

Invisible Logistics: Women Office Cleaners in Bhutan

Roderick Wijunamai

“My mop stick and bucket are like the land my parents own,” Kinley explains,¹ as she narrates her working life as a cleaner. After all, the mop stick and bucket are the source of her livelihood, and the primary means by which to raise her child. What land is to her farming parents, brooms and mop sticks are to Kinley who, along with other such workers, clean Bhutanese office spaces to make a living.

The logistics of cleaning, that is, the organization, distribution and execution of cleaning, is largely disappearing from view across the world – in the sense that it is silent, behind the scenes and taken for granted. More than these acts of logistics, however, it is the human side – the human agency and labour involved (cf. Ehsani 2018) – that becomes even more side-lined, or unimagined, especially the work done by ‘unskilled’ staff. Saskia Sassen (1991) long ago pointed out that the high-rolling advanced sectors in our global cities depend on huge numbers of low-end service workers, from cleaners and janitors to stock clerks, without whom the world economy would come to a halt. It is these seemingly menial labourers that keep corporate offices functional. Yet, despite being the real powerhouse underlying everything else, the human side of the logistics of cleaning and care appears to warrant little attention.



© Karzin, VAST Bhutan.

In fall 2021, I interviewed office cleaners in one of the biggest corporate offices in Thimphu, the capital city of Bhutan. This corporation employs at least fourteen people to clean the offices and client occupancies. All the cleaners are women and more than half among them are spouses of security guards who work for the same corporation. They related that they had taken up the role in consonance to their spouse's job. Kinley is one of the odd ones out in that regard.

Kinley grew up as a cowherd in Eastern Bhutan, and had come to Thimphu with her second husband some time in 2014 in pursuit of better opportunities. She explained that her husband then "ran away" (*jog yasi*²), however, and she was left by herself with her four children. With the help of her uncle, Kinley managed to secure the cleaning job she currently holds. Her responsibilities include cleaning the toilets, clearing the waste bins and sometimes cleaning the drain adjunct to the office compound road. In our conversation in October 2021, she categorized her work as *chabsa chami* ('toilet cleaner'), as opposed to *cham chami* ('sweeper'). Irrespective of the categorization, together these women call themselves – and are known by the organization as – *cham chami* (here indicating 'cleaner' in a general sense). There is no hierarchy among them, but most agree that 'wet cleaning' (*chabsa chani*) – referring to the kind of responsibilities Kinley has – is more arduous. They are obliged to stick to their specific line of work based on the remit for which they were recruited.

Upon recruitment, HR informs the supervisor who then passes the responsibility of teaching the trade on to the cleaners already employed there. The cleaners work in two teams, as *chabsa chami* and as *cham chami*. All of them live in the office compound, and they start their shift cleaning the main offices as early as 6:30 am. They then proceed to the client occupancies, at about the same time the clients leave for work, and remain busy there until early afternoon. All these schedules are arranged so as to keep them and their work invisible throughout. During their rather long lunch breaks, which span nearly three hours, they carry out their own household chores, cook and sometimes rest in their quarters. Following this, they are called to cleaning tasks that are not necessarily routine and are kept occupied thus until the early evening.

Each of the cleaners has a different story to tell, but they all share an insufficiency of income, for which they must make compromises. For Kinley, this means sending her three children away to the monastery and so foregoing the joy of raising them, as well as their companionship. For others, the decision to take up the job stems from the need to supplement their spouse's modest pay. None among them perceived their occupation as a viable sole source of earning. Kinley, for instance, like the other women cleaners, makes use of the corporation's unused land to grow vegetables, a surplus of which is sometimes sold to other staff of the organization to make a little extra money. Despite rural electricity subsidies which give each of them a hundred free units of power, all sweepers resort to collecting firewood from the nearby forest and refrain from using electric heaters. Again, this is to cut costs. With no partner and hence no complementary income, to make ends meet Kinley also has to work on the construction sites, fetching stones, during the office vacation.



© Kanzin, VAST Bhutan.

Another thing that stands out starkly in all of the women cleaners' testimonies is what Hochschild and Machung (2003: 166) call the "the burden of the second shift" – and this is similar to the stories related by Bhutanese women in other sectors as well³ – their struggle to juggle their job with managing a household. On the one hand, they are burdened with the logistics of household chores and various expected gendered responsibilities in their own families, and on the other they have the responsibility of cleaning and maintenance in the offices. They know that both these areas will not function without their labour. What is more, also noticeable are the embedded overlaps in gender, labour and logistics: certain sets of labour and logistics can only be afforded by a certain gender. This is because the recruitments, work patterns and schedules of these low-wage logistic services are structured in a way that conforms to societal gender norms and expectations. According to Yangchen, another of the cleaners, her husband's job has "no proper schedule" (*due tsey ten tsey mey*) like hers, and this makes it all the more difficult to entrust him with household chores.

But why, despite the challenges of low earnings and the family–work balance, do these women prefer to work as office cleaners instead of going back to farming lives in their

villages? Many of them weigh the prospect of a more stable and regular income even on the bottom rung of these corporate offices, which farming does not offer. Unlike the drudgery of farm labour, Karma reasoned, she was “in a better place,” as she did not have to “work under the sun ... and sometimes in an extremely cold weather outside.” Some of the identified push-factors responsible for rural to urban migration in Bhutan, and which some of these women also mentioned, include small land-holdings, difficult terrain, hard physical labour, unpredictable agricultural output and low market accessibility (Pelzom and Katel 2017). Most salient in their stories, however, is the imagined status of a city dweller. Migration from rural villages to urban areas, to work in these corporate settings, gives them a considerable sense of accomplishment and empowerment.

In most cases of rural to urban migration, these women testify, women and children tend to be left behind in the villages. Hence, their ability to come to the capital city, and earn what little they can, gives them a great sense of achievement. With such a perception, or what could be called mythmaking, of pegging their cleaning work against farm labour, the women tend to repress the unpleasant nature of their work, and the low wages they earn. As Yangchen admitted when asked to say one thing she did not like about her job, “I have to wake up early in the morning and reach the office at 6:30 am, before anyone else comes ... I am now used to it, but it still is a little difficult in the winter as it gets very cold.”

When comparing their work to farm labour, these women also emphasize the nature of the work in light of the different tools and equipment involved. They weigh up the conditions under which they must work on the village farm, but do not seem to mind having the most rudimentary of cleaning tools. The corporation where these women are employed boasts about having the most advanced IT facilities, and the latest amenities and infrastructure. And yet there is a stark contrast between the high-tech spectacle of front-end logistical efficiencies and the low-tech back end of manual labour and basic cleaning equipment.

As such, from the corporations’s perspective, so long as the cleaning logistics is fulfilled, it does not really matter how the cleaning is done or what is used in the process. In this, there seems to be a clear difference in logistical relations. On the one hand, the corporate office promotes efficiencies, and on the other inefficiencies are devalued and hidden, as well as feminized. This apathetic attitude towards the “support staff,” as they are termed, is also seen in their exclusion from most social events the organization holds. Almost all the cleaners either never meet the managerial ranks or rarely get to encounter them. Their work world, and largely also their social world, is confined among themselves – or extends just to their immediate male supervisor, whom they perceive as “unnecessarily strict ... never understand[ing] ... and always suspicious” about them. “Even when we are sick, our supervisor is not willing to grant us leave. Instead, he scolds us and tells us that it is because of our recklessness,” so Kinley narrated during our conversation in October 2021.

Amid these side-linings, and in the discharge of their duties, these women cleaners are aware of their essential service in maintaining the office spaces and keeping them functional. “We are usually not seen by anyone. But I can imagine how dirty the offices

would get without us showing up for even just one working day,” Pema said. “In fact, some of us are called in during the lunch hour to clean the toilets and coffee stands, as it becomes very messy,” she added. Such motivations, perceptions and the preference for a regular wage – despite it being insufficient – over unpredictable and difficult farm incomes, sustain the invisible logistics of cleaning in the urban spaces of Thimphu. These invisible cleaners overcome their job inequities through a debilitating myth, weighing it all up against the arduous farm life they would have if not for the cleaning.

Notes:

¹ All names used in this essay are pseudonyms.

² All the vernacular quotes reproduced in this essay are in colloquial Dzongka. I am grateful to my friend Tashi Choden for helping with the translations.

³ See also Roder and Choden 2020.

References:

Ehsani, Kaveh. 2018. “Disappearing the workers: how labor in the oil complex has been made invisible.” In *Working for Oil*, edited by Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini and Kaveh Ehsani, 11–34. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hochschild, Arlie and Anne Machung. 2003 [1989]. *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*. New York: Viking Penguin.

Pelzom, Tshering and Om Katel. 2017. “Youth perception of agriculture and potential for employment in the context of rural development in Bhutan.” *Development, Environment and Foresight* 3 (2): 92–107. <http://def-journal.eu/index.php/def/article/view/53>

Roder, Dolma Choden and Tashi Choden 2020. In *Creating Equality at Home: How 25 Couples around the World Share Housework and Childcare*, edited by Francine M. Deutsch and Ruth A. Gaunt, 121–33. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sassen, Saskia. 1991. *The Global City*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press.

Cite as: Wijunamai, Roderick. 2022. “Invisible Logistics: Women Office Cleaners in Bhutan.” *Roadsides* 7: 37–43. <https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202200706>

Author:



Roderick Wijunamai is a PhD student in the Department of Anthropology, Cornell University. He is also a Visiting Research Fellow at the Highland Insititite, Kohima (Nagaland). Prior to commencing his PhD, Roderick was Lecturer in Sociology and Anthropology at Royal Thimphu College, Bhutan. Roderick's research focuses on ecological changes and food systems in the Indo–Myanmar borderlands. Some of his authored and co-authored essays have appeared in *The India Forum*, *The Caravan*, *The Diplomat*, *Scroll.in* and *Himal Southasian*.

Roadsides is a diamond Open Access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social, cultural and political life of infrastructure.



🌐 roadsides.net
✉ editor@roadsides.net
🐦 [@road_sides](https://twitter.com/road_sides)
📷 [@roadsides_journal](https://www.instagram.com/roadsides_journal)

Editorial Team:

Julie Chu (University of Chicago)
Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam)
Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (University of Fribourg)
Madlen Kobi (Academy of Architecture, Mendrisio)
Galen Murton (James Madison University, Harrisonburg)
Nadine Plachta (University of Toronto)
Matthäus Rest (Max-Planck-Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena)
Alessandro Rippa (LMU Munich and Tallinn University)
Martin Saxer (LMU Munich)
Christina Schwenkel (University of California, Riverside)
Max D. Woodworth (The Ohio State University)

Collection no. 007 was edited by: **Julie Y. Chu** and **Tina Harris**
Managing editors: **Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi** and **Tina Harris**
Copyediting: **David Hawkins**
Layout: **Chantal Hinni** and **Antoni Kwiatkowski**

ISSN 2624-9081

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



Cover design: Creative Direction **Julie Y. Chu**, Illustration **Shahira Bhasha**



University of Zurich
UZH



**Swiss National
Science Foundation**

**UNI
FR**

UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG
UNIVERSITÄT FREIBURG