power relations and structural precarity.
3. To explore the agency of Indonesian migrant janitors in negotiating gendered identities, survival strategies, and informal spaces of social belonging within the Malaysian labor regime.

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2. Literature Review and Theoretical Review

2.1 The Gendering of Precarious Migrant Labor

Contemporary migration scholarship recognizes that international labor flows are deeply structured by gendered regimes of precarity (Piper & Withers, 2018; Yeoh & Ramdas, 2014). Migrant labor regimes in Asia rely on flexible, low-cost labor forces managed through restrictive immigration frameworks that tie legal status directly to single employers (Hewison, 2020). In Malaysia, the state's temporary migration framework institutionalizes structural precarity, leaving workers vulnerable to wage theft, mobility constraints, and sudden deportation (Low, 2021; Palmer, 2020).

Crucially, this precarity is experienced through a gendered lens. Feminist political economy demonstrates that labor markets capitalize on pre-existing gender hierarchies to justify wage disparities and occupational segregation (Acker, 2006; Elias & Sarkar, 2021). While migrant women in Southeast Asia are frequently funneled into caregiving and cleaning roles under the assumption of "natural" domestic affinity, male migrants in low-wage service sectors face distinct gendered pressures, such as emasculation, physical strain, and strict discipline (Datta & Yeoh, 2023; Hu, 2021).

2.2 Commercial Cleaning, Occupational Stigma, and "Dirty Work"

While literature on private domestic work in Malaysia is extensive (e.g., Chin, 2018), commercial cleaning services present a distinct institutional dynamic that remains under-analyzed. Commercial janitorial work is situated within formal corporate supply chains characterized by subcontracting, tight profit margins, and strict temporal control (Grimshaw et al., 2021). Subcontracted janitors navigate "double bossing," answering both to their direct cleaning agency managers and to the clients on whose premises they work (Dyer et al., 2011).

Occupational stigma is central to the experience of commercial cleaning. Drawing on "dirty work" theory (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1958), recent studies show that workers in stigmatized occupations are subjected to physical taint (contact with refuse or bodily fluids), social taint (contact with stigmatized populations or lower-status positions), and moral taint (perceived lack of skill or dignity) (Barbour & Lammers, 2015; Grandy & Mavin, 2012). In migrant contexts, occupational stigma interacts with racialized xenophobia, compounding the devaluation of migrant workers (Koh, 2022). However, dirty work is not passively endured; workers construct counter-narratives, informal solidarity, and gendered dignity-defending practices to reclaim moral self-worth (Dick, 2005; Simpson et al., 2012).

2.3 Empirical Gap: Migrant Janitors in Contemporary Malaysia

Literature on Indonesian migration to Malaysia has historically prioritized three primary employment sectors:

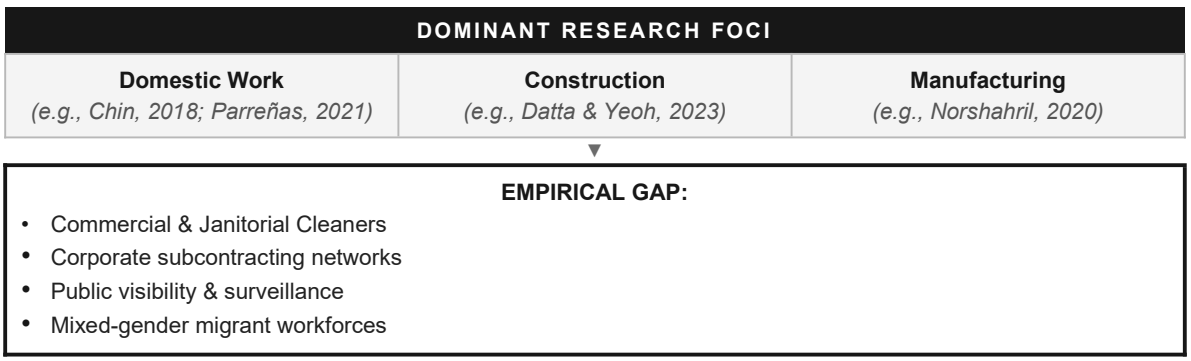


Figure 1. Dominant Research Foci and the Empirical Gap in Malaysian Migration Scholarship

Source: Author's own conceptualisation.

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Commercial janitors remain under-researched despite their visible presence in Malaysia's corporate, residential, and transport infrastructure. Unlike domestic workers isolated in private homes, commercial janitors operate in public and corporate spaces subject to customer surveillance, corporate performance metrics, and mixed-gender team structures. Addressing this empirical gap is essential to understanding how formal labor regimes intersect with migrant precarity in urban Southeast Asia.

2.4 Integrated Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Gendered Agency

To avoid theoretical fragmentation, this study synthesizes two primary theoretical constructs which is Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989), Gendered Agency and Theory of Performativity (Butler, 1990; Giddens, 1991).

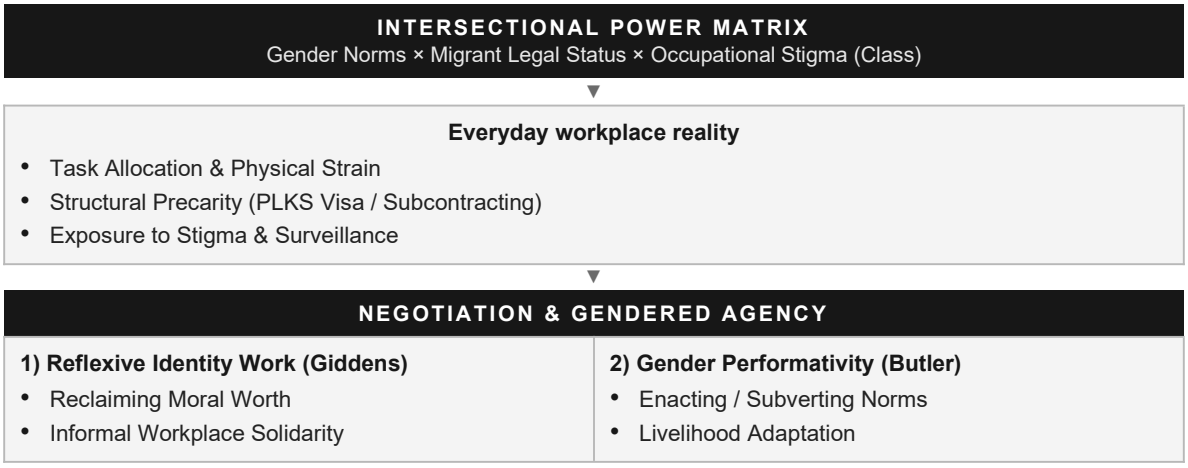


Figure 2. Integrated Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Gendered Agency

Source: Author's own conceptualisation.

Intersectional Power Matrix (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality serves as the primary analytical lens. Rather than treating gender, migrant legal status (PLKS binding), and class/occupational position as isolated variables, this framework examines how they mutually constitute one another. Gender dictates task allocation (e.g., assigning heavy machinery to men and repetitive detailing to women); legal status restricts worker mobility and bargaining power; and occupational stigma diminishes social standing.

Gendered Agency and Identity Negotiation (Butler, 1990; Giddens, 1991). Within these intersectional constraints, workers act as reflexive social agents. Drawing on Giddens' (1991) theory of reflexive identity and Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, this framework captures how janitors perform, adapt, or subvert gender norms to preserve dignity, resist workplace exploitation, and maintain social belonging.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Ethnographic Positionality

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic research design (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) to investigate the gendered labour practices, structural precarity, and identity negotiations of Indonesian migrant janitors in Malaysia's commercial cleaning sector. Ethnography is particularly well-suited for capturing unscripted workplace dynamics, informal coping mechanisms, and power relations that standard structured interviews frequently overlook (O'Reilly, 2012).

Fieldwork was conducted over a four-month period from May 2026 to August 2026 in the Klang Valley area specifically Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's primary commercial and financial hub. To gain direct observational access, the primary researcher secured temporary employment as an assistant

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janitor within contracted cleaning crews, working alongside participants for 4 to 6 hours per day, 4 days per week accumulating approximately 280 total hours in the field. Tasks performed alongside participants included floor sweeping, waste disposal, sanitary unit maintenance, and residential deep cleaning. Positionality was reflexively managed throughout the research process (Bourgois, 2003). As an academic researcher, the investigator maintained a self-aware stance regarding educational and socio-economic privileges. Working directly alongside participants lowered social barriers, minimized observer effects, and built interpersonal trust, allowing the researcher to observe raw workplace interactions and informal break-time conversations (Spradley, 1980).

3.2 Site Selection and Access Negotiation

Field sites were selected through purposive sampling across three private cleaning companies operating in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur (Table 1). Access was established through a three-stage gatekeeper protocol designed to ensure institutional permission while safeguarding worker autonomy:

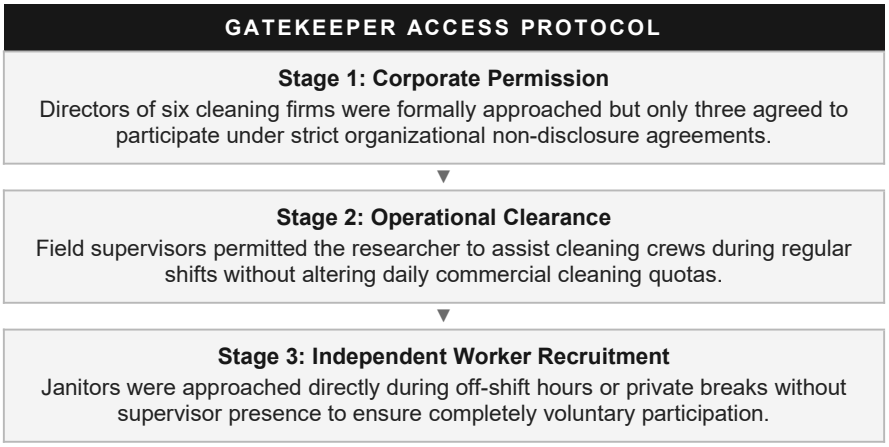


Figure 3. Gatekeeper Access Protocol

Source: Fieldwork data (May–August 2026).

Table 1. Profile of Participating Cleaning Companies

Company Code	Location	Company Type	Years in Operation	Service Scope	Estimated Workforce Size
Company A	Selangor	Private Limited	8	Corporate Offices, Commercial Malls	100 workers
Company B	Selangor	Private Limited	7	Residential Sites, Mixed Commercial	85 workers
Company Z	Kuala Lumpur	Private Limited	6	High-End Retail Malls, Corporate Offices	120 workers

Source: Fieldwork data (May–August 2026).

3.3 Participant Recruitment and Sampling

A total of 12 Indonesian migrant janitors (3 males, 9 females) were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling strategies (Bernard, 2018). Sampling criteria required participants to hold Indonesian citizenship, possess a valid *Pas Lawatan Kerja Sementara* (PLKS) temporary work permit, have worked in Malaysia's cleaning sector for at least 12 months, and be directly employed by one of the three study companies. Sample size was governed by thematic saturation (Saunders et al., 2018), which occurred when subsequent field observations and conversations yielded no further conceptual insights regarding gendered task allocation or stigma negotiation.

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PARTICIPANT SAMPLING

- Total Janitor Participants: n = 12 (3 Males, 9 Females)
- Supplementary Key Informants: n = 3 Management Representatives
- Inclusion Criteria:
  1. Indonesian nationality holding valid PLKS temporary permits.
  2. Minimum 12 months employment in Malaysian commercial cleaning.
  3. Direct employment by one of the three participating agencies.

Additionally, 3 key-informant interviews were conducted with operations managers (one per company) to contextualize corporate recruitment practices, wage structures, and formal job allocations.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Indonesian Migrant Janitor Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Indonesian Origin	Permit Status	Stay in Malaysia	Previous Occupation	Company
Budi	Male	39	Central Java	Legal (PLKS)	3 Years	Factory Worker	Company A
Sudar	Male	38	East Java	Legal (PLKS)	4 Years	Fisherman	Company B
Agus	Male	36	West Nusa Tenggara	Legal (PLKS)	2 Years	Farmer	Company Z
Siti	Female	37	East Java	Legal (PLKS)	3 Years	Domestic Worker	Company A
Dewi	Female	40	Central Java	Legal (PLKS)	5 Years	Domestic Worker	Company A
Suryahani	Female	35	West Java	Legal (PLKS)	2 Years	Domestic Worker	Company B
Rina	Female	43	East Java	Legal (PLKS)	4 Years	Domestic Worker	Company B
Yanti	Female	41	Central Java	Legal (PLKS)	3 Years	Small-Scale Trader	Company B
Ningsih	Female	48	East Java	Legal (PLKS)	6 Years	Small-Scale Trader	Company Z
Fajar	Female	39	West Java	Legal (PLKS)	3 Years	Boutique Tailor	Company Z
Endang	Female	49	Central Java	Legal (PLKS)	5 Years	Factory Worker	Company Z
Murni	Female	42	East Java	Legal (PLKS)	4 Years	Factory Worker	Company A

Source: Fieldwork data (May–August 2026).

3.4 Data Collection and Triangulation

Data collection combined three primary qualitative streams to achieve empirical triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). First and foremost, participant observation of 280 hours of observational data were captured using the "jottings-to-full-notes" protocol (Emerson et al., 2011). Daily field logs documented non-verbal interactions, spatial movement, supervisor surveillance, and gendered divisions of labor. Next, semi-structured and informal interviews. 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews taking about 45 to 75 minutes were conducted in neutral private settings such as local eateries or residential rooms away from workplaces. In addition, 48 informal conversational interviews conducted during work shifts and lunch breaks were recorded in field logs. All formal interviews were conducted in Malay and Indonesian language. Lastly, management key-informant interviews like three semi-structured interviews about 30

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minutes were held with company managers at corporate offices to contextualize formal job assignment policies and recruitment structures.

3.5 Data Analysis Protocol

All handwritten field notes and interview session were transcribed verbatim in Indonesia and Malay language, translated into English, and imported into NVivo (v.14) for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analytical strategy followed an integrated inductive-deductive pipeline:

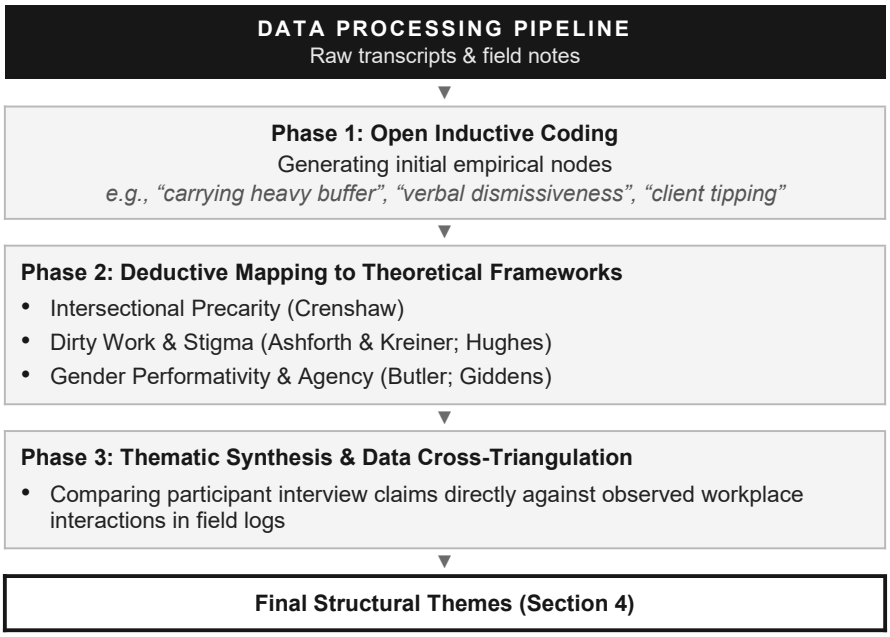


Figure 4. Data Processing Pipeline

Source: Author's own analytical protocol.

To establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), member-checking sessions were conducted with four key participants to verify transcript accuracy and validate interpretive findings.

3.6 Research Ethics and Risk Mitigation

This study strictly adhered to institutional ethical guidelines regarding vulnerable migrant populations (Liamputtong, 2007). Key ethical safeguards included:

1) Informed Consent and Freedom from Coercion: Written informed consent was secured from all participants. For workers concerned about signed documents affecting immigration status, recorded oral consent was obtained. Participants were explicitly informed that participation was independent of their employment status and could be withdrawn at any time.

2) Employer Neutrality: Employers and supervisors were completely excluded from recruitment, interviewing, and data collection. Interviews occurred off-site during non-working hours to prevent managerial surveillance or retaliation.

3) Anonymization: Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, cleaning agencies, and work sites. Specific building names and geographical details were generalized to protect participant identities.

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4. Research Findings

4.1 Gendered Division of Cleaning Tasks, Micro-Spatial Allocation, and Embodied Expectations

Fieldwork demonstrated that while both male and female janitors perform essential cleaning operations, task allocation is deeply structured by institutionalized gender norms. Employers and clients actively deploy gendered logic to organize work regimes, constructing a binary between "heavy physical labor" assigned to men and "meticulous care work" usually assigned to women. Fieldwork across Companies A, B, and Z revealed that while corporate service agreements frame cleaning duties as gender-neutral operational tasks, daily workplace assignments are rigidly organized along gendered lines. Managers, site supervisors, and clients systematically mobilize naturalized assumptions regarding male physical stamina and female domestic competence. This results in a dual labor regime that segregates workers by task, spatial location, and physical risk.

GENDERED TASK ALLOCATION MATRIX	
Male Janitors: External and Heavy • Industrial Floor Buffers • Waste Compactor Operation • High-Pressure Patio Washing • Clearing Clogged Gutters • Bulky Furniture Transport • Heavy Furniture Relocation	**Female Janitors: Internal & Care** • Residential Deep-Cleaning • Bathroom & Sanitary Unit Detailing • Kitchen Appliance & Surface Detailing • Interior Dusting & Space Organizing • Interactive Client Care & Hospitality

Figure 5. Gendered Task Allocation Matrix

Source: Fieldwork data (May–August 2026).

Male Janitors: Heavy Machinery, Mechanical Hazards, and Spatial Exteriority

Male janitors were consistently deployed to exterior, high-risk, or mechanically demanding spaces. Tasks requiring the operation of heavy industrial machinery such as 45-kilogram single-disc rotary floor scrubbers, high-pressure water jets, and commercial carpet extractors were assigned exclusively to men. Supervisors justified this distribution by pointing to male physical strength, treating the male body as an expendable instrument of heavy physical labor.

Field observations at Company A’s commercial mall contract in Selangor captured this dynamic during a night-shift floor-stripping operation:

> **FIELDWORK EXCERPT** May 28, 2026 – Commercial Mall Site, Selangor
> At 9:30 PM, after the retail stores closed, the supervisor, Mr. Yusof, assigned Budi (39, Male) and Agus (36, Male) to strip and wax the central atrium concourse. Budi was tasked with guiding a heavy 17-inch industrial floor buffer using chemical stripping solvent without protective rubber boots or respiratory masks. The machine vibrated violently against the slick tile floor, requiring continuous upper-body exertion to maintain control. When Agus requested a rotation to lighter dusting so Budi could rest his arms, Mr. Yusof refused, stating: *"Mesin ini berat, kena orang lelaki pegang. Perempuan mana lah larat nak kawal mesin ni"* (“This machine is heavy; it requires a man to hold it. Where would a woman get the strength to control this machine?”). Budi operated the buffer continuously for four and a half hours sustained only by a short tea break.

Male janitors were also assigned to dirty, high-risk spatial zones, including waste compactor rooms, building drainage channels, and exterior facade cleaning at elevated heights. This physical load resulted in chronic physical wear. Budi described the long-term bodily toll of operating unmaintained machinery:

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> *"The rotary buffer shakes your whole body from your wrists up to your shoulders. By the third hour, your hands go numb from the vibration. But if you stop or slow down, the supervisor says you are lazy. Because we are men, they think we don't feel exhaustion. If a man complains about back pain, others laugh and say, 'You're a man, how can you be weak? So, we just swallow the pain." (Budi, Male, 39)*

Female Janitors: Domesticity, Detailing, and Emotional Labor

Conversely, female janitors were placed inside corporate offices, executive suites, and private residential units. Their work centered on detailed interior maintenance such as polishing sanitary fittings, sanitizing restrooms, wiping appliance grease, and arranging furniture. Management framed this work as a natural extension of women's innate domestic abilities, erasing the physical effort required for detailed cleaning.

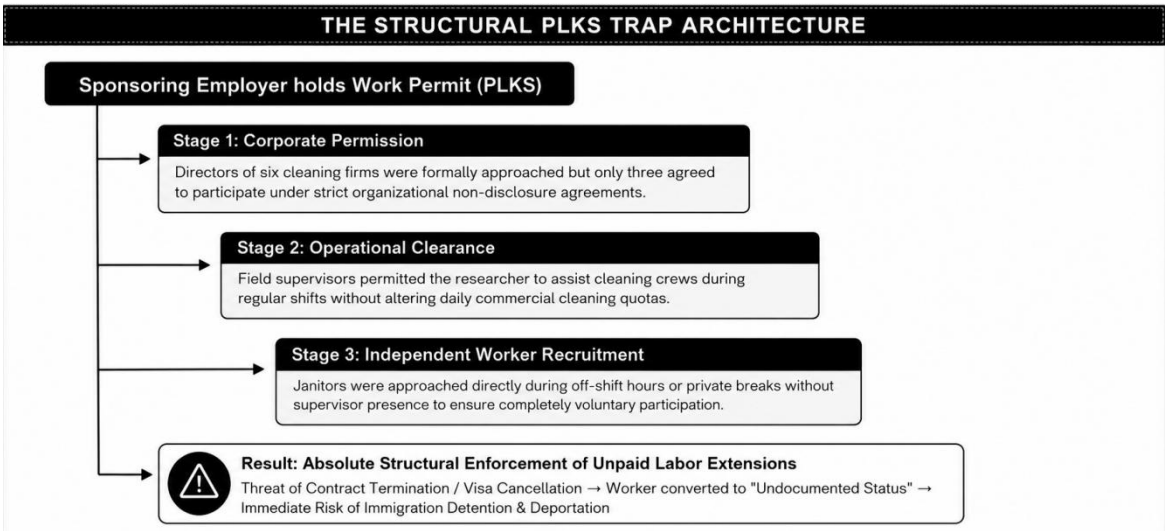
At Company B's high-end residential sites in Selangor, female cleaners were subjected to strict visual inspections by site managers and homeowners. Female janitors were expected to deliver spotless surfaces while maintaining an accommodating, soft-spoken, and deferential demeanor.

> **FIELDWORK EXCERPT** June 19, 2026 – Condominium Deep-Cleaning Site, Selangor
> Siti (37, Female) and Dewi (40, Female) were assigned to deep-clean a 2,200-square-foot duplex apartment following renovations. The assignment required scrubbing fine grout lines on knees using handheld grout brushes, removing paint splatters with razor scrapers, and polishing floor-to-ceiling glass balconies. Throughout the six-hour shift, the unit owner hovered in the apartment, pointing out minor dust specks on ceiling fan blades and demanding that the kitchen cabinets be wiped three times. Despite the high heat and physical strain, both women bowed slightly whenever addressing the owner, using soft tones and responding with *"Baik, puan, kami cuci semula"* ("Yes, ma'am, we will wash it again").

This interaction illustrates the double burden borne by female janitors: they must execute strenuous physical cleaning while simultaneously performing emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). Unlike male janitors working in isolated mechanical areas or exterior bays away from clients, female janitors work under direct supervision, where physical deference, smiles, and emotional management are mandatory job requirements.

4.2 Intersectional Precarity and the Legal Binding of the PLKS Visa System

The precarity experienced by Indonesian janitors is shaped by the intersection of gender, lower-class migrant status, and the legal constraints of Malaysia's *Pas Lawatan Kerja Sementara* (PLKS) visa framework. Under the PLKS system, a migrant worker's legal residence is tied directly to a single sponsoring employer. Quitting a job or being terminated results in the immediate cancellation of the work permit, transforming the worker into an undocumented migrant subject to detention and deportation (Low, 2021; Palmer, 2020).



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Figure 6. The Structural PLKS Trap Architecture

Source: Fieldwork data (May–August 2026).

Uncompensated Labor Extensions and Managerial Coercion

This legal structure creates an asymmetric power dynamic that cleaning agency managers actively exploit. Field observations revealed that supervisors routinely use the threat of visa cancellation to enforce unpaid overtime, expand job scopes, and suppress workplace grievances. During fieldwork with Company Z in June 2026, an unexpected client request highlighted how legal status prevents workers from declining additional work:

> **FIELDWORK EXCERPT** July 11, 2026 – Corporate Office Tower, Kuala Lumpur
> At 4:47 PM fifteen minutes before the end of a ten-hour shift, a corporate client requested that all corporate restrooms on two additional floors be disinfected before an executive event the following morning. The field supervisor, Mr. Lee, instructed Ningsih (48, Female) and Titi (39, Female) to complete the extra floors. When Ningsih gently pointed out that their shift ended at 5:00 PM and that they had to catch the company transport van back to their house, Mr. Lee responded sharply: *"You don't want to do? I can call HQ, chop your permit, and send you back to Indonesia next week. Don't be lazy."* Without further argument, Ningsih and Titi gathered their cleaning carts and worked until 6:30 PM without additional pay.

During a subsequent interview, Ningsih explained the structural logic behind her compliance:

> *"We cannot say no. The company holds our passport and controls our permit renewals. If we complain about extra work or unpaid hours, the manager marks us as 'troublemakers. In Indonesia, my family has debts from paying the employment agent to get me here. If I get sent home early, my family loses everything. So, when the supervisor threatens our permit, we swallow our anger and keep working." (Ningsih, Female, 48)*

Gendered Compounding of Legal Vulnerability

This legal entrapment interacts with gender roles in distinct ways for female and male workers. For male workers, legal precarity manifests as enforced exposure to occupational hazards. Male janitors reported being directed to clear clogged, overflowing sewage pipes or apply concentrated chemical strippers without basic personal protective equipment (PPE). Refusing hazardous work is framed by supervisors as insubordination, placing their work permits at risk. Apart from that, for female workers, legal precarity compounds domestic gender socialization. Clients frequently request additional personal chores such as hand-washing personal laundry, ironing clothes, or washing private vehicles that fall outside formal commercial contracts. Fearing that a negative client review will jeopardize their job security, female cleaners comply with these demands.

INTERSECTIONAL IMPACT DYNAMICS	
Female Janitors: Task Creep • Uncompensated personal chores • Unpaid residential ironing and washing • Silent compliance to protect	**Male Janitors: Safety Violation** • Hazardous sewage maintenance • Unprotected chemical handling • High-risk facade work without proper safety equipment

Figure 7. Intersectional Impact Dynamics of Legal Vulnerability

Source: Fieldwork data (May–August 2026).

Agus also described being ordered to clear an overflowing septic drainage pit at a commercial site without gloves or boots:

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> *"The smell was overwhelming, and raw sewage was leaking onto the concrete floor. I asked the supervisor for rubber boots and long gloves, but he told me there were none in the van. He said, "If you don't clean it now, the client will terminate our contract, and I will report you to immigration." I had to clear the clog using bare plastic bags wrapped around my hands. You feel completely degraded, like you are less than human, but your visa ties your hands." (Agus, Male, 36)*

4.3 The Visibility and Recognition Paradox: Structural Erasure vs. Micro-Paternalism

A central empirical contribution of this study is the conceptualization of the visibility/recognition paradox. Fieldwork demonstrated that Indonesian migrant janitors exist in a dual social reality that they face functional social erasure in corporate and public spaces, yet receive personalized, micro-paternalistic gestures of recognition in private residential settings.

THE VISIBILITY AND RECOGNITION PARADOX	
1. Public and corporate spaces (Spatial invisibility) • Depersonalized "non-personhood" during routine operations. • Verbal avoidance: lack of greetings or direct eye contact. • Hyper-visibility only during operational failures or hygiene slip-ups.	**2. Private residential spaces (Micro-paternalistic recognition)** • Personalized tipping (RM10–RM50), especially during festive seasons. • Provision of home-cooked meals, cold drinks, and packaged snacks. • Informal adjustments allowing rest breaks during intense heat.

Figure 8. The Visibility and Recognition Paradox

Source: Fieldwork data (May–August 2026).

Corporate Public Sphere: Spatial Invisibility and Depersonalized Non-Personhood

In high-end corporate towers, retail malls, and commercial spaces, janitors experience systemic social invisibility. Office workers, shoppers, and building management treat cleaners as functional non-entities present to maintain environmental hygiene, but absent as social beings.

Field logs recorded numerous instances of spatial erasure. Building occupants routinely walked within inches of sweeping janitors without making eye contact, stepped directly over freshly mopped floors, or threw trash into bins while janitors were replacing the plastic liners.

> **FIELDWORK EXCERPT** July 26, 2026 – Corporate Mall, Selangor
> While Sri (35, Female) was kneeling on the floor cleaning dirty stainless-steel elevator tracks with a detail toothbrush, office workers stepped over her extended legs without acknowledging her presence. Over a two-hour period, approximately twenty-three individuals entered the elevator bank; not one made eye contact, said *"excuse me"*, or acknowledged her position on the floor. Sri adjusted her body continuously to avoid being stepped on, maintaining a lowered gaze throughout.

Sri reflected on this routine spatial erasure during an interview:

> *"When you put on this uniform, you become invisible. People look through you, not at you. They see the yellow 'Caution: Wet Floor' sign, but they don't see the person holding the mop. It's as if we are part of the wall or the furniture. You are only noticed if a toilet is blocked or a bin spill over. When everything is clean, you don't exist to them." (Sri, Female, 35)*

Private Residential Sphere: Micro-Paternalism, Tipping, and Tactical Hospitality

In private residential spaces such as landed homes and residential condominiums), this structural erasure gives way to a different dynamic. In these intimate settings, homeowners directly observe the physical effort required to restore dirty living spaces. Consequently, janitors frequently receive direct, personalized gestures of recognition and hospitality.

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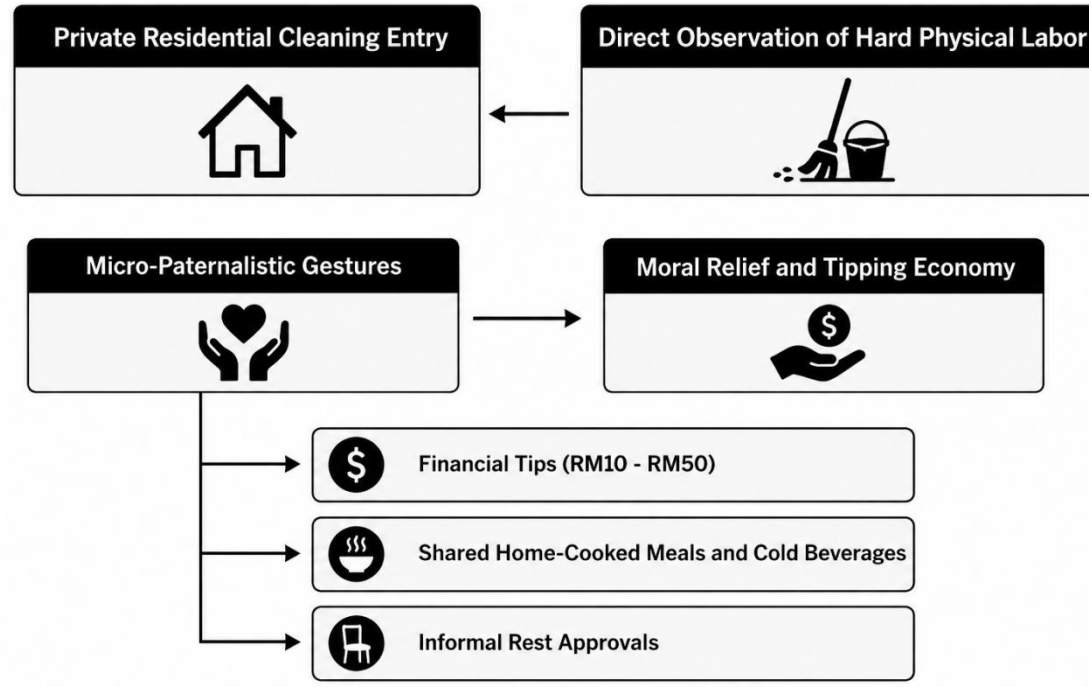


Figure 9. Micro-Paternalistic Recognition Pathway in Private Residential Spaces

Source: Fieldwork data (May–August 2026).

Fieldwork with residential deep-cleaning teams revealed an informal tipping and gifting economy that provides essential material and psychological relief:

> **FIELDWORK EXCERPT** August 9, 2026 – Condominium Residential Site, Selangor
> After Endang (49, Female) and Sudar (38, Male) spent five hours deep-cleaning a ceiling-high kitchen covered in heavy oil residue, the homeowner, a middle-aged Malaysian woman brought out two cold cans of grass jelly drink and two containers of fried noodles. Before the workers departed, she handed each worker a RM 20 tip, saying: *"Terima kasih banyak, Kak. Rumah saya dah bersih sangat. Pergi minum air, rehat dulu"* ("Thank you so much, Sister. My house is very clean now. Go drink water and rest first").

Participant accounts confirmed that such micro-paternalistic acts are common in residential settings, especially during major cultural holidays like Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Chinese New Year, and Deepavali:

> *"In big corporate offices, nobody speaks to you. But when we clean private houses, the owners often see how hard we work. They buy us lunch, give us cold fruit juice, and give us extra tips. Last Chinese New Year, one client gave me a RM50 angpow because I helped her polish all her brass dining sets. It makes you feel human again. It shows that someone sees your sweat." (Endang, Female, 49)*

Analytical Synthesis of the Paradox

Crucially, this recognition does not dismantle underlying structural inequalities or legal vulnerabilities. Instead, it functions as micro-paternalistic compensation. These informal acts of client generosity provide material support and temporary emotional validation, helping workers manage the strain of workplace precarity. However, because these gestures depend entirely on individual client goodwill, they leave the broader framework of subcontracted exploitation, low wages, and visa-linked precarity intact.

Moreover, faced with structural precarity, legal constraints, and occupational stigma, Indonesian migrant janitors do not act as passive victims. Instead, they exercise agency through informal workplace support networks, subtle counter-tactics, and transnational identity work.

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INFORMAL AGENCY AND SURVIVAL MATRIX		
Horizontal Peer Solidarity • Skill sharing: senior workers teach ergonomic, time-saving techniques. • Workload swapping: men handle heavy lifting and women manage detailing. • Emotional pooling: shared meals and mutual support during breaks.	**Re-Signifying "Dirty Work"** • Reframing janitorial labor as skilled, essential, and honorable work. • Moral superiority over idle or unhygienic practices.	**Transnational Breadwinning Framework** • Locating personal self-worth in children's education and family homes. • Constructing social status around achievements in home communities.

Figure 10. Informal Agency and Survival Matrix

Source: Fieldwork data (May–August 2026).

Horizontal Peer Solidarity and On-Site Mutual Aid

To survive physical exhaustion and managerial pressure, janitors established informal networks of mutual support based on shared Indonesian origins. These networks operate during shift breaks, transit times, and off-site hours, serving as crucial spaces for sharing survival strategies and offering emotional support. On work sites, experienced janitors actively instruct newcomers in time-saving cleaning routines, ergonomic movements, and strategies for managing demanding supervisors.

During fieldwork with Company Z, observed teams routinely redistributed workloads on site to protect exhausted colleagues:

> **FIELDWORK EXCERPT** August 15, 2026 – Corporate Office Tower, Kuala Lumpur
> During a short 15-minute lunch break behind a stairwell, Yanti (41, Female) mentioned that her lower back was aching after scrubbing bathroom tiles for three hours. Without being prompted, Sudar (38, Male) offered to swap his remaining assignment which is mopping corridors with a wide dust mop with Yanti's bathroom assignment, taking over the heavy scrubbing himself. Meanwhile, Yanti took over Sudar's corridor mopping. The swap was executed quietly without informing the site supervisor.

Sudar explained the necessity of this peer solidarity during an interview:

> *"We are all far from home, living in the same cramped hostels. If we don't look out for each other, nobody else will. When a sister is tired or sick, the men take over the heavy scrubbing. When we don't know how to remove a stubborn stain on a glass wall, the women show us the right chemical mix. We survive in Malaysia because we act as one family." (Sudar, Male, 38)*

Re-Signifying "Dirty Work" and Constructing Transnational Pride

To manage occupational stigma, workers actively reframe their daily labor. Rather than internalizing the label of "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1958), janitors re-signify cleaning as an essential, skilled, and morally upright profession. They contrast their honest earnings with dishonest financial gain, constructing narratives of moral self-worth.

Murni (42, Female) articulated this moral reframing:

> *"People look down on janitors and think anyone can mop a floor. But cleaning is a real skill. You need to know which chemicals dissolve grease without destroying marble, how to work fast without damaging property, and how to stay patient. We earn honest, halal money through hard physical work. We don't steal, and we don't beg. Without us, these beautiful towers would be covered in filth within two days." (Murni, Female, 42)*

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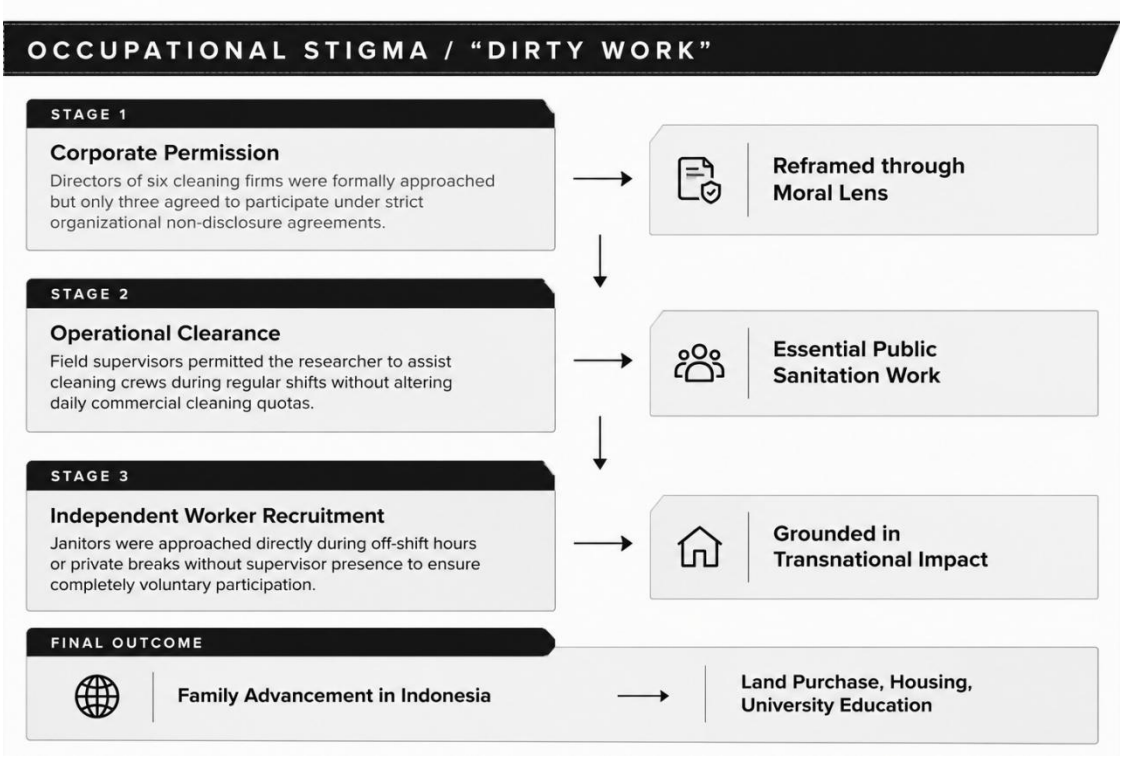


Figure 11. Re-Signifying "Dirty Work" through Moral Reframing and Transnational Impact

Source: Fieldwork data (May–August 2026).

Finally, workers maintain psychological resilience by anchoring their identities in their roles as transnational family providers. They view their daily physical sacrifices in Malaysia as temporary acts of devotion to secure economic mobility for their families in Indonesia. By evaluating their self-worth against long-term achievements in their home communities such as purchasing agricultural land, constructing family homes, or funding children's university education janitors successfully distance themselves from local occupational stigma:

> *"When I feel degraded by a supervisor or exhausted by the work, I looked at the photos of my daughters on my phone. My eldest daughter is studying at a university because of the money I send home every month from cleaning here. When people in Malaysia treat me like a low-class janitor, I remind myself: back home, I am a mother building a future for her children. Their respect doesn't matter… my children's future is what gives me dignity." (Siti, Female, 37)*

Through these informal support practices, moral reframing, and transnational family commitment, Indonesian migrant janitors actively exercise agency. They navigate the structural constraints of Malaysia's migrant labor regime, carving out personal dignity within a precarious service economy.

5. Discussion

The empirical findings of this study advance contemporary debates across social anthropology, gender studies, and Asian migration research by revealing how gender norms, temporary legal regimes, and occupational stigma interact within Malaysia's subcontracted cleaning sector. Rather than treating migrant precarity as a monolithic condition of economic disadvantage, this discussion interprets the daily realities of Indonesian janitors through an anthropological lens mapping the cultural logics, moral economies, and structural contradictions that give meaning to their labor. By placing these empirical insights into direct dialogue with the theoretical literature, this section uncovers how macro-level

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migration architectures are operationalized, embodied, and contested within the intimate, micro-spatial landscapes of everyday work.

Table 3. Theoretical Dialogue Matrix

Discussion Theme	Theoretical Contribution
5.1 Re-Theorizing Gendered Labor through Anthropologies of the Body	Extends Acker (2006) & Grimshaw et al. (2021) by analyzing how subcontractors weaponize gendered corporeal essentialism.
5.2 Intersectional Precarity & the Cultural Logic of the PLKS Regime	Builds on Crenshaw (1989) & Low (2021) to show how legal tying transforms gendered deference into uncompensated structural extraction.
5.3 The Visibility/Recognition Paradox and Micro-Paternalist Economies	Reconceptualizes Ashforth & Kreiner (1999) by contrasting corporate erasure with residential tipping economies.
5.4 Performative Agency, Moral Economies, & Transnational Selfhood	Synthesizes Butler (1990) & Koh (2022) to trace how workers re-signify stigmatized labor into honorable halal provisioning.

Source: Author's own analysis.

5.1 Re-Theorizing Gendered Labor: Essentialism and Anthropologies of the Body

Feminist organizational scholarship has long established that formal labor markets reproduce social inequalities through gendered task allocation and hierarchical segregation (Acker, 2006; Connell, 2021). However, while foundational literature primarily examined fixed corporate bureaucracies, these findings reveal how flexible, subcontracted service networks actively operationalize gender essentialism as a primary tool of operational efficiency. Subcontracting agencies in Malaysia capitalize on naturalized cultural assumptions about male and female bodies to streamline labor deployment and meet rigid service-level agreements without investing in formal skills training (Grimshaw et al., 2021).

SUBCONTRACTED GENDER ESSENTIALISM	
Female Domestic Naturalization	**Male Corporeal Utility**
• Inherent domestic meticulousness. • Spatial containment in interior zones. • Enforced affective/emotional performance.	• Naturalized physical stamina. • Expendable mechanical instruments. • Exposure to high-risk hazards & sewage.

Figure 12. Subcontracted Gender Essentialism

Source: Author's own analysis of fieldwork data.

Interpreted anthropologically through the body, labour assignments become physical manifestations of gendered expectations. Male janitors are reduced to disposable units of physical power. Assigned exclusively to high-vibration floor buffers, waste compactors, and hazardous outdoor drainage, their bodies absorb structural wear to protect corporate client infrastructure. This aligns with and extends recent research on male migrant vulnerability in Southeast Asia (Datta & Yeoh, 2023; Elias & Sarkar, 2021), demonstrating that dominant masculine expectations, the imperative to remain silent, endure physical pain, and perform dangerous labour act as mechanisms of structural extraction rather than privileges (Hu, 2021).

Conversely, female janitors face a cultural logic that frames meticulous interior cleaning not as acquired technical labour, but as a natural extension of female domesticity. Confined to office interiors and private residences, female cleaners navigate intense behavioural, aesthetic, and emotional surveillance. They must execute strenuous physical labour such as scrubbing floor grout on hands and knees while maintaining a calm, soft-spoken, and deferential demeanour. This gendered segregation reveals a core contradiction in modern service work where female janitors are subjected to continuous visual scrutiny, yet their physical effort is culturally rendered "invisible" as mere domestic instinct. Male janitors, meanwhile, are granted spatial independence in exterior zones, but pay for it through unchecked physical strain and hazard exposure.

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5.2 Intersectional Precarity and the Cultural Logic of the PLKS Regime

This study confirms the analytical utility of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Koh, 2022) by showing how gender, class, foreign nationality, and temporary legal status intersect to construct workplace powerlessness. Within the Malaysian labor regime, the *Pas Lawatan Kerja Sementara* (PLKS) visa framework legally binds migrant workers to a single sponsoring employer (Low, 2021; Palmer, 2020). Anthropologically, this immigration architecture functions as a system of institutionalized capture, transforming state-enforced legal vulnerability into daily workplace compliance.

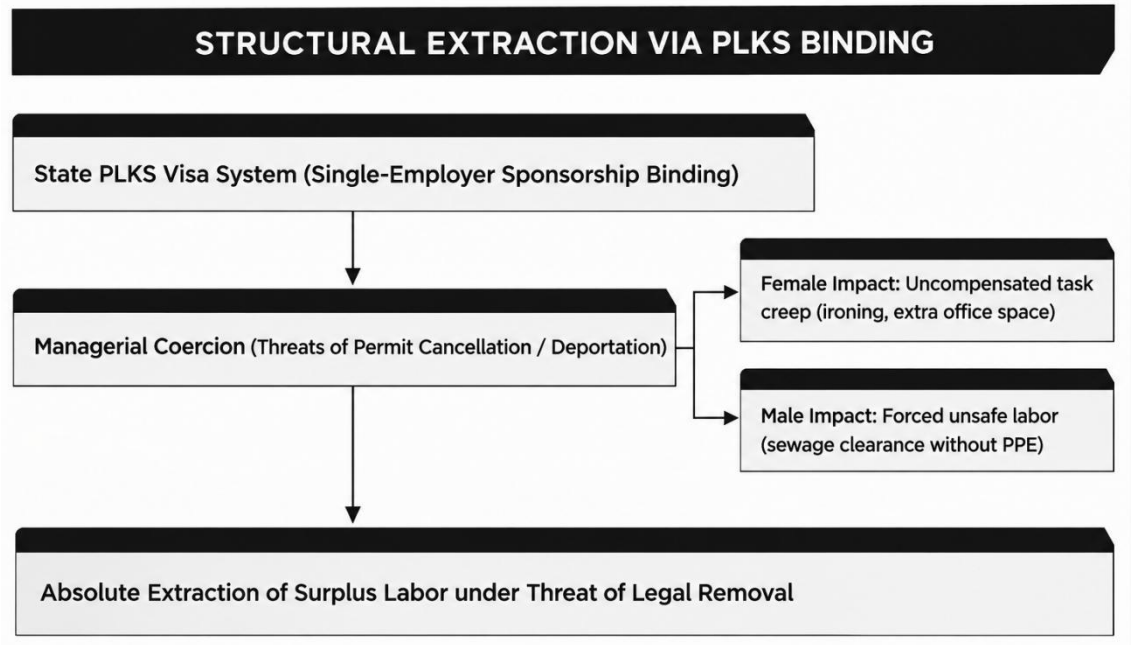


Figure 13. Structural Extraction via PLKS Binding

Source: Author's own analysis of fieldwork data.

The empirical evidence demonstrates how this legal precarity shapes daily gender performances (Kilkey & Urzi, 2021; Parreñas et al., 2021). When field supervisors threaten to cancel visas (*"chop your permit"*) in response to worker resistance, they mobilize state migration policies to enforce unpaid labour extensions and suppress complaints.

This intersectional pressure operates through distinct gendered channels. For female cleaners, cultural expectations of female submissiveness combine with legal precarity to produce uncompensated "task creep". They accept additional domestic chores such as washing personal laundry or ironing for residential clients not out of willingness, but because refusing risks employer retaliation and deportation. Then, for male cleaners, legal precarity forces them to accept unsafe working conditions. They perform high-risk tasks, such as clearing raw sewage lines without protective gear because their legal right to remain in the country depends entirely on supervisor approval. Legal precarity thus acts as a force multiplier as it converts traditional gender norms from social expectations into enforced mechanisms of labor extraction.

5.3 The Visibility/Recognition Paradox and Micro-Paternalist Economies

A central theoretical contribution of this study is the formulation of the visibility/recognition paradox, which refines classical theories of "dirty work" and occupational stigma (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1958). Classical literature often presents stigmatized service labour as characterized by uniform social devaluation, overt hostility, or continuous degradation (Barbour & Lammers, 2015; Simpson et al., 2012).

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However, the ethnographic evidence reveals a more complex reality where janitors experience structural social erasure in public and corporate spaces, alongside intimate, micro-paternalistic recognition in private residential spaces.

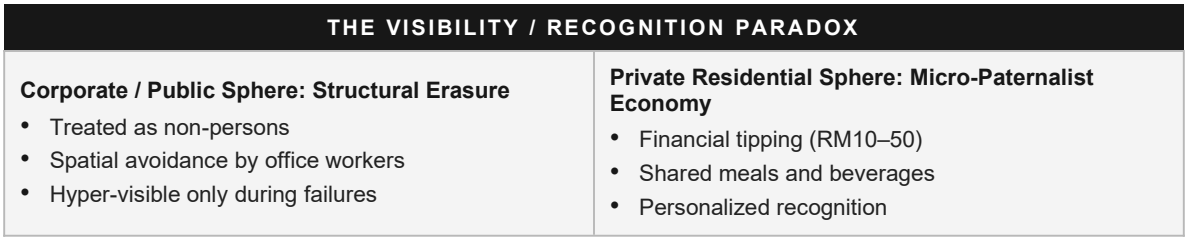


Figure 14. The Visibility/Recognition Paradox across Corporate and Residential Spheres

Source: Author's own analysis of fieldwork data.

In corporate offices and commercial malls, janitors encounter a cultural logic of spatial erasure. Office workers and shopping mall visitors look through cleaners, stepping over them or ignoring their presence. The migrant janitor becomes a functional non-personal background fixture necessary for environmental hygiene but denied full social presence. They become hyper-visible only when a system fails like a clogged toilet, an unemptied bin, or a slippery floor.

In private residential spaces, this dynamic shifts. When homeowners directly observe the intense physical effort required to restore their living spaces, they frequently respond with informal gestures of hospitality: offering cold drinks, sharing home-cooked meals, granting rest breaks, and handing out cash tips (*angpow*). Anthropologically, these exchanges function as a moral economy of micro-paternalism. In private settings, witnessing direct physical exertion creates moral discomfort for middle-class clients. Informal gifts and tips serve to alleviate this discomfort, re-humanizing the interaction through personal generosity.

Table 4. Comparison of Corporate/Public and Private Residential Spheres

Dimension	Corporate / Public Sphere	Private Residential Sphere
Social Perception	Functional non-personhood; structural erasure	Individualized recognition; paternalistic care
Client Interaction	Spatial avoidance; zero eye contact	Direct conversation; shared food/drinks
Visibility Logic	Visible only during operational failures	Visible through observed physical labour
Economic Mechanism	Strict contractual wage suppression	Informal tipping economy (RM10–RM50 tips)
Structural Effect	Reinforces social distance and class hierarchy	Offsets moral discomfort without altering wages

Source: Fieldwork data (May–August 2026).

Yet, a critical analytical contradiction emerges when these micro-paternalistic acts do not dismantle structural exploitation. Tipping, food sharing, and kind words provide genuine psychological relief and material support to workers, helping them endure difficult conditions. However, because these gestures rely entirely on individual client goodwill, they leave the broader framework of low subcontracted wages, legal visa dependence, and systemic precarity completely intact. Micro-paternalism softens the emotional strain of dirty work, but ultimate economic and legal control remains unchanged.

5.4 Performative Agency, Moral Economies, and Transnational Identity

Finally, the findings support Giddens' (1991) theory of reflexive identity and Butler's (1990) concept of performativity by demonstrating that Indonesian migrant janitors are active agents rather than passive victims. Navigating restrictive migration regimes and occupational stigma, janitors construct

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sophisticated counter-narratives of dignity, moral worth, and horizontal solidarity (Dick, 2005; Hewison, 2020).

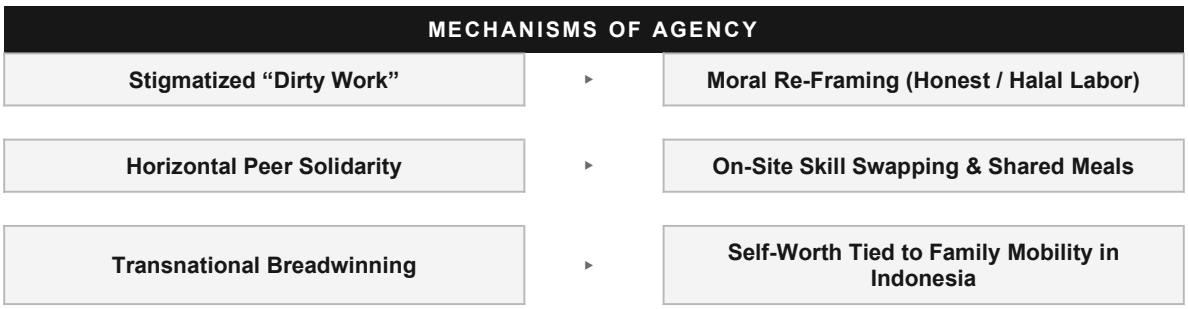


Figure 15. Agency Mechanisms of Indonesian Migrant Janitors

Source: Author’s own analysis of fieldwork data.

In their daily routines, Indonesian migrant janitors active respond to the constraints of the Malaysian labour regime, demonstrating that they are not merely passive victims of exploitation, but strategic actors capable of constructing meaningful agency. This agency manifests through three distinct cultural mechanisms which is horizontal peer solidarity, the moral re-framing of stigmatized labour, and a commitment to transnational family breadwinning.

First, on active job sites, janitors cultivate informal, origin-based support networks to buffer the physical tolls of heavy labour and manage rigid supervisor expectations. Far from working in isolation, senior cleaners quietly mentor newcomers, teaching them ergonomic body movements and chemical dilution shortcuts that reduce physical exertion and speed up cleaning cycles. When severe fatigue or physical pain threatens a colleague's capacity to complete an assignment, male and female janitors subtly swap tasks without notifying site management. By rebalancing labour such as exchanging high-vibration rotary scrubbing or heavy floor stripping for lighter corridor mopping where workers protect one another from physical breakdown. These quiet, daily acts of mutual aid form an informal moral economy of survival that keeps workers safe in a system that views them as replaceable.

Second, janitors actively push back against the occupational stigma attached to “dirty work” by redefining the moral meaning of their labour. Rather than internalizing societal disdain, cleaners reject the lower status assigned to janitorial duties and reframe their work as skilled, essential, and morally upright (*halal*). They distinguish their strenuous physical efforts from dishonest financial gain, taking genuine pride in their specialized understanding of surface maintenance, chemical mixing ratios, and physical endurance. By viewing their daily duties as a critical public service that maintains hygiene in corporate and domestic spaces, janitors assert their moral value within a host society that often overlooks them.

Lastly, janitors locate their primary sense of identity and self-worth beyond the confines of the Malaysian labour market, anchoring their self-concept in their roles as transnational family providers. Everyday physical hardships and micro-aggressions in Malaysia are reframed as necessary, temporary sacrifices made for the long-term advancement of their households in Indonesia. By connecting their daily struggles to tangible achievements back home such as purchasing agricultural land, constructing family homes, or funding their children's university educations so janitors neutralize the social stigma they face at work.

Ultimately, while the Malaysian migration architecture attempts to reduce migrant workers to temporary, disposable economic inputs, Indonesian janitors continuously build meaningful lives across national borders. Through horizontal peer solidarity, moral re-framing, and a dedication to transnational family provision, they maintain their humanity, agency, and personal dignity within a precarious global economy.

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6. Conclusion

This study has examined the gendered, legal, and socio-cultural dynamics shaping the daily experiences of Indonesian migrant janitors within Malaysia's subcontracted cleaning sector. By investigating the intersection of gender norms, temporary legal status (*Pas Lawatan Kerja Sementara*), and occupational stigma, the research demonstrates how workplace precarity is structurally produced, corporealized, and contested.

The empirical findings reveal that subcontracted cleaning agencies operationalize gender essentialism to organize daily tasks, assigning male janitors to heavy, high-risk exterior machinery while confining female janitors to meticulous, highly monitored interior spaces that demand continuous emotional deference. This labor regime is further reinforced by the tied visa framework, which converts structural vulnerability into forced workplace compliance, driving uncompensated task extensions for women and hazardous exposure for men. Simultaneously, the study formulates the "visibility/recognition paradox," illustrating how structural social erasure in corporate environments coexists with micro-paternalistic acts of client appreciation, such as tipping and food sharing, in private residential settings. Faced with these constraints, Indonesian janitors exercise meaningful agency through horizontal peer solidarity, the moral re-framing of "dirty work" into honourable *halal* labour, and an overarching commitment to transnational family breadwinning.

Reflecting on the methodology, the use of qualitative ethnographic methods proved indispensable for uncovering these complex workplace dynamics. Long-term field observations across commercial malls, office towers, and private residences, paired with in-depth interviews and daily field logs, made it possible to capture fine-grained micro-spatial interactions, subtle non-verbal exchanges, and informal survival tactics that quantitative surveys or formal policy reviews consistently miss. Immersing within the spatial environments where cleaning labour occurs allowed for a nuanced understanding of how macro-level migration policies are experienced directly through the worker's body.

At the same time, this study encountered important methodological limitations and field challenges. Accessing commercial job sites and private residences required navigating strict gatekeeping by site supervisors and agency management, which occasionally restricted observation times and limited access to more highly controlled corporate spaces. Language dynamics, power asymmetries between the researcher and participants, and the pervasive fear among migrant workers regarding visa cancellation required careful ethical navigation, trust-building, and flexible scheduling around workers' demanding shifts. Furthermore, as a qualitative study centered on specific subcontracted sites in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, the findings offer rich contextual depth rather than statistical generalizability across the entire migrant labour landscape in Malaysia.

Building on these insights, future research should expand the empirical scope by conducting comparative studies across other subcontracted service industries, such as security, hospitality, and industrial maintenance. Longitudinal research tracking migrant janitors after their return to Indonesia would also provide valuable insight into the long-term socio-economic mobility generated by transnational remittances. Finally, future studies should explore the perspectives of subcontracting management and regulatory bodies to better understand how policy interventions might reform tied visa systems and foster safer, more equitable working conditions for migrant service workers throughout the region.

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