

The sight of a spick and span office or dust-free ornaments in the living room after the cleaner has worked their magic is often taken for granted. Cleaners beaver away, largely invisible, to make our homes and commercial premises hygienic, neat and tidy.

Their job status, however, was elevated into the spotlight during the pandemic, when those working in hospitals, care homes and public transport were designated key workers in the fight against COVID-19.

While celebrated for their work, this higher profile illustrated the often poor pay and working conditions cleaners face.

Protests were mounted from those who were at the mercy of the minimum wage, and merely entitled to statutory sick pay of £96.35 per week should they become ill – during a time when they were putting themselves at risk to protect the nation's health.

Woman speaks to one woman who is campaigning for better working conditions and pay for those who form the bedrock of every industry.



Why cleaning IS A DIRTY BUSINESS

With hard work and low pay, does the cleaning industry itself need a deep clean? Woman investigates

'WE WERE HEROES DURING THE PANDEMIC'

Antoinette Daniel, 47, is the founder of cleaning company Just Helpers. She is single, and lives in Worthing, West Sussex.

Waking at the sound of my alarm, I hurriedly pushed away the bed sheets and climbed out of bed. At 5am, armed with a brush and cloth, I started at the top of the three-storey townhouse and cleaned my way to the bottom. Then I dusted two lounges, ornaments and surfaces, washed and put away any dishes left overnight in the kitchen, wiped the sinks, the bathroom and the toilet.

It was 1985, I was 11 and my task every morning was to clean the house from top to bottom. I lived with a foster mother and, as she worked nights, I had to make sure the house was clean by the time she returned home. She was a great foster mother but these were the rules in her house, and the two girls who lived here before me had experienced the same.

I'd ended up here because my mother had suffered from schizophrenia and had burnt down our flat when I was seven.

By learning to spot sweep – focusing on where it was dirty rather than sweeping the full room – I managed to get the one-and-a-half hours cleaning down to 30 minutes. Then, every Saturday morning, I washed my clothes in the bath with soap.

While it was exhausting, the cleaning made me strong, and I excelled in sports.

Nowhere to go

When I left my foster family, I went to live with my mother's sister during my A-levels, but when I went off to university, we had a falling out, which meant I had nowhere to go when I came home for the holidays.

So, people from my church would let me stay with them. In return, as I didn't have much money, I'd clean their house and loved seeing the pleasure on their faces when they saw what I'd done.

And I realised that while I was cleaning, I enjoyed the rhythm and the calm, quiet space where I could think. I liked that there was a clear start and end point to cleaning. While my cleaning experience as a child hadn't always been positive, it remained a passion throughout my life.

After I finished university, I worked as a PE teacher for 12 years in secondary schools.



Real life

Antoinette with some of her 51-strong team

Cleaners by numbers

- * In 2019, domestic cleaners and hygiene operatives numbered nearly 600,000. But this figure fell by 88,000 in 2020, owing to the impact of COVID-19.
- * Cleaners contributed £54.5 billion to the UK economy in 2018 – turnover in the industry increased by 28% from 2013-2018.
- * The average hourly rate for a cleaner is £9.31, for an average working week of 37.2 hours. The average hourly rate for employees across the UK is £15.15.
- * A survey showed 61% of people felt reassured that safety measures were being taken seriously when they saw cleaners in public spaces during the day.

work, but I had no idea this was happening in the cleaning industry.

There were tales of sexual harassment, particularly in commercial premises, and some cleaners simply weren't paid by firms. They'd stay in the hope that they'd eventually get their money because they'd already invested so much time. But, inevitably, they wouldn't receive it. This wasn't a rarity, this was a common story among my new colleagues.

Mass mistreatment

Exploitation was rife, especially for people who came from abroad to work here. They'd be given accommodation and transported to and from cleaning jobs. But when pay day arrived, they'd be told most of their salary had been used up on accommodation and transport, so they'd receive significantly less than they'd expected – or nothing.

Having worked in the anti-human trafficking realm, I saw first-hand the exploitation that happens in communities, even those on our doorsteps.

'I have a duty of care and want my company to be ethical'

I was determined that anyone who worked for my agency would have a fair and equitable wage, so I resolved to pay them the London Living Wage. That's currently £11.05 per hour, compared with the

industry's national average of less than £10.

This makes us more expensive, but I have a duty of care to the cleaners and want my company to be ethical. I don't want them to work for the minimum wage.

Cleaning should not be an industry where people are bargaining for the cheapest

But my life changed dramatically when I heard a talk about modern-day slavery.

I gave up my teaching job and helped to set up a local charity in Merton, south-west London, which campaigned against sex trafficking and exploitation of workers.

But it was only part-time work and I needed to boost my income, so I asked around if anyone needed a cleaner.

Some of my friends were shocked when I told them I was looking for cleaning work – typical of people's reactions towards cleaners.

Eventually, one of them lined me up with a neighbour in December 2013, and as word of mouth grew, I took on more clients.

As the business expanded, I recruited more cleaners and formed a management agency, Just Helpers.

It was then that I began to become aware of some of the awful situations that cleaners endured. I had learned about the exploitation of workers through my charity

service – it should be a place where the care, trust, commitment and expertise of cleaners is recognised as an essential and life-enhancing service. And it should be paid at its proper rate.

I now have 51 cleaners in my cleaning management agency working in London – the majority are full-time and 95% of the properties we clean are domestic.

Many approached me when they found out how well they would be treated.

My business turned over £1 million in 2020 and I'm enjoying a career I never dreamt of having when I was that little girl cleaning my foster mother's house. But my main ambition is to make better working conditions and pay for cleaners across the industry.

During the pandemic, the work of cleaners was vital and they continued to put themselves at risk of COVID-19 while lowering the risk for the rest of us. People became aware of just how important cleaners are, but I don't think that awareness will be long-lasting.

I don't want cleaners to go back to being invisible, so I plan to launch a campaign for the government to reduce the amount of VAT from 20% down to 5% to ensure better profit margins. This could be introduced to force all cleaning companies to pay a real, living wage – the same rule was brought in temporarily for the hospitality industry during the pandemic to protect its workers.

Better drawn-up employment contracts would also help. We need to put workers' welfare before profit. I want to revolutionise the cleaning industry.

* justhelpers.co.uk

My ambition is for better working conditions'



CONFESSIONS OF A CLEANER

Antoinette says most of us wouldn't believe the things people leave lying around their homes and expect cleaners to clear up – items such as used condoms, used tampons and mucky sex toys. Here are some of her team's most shocking discoveries.

* We have found lines of cocaine and drug paraphernalia, but we refuse to clear that up because it puts our safety at risk, so we clean around it.

* After cleaning up after a house-share of six men and their partners every two weeks, we decided to end the contract. It was disgusting. There was faeces up the walls of the two bathrooms, and the toilet was awful. There was food all over the

kitchen floor, and, in the end, I felt I couldn't ask one of our cleaners to clean this up, so I told the landlord, 'we are out'.

* One of my cleaners rang me in an agitated state, whispering that she'd locked herself in the bathroom of the house she was cleaning because a man was walking around naked while she dusted. She'd knocked on the door and a man wearing just his underpants had let her in after she explained she was the cleaner. Later, she noticed he was wandering the house naked. I told her to stay on the phone, talk loudly to me and walk out of the house. She did so. We

then found out there'd been a mix-up over the door number in a nearby street. She'd gone to the wrong house!

* I was asked to help a client's mother declutter her home, but when I arrived, I could barely get through the front door. It was a hoarder's home with stuff there from more than 20 years ago. During three months, I befriended the lady and the job turned into a cleaning and low-level counselling job as we talked gently about what could stay and what could go. It was a joy and privilege to see the transformation and clarity being restored to her.

WORDS: MOIRA HOLDEN; PHOTOS: ANNE-MARIE BICKERTON; DAVID MCHUGH/BRIGHTON PICTURES; GETTY; HMU: SHERRIE WARWICK; STYLING: SHARON VALENZUELA; MAKEUP: KAREN MILLEN; HAIR: KAREN MILLEN; ACCESSORIES: RING AND BRACELET: ANTOINETTE'S OWN; SHOES: SIMPLY BE; OUTFIT: Z. TOP AND SKIRT: THE HOUR; SHOES: ASOS; RING: JONRICHARD.COM