

Always present, never seen: Precarity and cleaning work in a Sri Lankan university

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This study examines the political economy of precarious cleaning labour within the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. Drawing on our long-term observations as faculty members and on qualitative research with cleaners, supervisors, academic staff, students, and community members, the paper situates the lived experiences of these workers within broader neoliberal transformations in Sri Lanka's labour regime. The cleaners—many beyond retirement age, physically and mentally unfit for the strenuous work they perform—labour under hazardous conditions. They lack basic protective equipment, clean toilets without proper footwear, and handle waste barehanded. Paid only for days worked, without medical leave or insurance, they often continue working despite illness to finance medication. Most come from economically devastated neighbourhoods, marked by drug abuse, crime, and extreme poverty. Interestingly, despite their daily presence, these workers remain socially invisible to much of the university community, with their continued exploitation rationalised as “benevolent” employment. Analytically, the paper engages with neoliberal political economy, Foucault's governmentality, and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics to explore how the state's long retreat from welfare responsibilities—intensified since the structural adjustment era—has enabled forms of labour control that commodify marginalised bodies. In a context of economic crisis and disaster capitalism, these workers' bodies are acknowledged, yet rendered into calculable units of value under neoliberal ethics of “honest work,” productivity, and individual responsibility. The study reveals how precarity is normalised within a premier public university—an institution ostensibly committed to critical thought—highlighting the contradictions of intellectual spaces that overlook the exploitation embedded in their everyday operations.

Keywords: *Precarious labour, Neoliberal governmentality, Cleaning workers*