

CLEAN WORK, UNCLEAN REALITIES: GENDERED CHALLENGES AND THE ROLE OF CLEANERS IN MAINTAINING SAFE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS IN TANZANIA

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Abstract

Their role in maintaining hygiene and safety is critical. The study, although limited to MNMA, offers insights relevant to similar institutions and underscores the need for reforms to ensure fair wages, training, and improved infrastructure. Recognising cleaners' contributions can promote respect and inclusivity in higher education. Cleaners play a pivotal role in maintaining safe and conducive learning environments within higher education institutions.

Keywords: Decent work Cleaners Gender roles Safe learning

Introduction

This study explores the experiences of male and female cleaners at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA), Tanzania, highlighting their contributions to a safe learning environment and the challenges they face in achieving decent work conditions. Using a cross-sectional research design, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from 30 cleaners and two key informants through semi-structured questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, while qualitative data were thematically analysed. Findings reveal a gendered division of labour, with women primarily handling indoor cleaning tasks and men focusing on outdoor maintenance. Cleaners face economic challenges (low wages, salary delays), social issues (disrespect from students), and infrastructural barriers (inadequate equipment). Women cleaners face additional challenges related to societal norms and job insecurity. Despite these challenges, their role in maintaining hygiene and safety is critical. The study, although limited to MNMA, offers insights relevant to similar institutions and underscores the need for reforms to ensure fair wages, training, and improved infrastructure. Recognising cleaners' contributions can promote respect and inclusivity in higher education. Cleaners play a pivotal role in maintaining safe and conducive learning environments within higher education institutions. Despite their essential contributions, they often face undervaluation and inadequate support, leading to challenges such as poor working conditions, low wages, and limited recognition. These issues not only affect the cleaners' well-being but also impact the overall health and experience of students and staff (Chen & Ravallion, 2010; Savolainen, 2023). In Tanzania, the concept of "decent work" encompasses productive employment under conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity. However, many cleaners in higher education institutions, including The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA), do not fully enjoy these conditions. Challenges such as

inadequate training, lack of proper equipment, exposure to hazardous materials, and limited access to resources persist. Addressing these issues is crucial for promoting sustainable development and aligning with national strategies like the National Five-Year Development Plan 2021/22-2025/26, emphasises "Realising Competitiveness and Industrialization for Human Development" and aims to promote decent work by focusing on job creation, skills development, and improving the business environment. (United Republic of Tanzania, 2021). Internationally, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has established conventions and recommendations to promote decent work. The ILO's Decent Work Agenda aims to achieve productive employment and decent work for all, including cleaners in educational institutions. Additionally, the ILO's Convention No. 189, known as the Domestic Workers Convention, sets labour standards for domestic workers, which can be extended to cleaners in institutional settings. This convention emphasizes rights such as daily and weekly rest hours, entitlement to minimum wage, and protection against violence and abuse (International Labour Organization, 2011a, 2011b). Nationally, Tanzania has implemented policies to enhance the quality of higher education and the welfare of its workforce. The National Higher Education Policy (NHEP) of 1999 and the Higher Education Development Programme (HEDP) 2010–2015 aimed to improve higher education quality and accessibility. However, these policies have not sufficiently addressed the working conditions of support staff, including cleaners. The Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) has developed standards and guidelines for university education, but specific provisions for the welfare of cleaners remain limited (Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, 1999; Tanzania Commission for Universities, 2019). This paper investigates the experiences of both female and male cleaners at MNMA in promoting a safe learning environment. It aims to raise awareness about their contributions, the challenges they encounter, and the gender dynamics within cleaning roles. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do female and male cleaners at MNMA perceive the concept of a safe learning environment?
2. What are their daily responsibilities in ensuring such an environment?
3. What gender-specific challenges do they face in fulfilling these responsibilities?

By addressing these questions, the paper aims to highlight the significance of cleaners' roles and advocate for improvements in their working conditions and support systems. Such awareness is anticipated to trigger appropriate interventions to enhance the well-being of cleaners at MNMA and in similar contexts.

In examining the importance of decent work conditions for cleaners at The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA) and their impact on fostering a safe learning environment, two theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant: School Climate Theory and Universal Design for Instruction (UDI).

Literature Review

This section defines key concepts which are; decent work, gender roles and cleaners. It also, reviews two theoretical frameworks; School Climate Theory, which links cleanliness to a positive learning environment, and Universal Design for Instruction (UDI), focusing on creating accessible spaces. It also explores existing research on cleaners' roles, challenges, and gender dynamics, highlighting the gap in understanding cleaners' experiences in Tanzanian higher education.

Key Concepts

Decent work

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines decent work as employment that ensures fair income, security in the workplace, social protection for families, personal development opportunities, and equal treatment (ILO, 2018). It also includes freedom of expression, protection against workplace abuse, and the right to participate in decisions affecting workers (ILO, 2011a). In the context of this paper, decent work for cleaners, involves fair wages, job security, proper working conditions, and respect for their contributions to maintaining a safe learning environment.

Cleaners

Cleaners are workers responsible for maintaining hygiene and sanitation in various settings, including educational institutions, offices, and public spaces (Cleaning & Maintenance Management, n.d.). Their duties typically include sweeping, mopping, waste disposal, disinfecting surfaces, and ensuring a safe environment for students and staff. This definition is adopted in this paper.

Gender Roles

Gender roles refer to the social and cultural norms that define the responsibilities, behaviour, and expectations associated with men and women (Cobb & Herd, 2002). These roles are shaped by historical, economic, and societal factors and often result in gendered divisions of labour. In this paper, gender roles reflect the tasks assigned to women and men cleaners.

Theoretical framework

Theoretical frameworks are essential for understanding phenomena in educational settings. This study uses two theories—School Climate Theory and Universal Design for Instruction (UDI)—to explore the role of cleaners in maintaining a safe learning environment at the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA). School Climate Theory emphasizes the impact of environmental and relational factors on institutional effectiveness, while UDI focuses on creating inclusive and accessible learning spaces (Cornell, 2024; Scott et al., 2002). Together, these theories highlight the importance of cleanliness and accessibility in fostering a supportive educational atmosphere.

School Climate Theory

The Theory focuses on the quality of school life, encompassing norms, values, relationships, and structures (Cornell, 2024). A positive school climate involves safe environments and respectful relationships among students, staff, and faculty. Cleaners play a crucial role in maintaining safety and hygiene, which are foundational to a conducive learning atmosphere. Their work directly impacts the physical safety and well-being of students and staff, influencing the overall school climate (Savolainen, 2023).

Universal Design for Instruction (UDI)

UDI applies universal design principles to create accessible learning environments for all students, including those with disabilities (Scott et al., 2002). It aims to remove barriers to learning while maintaining academic standards. Key components include using diverse instructional strategies and ensuring physical spaces are accessible and require minimal effort. Cleaners contribute by ensuring spaces are safe, accessible, and free of hazards.

At MNMA, UDI principles align with School Climate Theory. Recognizing the importance of cleaners' work, providing proper conditions, training, and equipment helps ensure a safer, more accessible environment. This supports the academic community's diverse needs, enhancing both school climate and learning outcomes.

Empirical literature

Understanding the experiences and challenges of cleaners in higher education institutions is essential for fostering safe and inclusive learning environments. While extensive research highlights the significance of cleanliness in academic performance and well-being, studies focusing on the perceptions, roles, and gender-specific challenges of cleaners remain limited, particularly in African contexts. This section reviews existing literature the role of cleaners in maintaining safe learning environments, with a focus on their perceptions, responsibilities, and the gender-specific challenges they encounter in public institutions.

The perceptions of male and female cleaners regarding safe learning environments in public institutions

Research on cleaners' perceptions of safe learning environments in African countries, including Tanzania, is limited. However, studies highlight the role of cleanliness in fostering safety. For example, Tanzania's Safe School Programme, under the SEQUIP Project, aims to create secure environments but does not address cleaners' roles (Mgomapayo, 2024). Similarly, UNICEF Tanzania focuses on WASH facilities but does not explore cleaning staff perceptions (UNICEF, 2024). Research also links clean environments with improved academic performance, although it doesn't focus on cleaners (Ijrehc, 2023). Globally, studies stress the importance of cleanliness in promoting well-being and academic success. A hygienic environment reduces health risks, improves comfort, and supports students' mental and social development (Pedagogue, 2023). In the Philippines, cleanliness programs involving all stakeholders, including cleaners, were found to improve the learning atmosphere (Uleanya, 2020). While these studies emphasize cleanliness, there's a gap in research on the specific perspectives of cleaners in higher learning institutions in Tanzania, like MNMA. This study provides valuable insights into their role in creating safe, conducive learning environments.

Roles of Female and Male Cleaners

Cleaners play a key role in maintaining safe learning environments in higher education institutions in Tanzania and across Africa. Their responsibilities include disinfecting classrooms, restrooms, and common areas to reduce health risks and improve student well-being. A clean environment enhances students' mental states and academic performance (Higgins, 2025). In Kenya and South Africa, cleaner environments have been linked to better academic outcomes (HRPub, 2020; Uleanya, 2020). While gender roles in cleaning are not well-documented, both male and female cleaners contribute to safety and cleanliness, with tasks shaped by institutional policies and cultural norms. Further research is needed on the responsibilities and challenges faced by cleaners in Tanzanian higher learning institutions (Further research is needed on the responsibilities and challenges faced by cleaners in Tanzanian higher learning institutions (Mgomapayo, 2024; Ecolab, 2021). This study focuses on MNMA.

Gender specific challenges faced by Cleaners in public institutions

Research indicates that female cleaners face gender-specific challenges due to socio-cultural, economic, and workplace factors. These challenges include stigmatization, as sanitation work is often viewed as "women's work" (UN Women, 2018), and caste-based discrimination, especially in countries like India, limiting social mobility

(Patel, 2016). Female cleaners are also exposed to health risks from hazardous work conditions, including waste and unsanitary environments, with inadequate protective equipment increasing their vulnerability to infections (UN Women, 2017).

Economic insecurity is another concern, as many female cleaners work informally, leading to low wages, job instability, and a lack of benefits, impacting their quality of life (Webology, 2023). The perception of cleaning as low-status work limits career advancement and skill development, resulting in job dissatisfaction. There is a research gap on the gender-specific challenges faced by cleaners in Tanzanian higher learning institutions. While general studies address issues like working conditions and health risks, there is limited exploration of how gendered perceptions and social stigma affect female cleaners. The lack of career opportunities and gender-sensitive policies further exacerbates these challenges, highlighting the need for more focused research on improving working conditions and gender equality for female cleaners in Tanzanian public universities.

Method

The study used a cross-sectional design with qualitative and quantitative data from 30 cleaners (17 women, 13 men) at MNMA. Data was collected via semi-structured questionnaires and interviews with key informants. The study aims to assess cleaners' roles, challenges, and perceptions of a safe learning environment. Study Design

A cross-sectional research design was used, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data at a single point in time. This design was chosen for its efficiency in estimating the prevalence of outcomes, cost-efficient, and suitable for studies with limited resources (Kothari, 2019).

Area of Study

The research was conducted at the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA) in Kivukoni, Kigamboni District, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. MNMA was selected as an ideal site due to its structured institutional environment and the presence of a sizable number of cleaning staff. These characteristics provided an appropriate setting for exploring the experiences of male and female cleaners in maintaining a conducive learning environment. However, the study was constrained by an eight-month timeframe and financial limitations, which may have impacted the scope of data collection. Sampling Procedure Purposive and simple random sampling were used. Purposive sampling selected participants with specific knowledge and experience relevant to the study's objectives, while random sampling ensured equal chances of participation. Two Key Informants (KIs) were selected from Kishingweni Company Limited, MNMA's cleaning service provider. Cleaners were randomly chosen to ensure balanced gender representation.

Sample Size

The study involved 30 cleaners, including (17 women and 13 men) representing approximately **85.7%** of the total 35 cleaning staff employed at MNMA. According to Bailey (1998), a sample size of 30 is considered sufficient for statistical analysis in small-scale social studies. Further two key informants were targeted one from the current and another one from the just exited company that provide cleaning services to MNMA.

Data Collection Methods

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools to gain a comprehensive understanding of cleaners' roles and experiences (Kothari, 2019). A semistructured

questionnaire was administered to 30 cleaners, capturing data on job responsibilities, challenges faced, and perceptions of a safe learning environment. In-depth interviews were conducted with the two Key Informants (KIs) to obtain contextual information on labour management, contracts, and expectations from cleaning service providers.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis was carried out in two phases: quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative data from interviews. For the quantitative data, responses were coded and analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means), were used to summarize key variables. Cross-tabulations explored relationships between gender and job roles (Kothari, 2019). For the qualitative data, Interview transcripts were analysed using open coding, followed by thematic/content analysis. Emerging themes—such as employment challenges, gender roles, and perceptions of work conditions—were identified and categorized. These findings were then integrated with quantitative results to provide a holistic understanding of the cleaners' lived experiences at MNMA (Kothari, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

Considering the sensitivity of the decent work topic, the aspect of ethical considerations was considered a paramount issue. Participants were provided informed consent; each participant was assured confidentiality in data processing and was given the freedom to participate or not. Correspondingly, confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Permission to collect information was requested and granted by the office of the Deputy Rector Academic, Research, and Professional Consultation (DRARC).

Results

The Findings section presents the key results of the study, highlighting the socio-demographic characteristics of the cleaners and their gender-specific roles. It discusses the challenges faced by both male and female cleaners, including economic, social, and infrastructural issues, and how these factors affect their ability to maintain a safe learning environment.

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The socio-demographic characteristics of respondents are summarized in Table 1. The study found a higher proportion of women (57%) compared to men, supporting the ILO (2018) assertion that women are more often employed in the informal sector due to barriers such as discrimination, lack of education or training, and gender expectations that limit their roles to domestic chores. Women in informal employment typically face lower wages than both formal workers and men in similar roles (UNESCO, 2021).

Table 1: Characteristics of Respondents

S/No.	Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
1	Sex of respondents		
	Female	17	57
	Male	13	43
	Total	30	100

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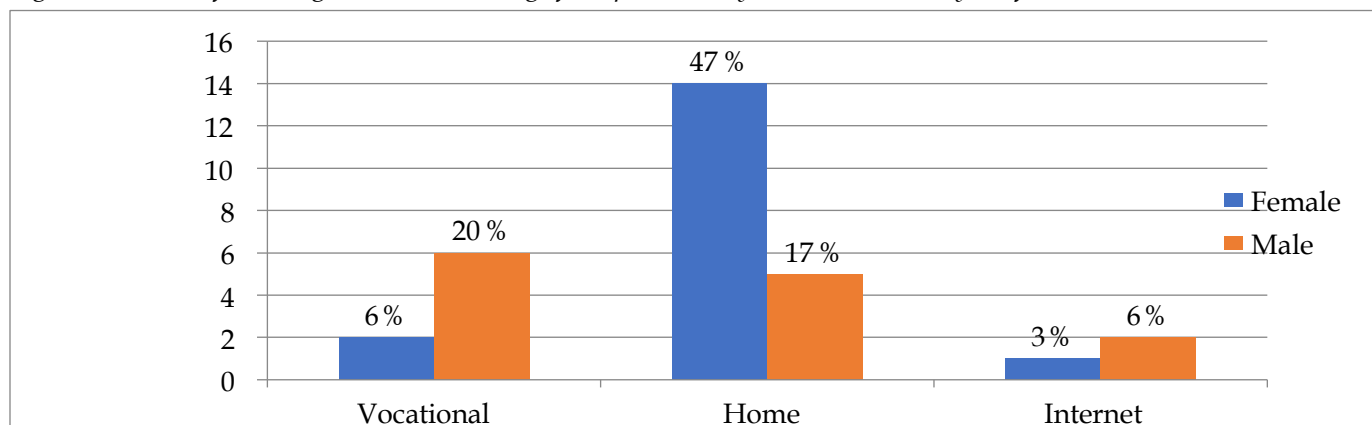
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	Total	30	100
4	Educational level of respondents		
	Primary	4	13
	Secondary	23	77
	Postsecondary	1	3
	Degree	2	7
	Total	30	100
5	Skills and Training attained by respondents		
	Vocational training	8	27
	Home	19	63
	Internet	3	10
Total		30	100
2	Groups of age of respondents		
	18 - 30 years	22	73
	30 - 45 years	8	27
	Total	30	100
3	Marital status of respondents		
	Married	16	53
	Not Married	13	43
	Widow	1	4

Regarding age, 73% of respondents were between 18 and 30, reflecting the lack of formal job opportunities in developing countries, which forces youth into the informal sector for immediate financial needs, despite job insecurity and lower wages (Chen & Ravallion, 2010). On marital status, 53% were married, and 43% unmarried, which aligns with the idea that married individuals often seek flexible informal jobs due to family responsibilities, while unmarried individuals, focused on career advancement, prefer formal employment (Chen & Ravallion, 2010). For education, 77% had completed secondary education, with few having primary, higher, or postsecondary education. Cleaning skills were gained through home training, vocational courses, and online resources, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Source of cleaning skills and training of Respondents by sex: Source: Analysis of Field Data

(2024)

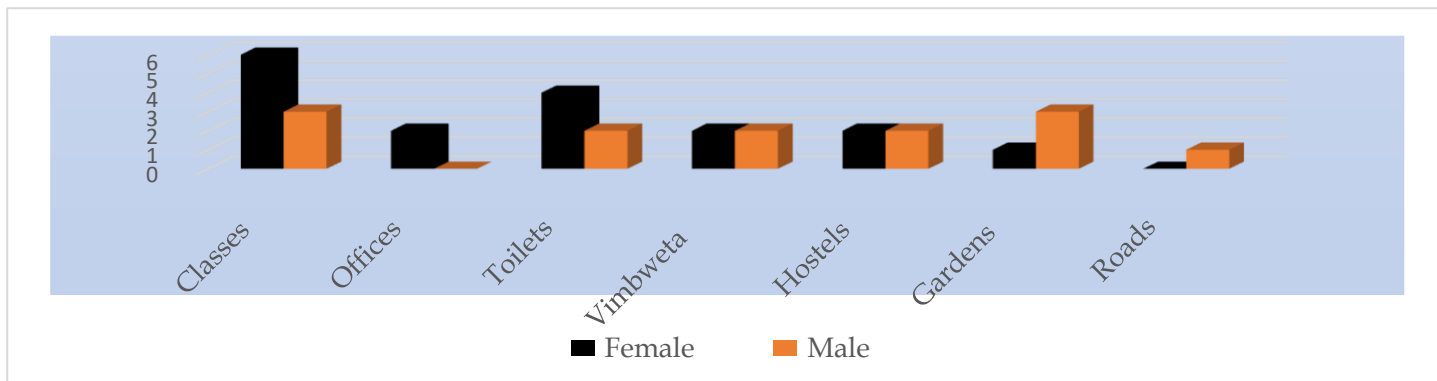


The study found that more women (47%) acquire cleaning skills at home than men (17%), reflecting societal norms that associate cleaning with women's responsibilities. Historically, women have been tasked with household chores, learning cleaning skills from a young age (Bianchi et al., 2000). This cycle, reinforced by media and culture, perpetuates cleaning as a female responsibility. Men, in contrast, typically gain cleaning skills through vocational training in male-dominated industries (Cobb & Herd, 2002). To address this, formal training for women in cleaning and vocational skills is needed. Online resources also play a role, with one female respondent using the internet to improve her skills. Regarding safe learning environments, both male and female cleaners understood the importance of cleanliness. One female respondent defined it as "An environment that guarantees the safety, health, and well-being of students, teachers, and staff in educational institutions," While a male respondent described it as "A sanitary environment free from harmful microorganisms and germs."

Gender Specific Roles

Gender-specific roles in cleaning were evident. Most women (57%) emphasized classrooms, offices, and toilets as key areas requiring daily cleaning. These spaces are vital for maintaining a productive learning environment. Male respondents, however, focused on gardens, toilets, and roads, highlighting the aesthetic and mental health benefits of clean gardens and the importance of safe, clean roads for campus mobility. Both genders agreed on the need for clean classrooms, offices, and toilets to ensure a safe learning environment.

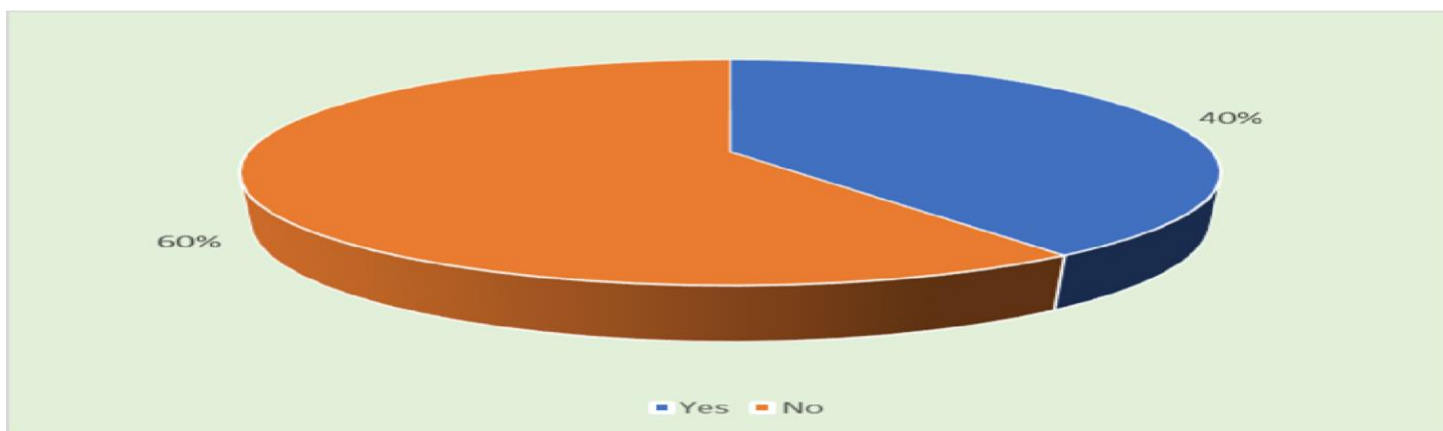
Figure 2: gender specific daily roles for the studied cleaners



Gender Specific Challenges encountered by Cleaners

The study was interested to distinguish work condition of women and men cleaners. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had a work contract, the length of the contract, and the daily tasks they perform upon arriving at work. Additionally, they were asked if their contracts included a job description outlining their duties. Unfortunately, as shown in Figure 3, a large portion of respondents (60%) reported not having formal work contracts.

Figure 3: Responses on Possession of Work Contract: Source: Analysis of Field data



This finding supports the World Bank's claim that informal sector workers often lack formal contracts. Many informal workers are in small, unregistered businesses or self-employed, with limited resources to establish contracts (World Bank, 2021). These workers have little bargaining power, making them vulnerable to exploitation and lacking basic labour protections, such as minimum wage, health insurance, and paid leave. This leads to insecure working conditions and low wages, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability (ILO, 2018).

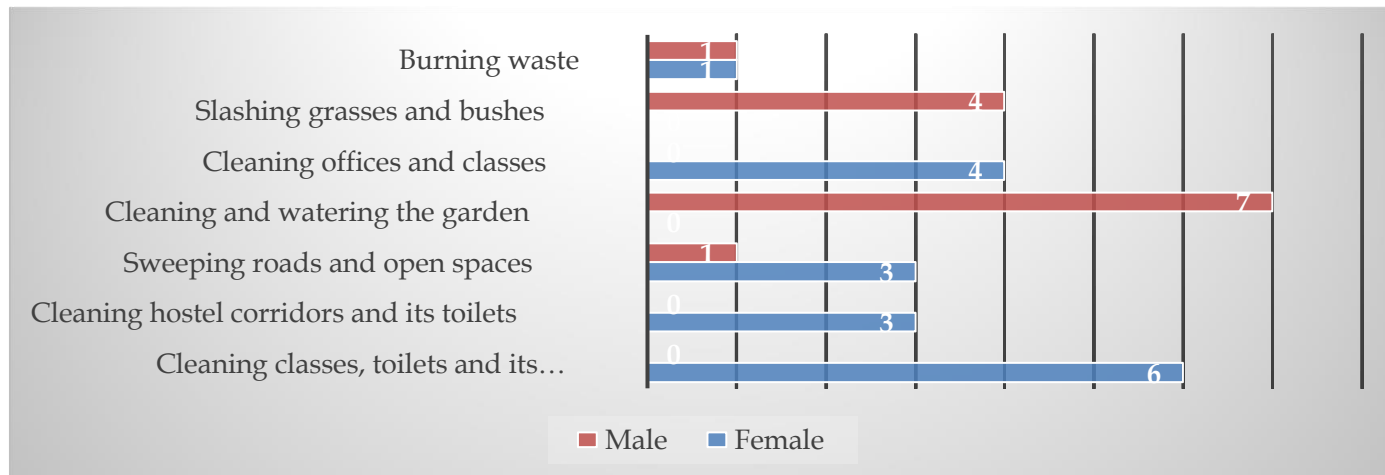
Additionally, the lack of contracts hampers government revenue collection and social welfare, contributing to economic and social challenges (World Bank, 2021).

Regarding duties, both male and female cleaners perform similar tasks, though there is a gender division as shown by Figure 4.

Figure 4: Duties and task done by Women and Men Cleaners

: Source: Analysis of Field Data

(2024)



Women focus on indoor cleaning, including classrooms, toilets, hostels, and office areas, while men handle outdoor tasks such as sweeping roads, slashing grass, and maintaining gardens. Men's tasks often require more physical strength, which may explain their predominance in outdoor duties. One key informant explained: "Women cleaners do indoor cleaning, such as in classrooms and toilets, while men handle outdoor duties like cleaning gardens, watering plants, and cutting grass" (Key informant, field data 2024).

Gender-Specific Challenges Faced by Cleaners

The study identified key challenges faced by both male and female cleaners, including economic, social, and infrastructural issues. **Economic Challenges:** All respondents reported financial difficulties, including high transportation costs, low wages, salary delays, and expensive cleaning equipment. Some cleaners supplement their income by taking on additional tasks like selling plastic bottles, providing laundry services, or washing cars.

Social Challenges: Cleaners face disrespect and suspicion, often seen as uneducated or unskilled. One female respondent shared an encounter with a student who dismissed her concerns about a spill, saying, "It's your job to clean; it's your hunger that brought you here." Another male respondent recalled being falsely accused of theft during an exam period.

Infrastructural Challenges: Poor facilities and outdated equipment further complicate cleaning tasks. Key informants highlighted broken toilets and damaged sewage pipes, making it harder to maintain cleanliness and increasing operational costs.

In conclusion, gender-specific challenges surrounding economic, social, and infrastructural spheres, affect the ability of cleaners to maintain a safe, conducive learning environment at MNMA, underscoring the need for better working conditions, fair wages, and improved facilities.

Table 3: Challenges Encountered by Male and Female Cleaners in Performing their Duties

1.	Economic challenges	Frequency n=30	Percent (%)
	High cost of essential needs	30	100
	Low salary	30	100
	Delay of salary	30	100
	High fares	30	100
	High price of sanitary equipment	30	100
2.	Social Challenges		
	Abuse of rights	30	100
	Mistrust from students and staffs	30	100
	Disrespect from students	30	100
3.	Other related challenges		
	Inadequate of modern sanitary equipment	30	100
	Poor infrastructure	30	100

Discussion

This study examined the working conditions, gender-specific roles, and challenges faced by cleaners at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA), Tanzania, with a focus on their contribution to creating a safe and conducive learning environment. The findings highlight key issues related to sociodemographic characteristics, gendered roles, and challenges faced by cleaners.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

The study found that the majority of cleaners were women (57%) and relatively young, with 73% aged between 18 and 30. This aligns with broader trends of women's overrepresentation in informal employment (ILO, 2018). The cleaners' education levels were generally low, with 77% having completed secondary education. These findings reflect the limited access to formal employment opportunities in developing countries, pushing many individuals into the informal sector (Chen & Ravallion, 2010).

Gender-Specific Roles

Gender-specific tasks were evident, with women primarily responsible for indoor cleaning (classrooms, toilets, offices), while men focused on outdoor tasks (gardens, roads). This division of labour reflects traditional gender roles, where women are associated with domestic work, and men with more physically demanding tasks (Cobb & Herd, 2002). These findings support the notion that societal norms shape employment roles, even within institutional settings.

Challenges Faced by Cleaners

Cleaners faced significant economic, social, and infrastructural challenges. Economic challenges included low wages, delayed salaries, and high transportation costs, as well as the high price of cleaning equipment. Social challenges involved disrespect from students and staff, while infrastructural issues, such as inadequate facilities and broken equipment, further hindered their work. These challenges mirror those reported globally in the informal sector, where workers often lack job security and face poor working conditions (World Bank, 2021; ILO, 2018). The lack of formal contracts, which 60% of respondents reported, further exacerbates the insecurity of cleaners' employment. This finding highlights the vulnerability of informal workers, who often lack basic labour protections such as minimum wage, health insurance, and paid leave (ILO, 2018). The division of labour also underlined gendered disparities, with women's tasks being less physically demanding but often seen as less valued compared to the more physically intense outdoor duties of male cleaners (Bianchi et al., 2000).

Implications of the findings

The study reveals that cleaners' low status, poor working conditions, and job insecurity negatively impact the school climate and student access to education. To address this, institutions should improve cleaners' conditions, aligning with Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) principles. The study also highlights a gendered division of labour, with women assigned indoor tasks. To promote gender equity, tasks should be based on skills, not gender, with fair pay and equal participation. Institutions should offer formal contracts, fair wages, and benefits, and improve equipment. Providing professional development opportunities will enhance job satisfaction. Finally, strengthening labour protections, grievance mechanisms, and awareness campaigns is vital to promote decent work for all staff.

Conclusion

This study highlights the essential yet often overlooked role of cleaners at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA) in maintaining a safe learning environment. It reveals a gender division in tasks, with women focusing on indoor cleaning and men handling outdoor duties. The study also exposes challenges such as low wages, job insecurity, and poor infrastructure.

The findings stress the need for improved working conditions, fair wages, and greater recognition of cleaners' contributions. Addressing these issues will enhance both their well-being and the quality of the learning environment.

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