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"Employer, union and individual strategies in response to changing national labor markets"

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Housekeepers lost in the Land of Labor Market Segmentation

Christine Guégnard* and Sylvie-Anne Mériot**

Abstract

This communication analyses the role that the main social actors, employers, trade unions and the French government play in labour market regulations, especially in working conditions, for feminine low wage workers. Labor market segmentation and the dual market theory (Doeringer and Piore, 1971), with on one hand qualified workers employed in attractive and stable positions, and on the other hand manpower in low-paid and insecure jobs, often in back-breaking working conditions, are not new. However, they have recently reappeared in the situation of housekeepers in the French hotel industry, where there are particularly few chances of career ladders, and on the contrary, there are major risks for being excluded from the labor market.

Introduction

France is famous for being the country that attracts the largest number of tourists. Indeed, it welcomes 77 million visitors each year, accounting for 11% of world tourists and is therefore the market leader. France has a long history of tourism, ever since its first luxury hotels sprung up in 1920. With regard to social progress for its workers, however, this sector has never been much of a pioneer. In fact, there is labor market segmentation in the hospitality industry, and particularly in a large number of hotels, favored by certain government policies.

Small independent hotels continue to make inroads in the sector, despite increasing standardization of services provided to guests and of work procedures. This rationalization has been undertaken by hotel chains which place an emphasis on high service performance quality at the center of the housekeepers' work. The organization of work schedules appears to be the result of pressure from competitors and increasing financial constraints. In order to be more flexible and reduce salary costs, hoteliers across the industry employ both part-time workers and "extras". As a result, dualism has widened between housekeepers with the permanent or stable employees and casual workers, reinforced by a second division between full-time and part-time workers.

How can these inequalities been interpreted by economists? An explanation can be found in theories that attempted to explain segmentation of the labor market by studying the situation of Blacks in the United States. Labor market segmentation and dual market theory (Doeringer and Piore, 1971) are not new with, on one hand, a *primary* sector comprising qualified workers employed in attractive and stable positions and, on the other hand, a *secondary* sector with manpower in low-paid and insecure jobs, often in back-breaking working conditions. However, they have recently reappeared in the case of housekeepers in the French hotel industry, where there are very few career prospects and, on the contrary, there are major risks of being excluded from the labor market. This communication analyses the role that the principal social actors, employers, trade unions and the French government play in labor market regulation, especially with regard to working conditions, for feminine low-wage workers.

* IREDU /CNRS (Institut de Recherche sur l'Education, Sociologie et Economie de l'Education), Université de Bourgogne, Esplanade Erasme, BP26513, 21065 Dijon Cedex. E-mail: christine.guegnard@u-bourgogne.fr.

** CEREQ, (Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications), 10 place de la Joliette, BP 21321, 13567 Marseille Cedex 02. E-mail: meriot@cereq.fr.

In this article, the dual statement for housekeepers is addressed from three different interlinked angles. Firstly, the specificity of the hotel and catering industry, with regard to its labor market and industrial regulations, is presented with emphasis on the strength of the employers' lobby and its influence on French politicians. In a second section, the differences in managerial strategies assigned to hotel characteristics such as chain or independent status, which creates a form of dualism, is analyzed as well as the individual destiny or possible strategies in such an institutional context. Housekeepers are allocated to the category of low-wage workers, often untrained and uninformed about their rights, they have few means for fighting against intensification of work schedules or imaginative application of labor laws. Unequal access to full-time and permanent work underlines an increasing inequality in the labor market of which housekeepers are victims. The third section focuses on their difficulties in seeking to escape from the vicious circle that links precarious employment to low earnings. Only a small number of French housekeepers find individual opportunities for career prospects worthy of the Cinderella fairy tale.

This paper builds on prior research in Europe and in the United States on the management of low-wage work (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2003), financed by the Russell Sage Foundation (New York). Since 2004, CEREQ and IREDU have been involved in this project coordinated in France by CEPREMAP (Centre pour la recherche économique et ses applications). The aim is to discover how low-wage jobs have taken shape in Europe where firms face the same intense pressure from global competition and technological change, but operate in distinct institutional and policy environments. This research has been carried out in five countries (Denmark, France, Germany, The Netherlands, and United Kingdom) and covered five industries (hotels, hospitals, food processing, retail, and call centers). The study takes both a quantitative and a qualitative approach, including a statistical and documentation review, monographs on eight hotels and many interviews with employees,¹ employer organizations and trade unions representatives (Guégnard and Mériot, 2005; 2007).

1 – In the Land of Hotels

The hotel industry differs from other French activities on more than one count. It remains mostly family-run, often marked by traditional references, long working hours, a watered-down application of collective agreements or labor rules, and undeclared work. A market dominated by very small independent establishments, the fragmentation of employer and worker organizations, and the very low level of trade union membership: these are just some of the obstacles to more positive labor regulations. Small employers are "*protected by the natural weakness of worker organizations in their small, dispersed work force*" and by the variety of exemptions to the legislation, and minimum labor standards, as described by Piore (1978).

A two-stream market

France has Europe's fourth highest hotel room capacity with over 602,000 rooms on January 1, 2006. For several years, the French hotel fleet has stabilized at around 18,000 establishments, with an average of 33 rooms per hotel. This trend has benefited large hotel chains at the expense of smaller independent hotels. Nevertheless, the French hotel industry continues to be dominated by small units: 80% of hotels employ less than ten employees. Independents have the highest number of establishments (84%) and the highest level of room capacity (63%). They are often family-managed businesses whose assets are usually held by the hotelkeeper (and/or close relatives). Hotel chains are relentlessly gaining ground, however, and are concentrated in the upper and lower market segments. They now account for over half the 4-star rooms and three-quarters of the 0-star rooms and they registered a higher room occupancy rate than the traditional independent hotels (67% compared to 54%, in 2005).

However, independent hotels have the lion's share of the market, in terms of number of establishments and of revenues. However, hotel chains are increasingly putting pressure on the market and this has led to a permanent price war. While large hotels and chains tend to rationalize the work, small and

independent hotels maintain a ‘cottage-industry’ approach to their employees, thus highlighting the French image of the hotel as a family-run micro-business. The chains tend to be dynamic in negotiations with unions and accept collective bargaining, while the small hotels are usually reluctant to discuss working conditions and seek to maintain lower wages, even for their loyal employees, especially in country areas. Despite this contrast between independents and chains, a collective agreement for the entire industry was negotiated and adopted in 1997.

A long wait for social progress

Because of the myriad small independent hotels, the fragmentation among organizations representing employers (four employer associations²) and the lack of collaboration among workers’ representatives (five trade unions³), and the low rates of unionization, the hotel and catering industry has taken its time in negotiating social progress for its personnel. This sector is organized around one major employer association, UMIH (Union of Hotel Professions and Industries) which represents roughly 90% of affiliated “hôtel, restaurant, café et discothèque” employers. In the French industrial relations system, the minimum wage is set by the government and by law, while specific working schedules are negotiated between employer organizations and trade unions through national branch collective bargaining. Moreover, these collective agreements are not always strictly applied at hotel level, even though they offer flexibility through a whole range of contracts.

Social bargaining has always been a complex and lengthy process, with the employers’ lobby historically reluctant to negotiate wage and social advancements. Their strength is underlined by the large number of dispensations from the Labor Code (minimum wage, working hours, specific contracts, etc.). For instance, until July 2004, the specific hotel industry minimum wage was lower than the real value of the SMIC (the national minimum wage) because employers were allowed to deduct a number of benefits in kind, such as meals or accommodation. The agreement now in force, however, makes no provision for automatic seniority allowance, no occupational seniority rights for redundancy payments and no compensation for working on Sundays or many public holidays.⁴

Another example emphasizes the role played by the actors, employers, trade unions and government. Adoption of the 35-hour working week came into force on January 1, 2002, but the hotel industry was reticent and agreed only to come down to 39 hours per week (as against 53 hours prior to 1997, then 43 hours). The latest branch agreement, signed in July 2004, not only introduced the 39-hour week and a sixth week of annual holiday, but also created an insurance scheme for all the employees, defined executives’ wage rates, and regulated night work. In the words of one industry journal, it was “*a historical agreement of the kind signed only once every thirty years in the field of hotels and restaurants*”. Despite opposition from two trade unions and one employer union, the French Government decided to extend this agreement, which came into force on January 1, 2005. Recently, at the request of a single trade union (CFDT), the Supreme Administrative Court (Conseil d’Etat) cancelled the adoption of the 39-hour working week. However, the Government immediately introduced measures that allowed the hoteliers to keep its hourly basis in order to not pay overtime, while waiting for the conclusion of new negotiations. An agreement on working hours (establishing the 35-hour week and overtime paid from the 36th hour) was signed in February 2007 and came into force in April 2007.

Absence of the trade unions

In fact, at the national level, a discord persists between trade unions and employers while employers’ organizations are divided over lobbying of the government. The origins of this pressure and contradictions in industrial relations go back to the development of cafés during the French Revolution. The French “hotels, cafés, and restaurants” traditionally occupy a large place in political and social debates: for instance, resistance during the two world wars, major demonstrations, strikes, and decisions in peace time have all emerged there. They are important places for societal and political life between the people and their representatives. This may explain why in November 2006, while the present Government tends to promote wage and schedule negotiations, it voted a €697 million subsidy

for the hotel and catering employers to promote “extra” contracts, the most precarious working status, as defined below.

In the work place, the trade unions are weak or absent. The first reason is that 80% of hotels employ less than ten employees: staff representation is only compulsory for companies with more than ten employees (work councils, on the other hand, are compulsory for companies with more over fifty employees). In all the hotels visited for this research, employee membership rates are low and trade unionists make very few demands at company level. In three hotels, three trade unions are represented on the consultative bodies. Only one manager of a deluxe hotel mentioned that its staff had gone on strike: *“It was down tools for two hours about the cut in working hours but as soon as the housekeepers realised that they were not being paid, they came back and have never been on strike since.”* Second, the hotel industry is one of the sectors with the lowest union membership: only 2%, compared to 5% of private sector workers in France (“Réponse” Survey, Ministry of Labor, 2005). Few trade unions have specific sections for the hotel industry and none have floor staff sections. The low level of militancy and union membership is partly due to hospitality industry organization, partly to staff structures with many short term contracts, high turnover and a captive workforce (low-skilled, young and female workers, often of foreign extraction).

A specific workforce

Over the last decade, the hotel and catering industry, which is present throughout France, has grown by 14% and employs more than 800,000 people, over 3.5% of the working population. This development has led to a permanent and endemic search for manpower and a high staff turnover rate with half the employees staying with their employers for less than six months. These tensions in recruitment are in part due to the particularly harsh working conditions. In addition, the hotel and catering industry employs 27% of its workforce on low-wages⁵ and offers many part-time or short-term contracts, primarily to cope with yearly fluctuations.

The main individual characteristics of the labor force in the “*secondary labor market*” can be found here: youth, women, migrants, minority groups. Indeed, hotel industry employees differ from employees in other sectors: half of them are women, mostly under thirty, 10% are foreign workers, often with no qualifications. The hospitality industry attracts many young people and *non-citizen workers*⁶ and *illegal migrants*, because many of the jobs in this sector do not require qualifications.

In addition to the small independent enterprises, there is a “*black market*” for labor, an expanding industry which totally escapes taxation and other legal restrictions. The black market sometimes corresponds to partly-declared situations, or to an unfair and excessive use of some precarious contracts, or to a bad count of real working times. Illegal immigrants are especially likely to accept any kind of contract or schedule, and sometimes working in conditions close to exploitation. According to the latest data published on undeclared work in hotels and restaurants (NéoRestauration, 2005) from records of the Inter-Ministerial Delegation on Combating Undeclared Work (Délégation interministérielle à la lutte contre le travail illégal), 35% of all the labor inspections organized in 2004 led to fines and a growing number of cases were sent to court (2,211 in 2004 against 336 in 2003). In some southern French regions, one-third of the hotel or restaurant employers resort to illegal work.⁷

Against this special backcloth of the hotel industry, housekeepers, who account for almost 20% of the labor force, are different from other employees on more than one count. They have more occupational seniority in their jobs, are also relatively old (in the 35-45 age bracket), and the overwhelming majority is of foreign extraction. Another peculiarity claimed by hotel managers is that recruitment is easy and turnover is low, which contrasts with many other categories of hotel personnel. The bedroom is at the heart of the hotel business and the quality of room cleaning is strategically important for the success of hotels, yet invisibility is crucial to housekeepers’ activity. Finally, these are jobs that technological developments, training courses, the unions, pass by. Prospects of having a real career are remote, except in a few hotels where management has been making some positive initiatives, as discussed in the next section.

2 – Facing Managers’ Strategies

The tendency towards concentration in the hotel industry, linked to the progression of chains, is nevertheless leading to some high road managerial practices. Accor, for example, led the way, when it adopted the 39-hour week several years ago. However, the same managers combine elements of the high and low roads in a profitable and flexible way. As the hotel industry is, by its very nature, subject to variability and uncertainty in demand, managers offer jobs with career prospects to some employees and unstable contracts to others. Part-time work and subcontracting serve strategies of flexibility, rationalization of work, and compression of production costs. As a result, these human resource management practices lead to a dichotomy of the market between stable and unstable jobs, which tend to disadvantage housekeepers in particular.

The siren call of hotel chains

The primary difference in management strategies relates to whether the hotel is an independent establishment or part of a chain (*cf.* Table 2). However, we can also see the emergence of other characteristics, such as category or size of hotel, specific strategies within a single chain, the chain’s employment history, or the individual manager. In fact, the key element is often the hotel’s management and the personality of the director can play a fundamental role (Guégnard *et al.*, 2004). Because of the *domestic* nature of the work, employees are dependent on the director or a specific manager, even in major hotels (Triby, 2005). However, in some hotel chains, managers enjoy considerable freedom in managing their staff. Thus, labor relations in any single establishment are closely linked to the director’s personality: *"The hotel and catering industry sets particular store by its small-scale features and personal involvement of its individuals"* (Mériot, 2000).

Working for a chain is often seen as opting for more institutional relations and compliance with current regulations (adherence to the Labor Code or collective agreement, working hours, schedules provided). In addition to the benefits of working for a chain (payment of a 13th month, sickness and pension schemes, surety bond, profit-sharing, guarantees, help with traveling expenses, subsidized meals at the workplace, gift vouchers), the Accor Group collaborators indicate that they have working conditions which conform to legislation (a 39-hour working week, public holidays, bonuses, continuous training, and occasionally career prospects) that are often lacking in independent hotels. Furthermore, their work schedules are given in advance, making it easier for employees to balance work and family commitments, as witnessed by the *Equilibre* project instigated by Ibis.⁸ The Sofitel hotel chain, for example, seeks to innovate on behalf of housekeepers by developing social monitoring (including social workers), by limiting tediousness, isolation and stress through the possibility of working in pairs, encouraging good postural habits or using innovative equipment (such as the "ergolit" system that raises beds at the press of a pedal). In some up-market hotel chains, there have been recent moves to improving housekeepers’ working conditions, while in mid- to low-range hotel chains, some managers are testing new forms of multiskilling (for instance, combining cleaning and reception activities). Despite introducing these good practices, the same hotel managers do not hesitate to offer precarious contracts or subcontractors, especially for room cleaning.

Work as an obstacle race

When first recruited, housekeepers do not usually obtain stable or full-time contracts. These contracts are reserved for experienced personnel or supervisors. As there is a large pool of available housekeepers, hoteliers can use a whole range of job contracts from “extras” at the bottom of the hierarchy to fixed-term and permanent contracts at the top. Moreover, employees can also be divided between full-timers (39 or 37 weekly hours) and part-timers. Whereas extras often work for only a few hours a day, stable part-time workers are generally guaranteed around 30 hours a week in the hotels under study. This creates a reinforced dualism between permanent/non-permanent staff (“*tenured and untenured workers*”) and between part-timers/full-timers. There is real competition for landing a full-time stable job, which comes hand in hand with better working hours and more regular work. Advancement through merit is thus a real *right to work*, as the number of rooms allocated per day per

person starts off very low, and only permanent hotel staff can be sure of getting a decent wage through their daily work.

In order to improve flexibility and mitigate absenteeism, employers often prefer to offer part-time work, and more than a third of hotel employees have part-time contracts. Part-time work is rarely requested by employees and can force them to take several jobs, with no real legal framework: one housekeeper gets up at 4 am to spend three hours cleaning a pharmacy before going to her job in a hotel. Middle range hotels visited, whether independent or belonging to chains, mainly employ their floor staff as part-timers, with the exception of supervisors. This contrasts with deluxe hotels which offer very little part-time work. On the contrary, almost all their staff is on permanent full-time contracts, with some short-term contracts to cover temporary peaks in activity (usually people who come in for three months to help out).

The alternative is to hire “extras”, which allows managers to adapt schedules to fluctuations in room occupancy rates. Contracts for extras are specific to the hotel and catering industry and cover a period of at least one hour, but for no longer than sixty days in any one quarter (otherwise the employee can claim a permanent contract). In addition, employers are allowed to give staff these contracts within 48 hours, a condition which limits the Labor Inspectorate services’ ability to monitor them and may encourage undeclared work, especially in small units. Some managers also use this contract to take their time over selecting the most deserving staff. An extra has to wait for a vacancy before she can expect to obtain a stable job contract and therefore has to prove she is highly committed to her work. This may take several years. Sometimes a part-time permanent contract will be offered to a person after an assignment. Housekeepers find it hard to refuse, even though they may lose out financially.⁹ They also have to make themselves available, at the risk of being passed over for other assignments. One supervisor in a deluxe hotel in the provinces openly asks her extras not to sign up elsewhere so that she can count on them. Housekeepers are thus forced to stay in unstable situations for fear of losing the few advantages they may have acquired.

One hotel director, along with many of his peers, admits that he is tempted to restrict the number of stable contracts, because *"sometimes, the people we hire lose their appetite for work"*. In an area blighted by unemployment, he can keep a large pool of manpower available on unstable contracts. These are so dependent that they accept any type of requests, working hours or objectives (numbers of rooms to clean within a preset time, even if this is unrealistic). Many housekeepers are desperate about insecurity: one person described herself as a *"permanent extra"*, prompting her comment that there is *"nothing extraordinary about the extra contract"*! She tells the following story: she arrived in France twenty years ago and took a 2-month short course to learn to speak French, then became a cleaner for several employers simultaneously (in a cleaning company). She worked up to 13 hours a day, then took a vocational course, and had now reverted to being an extra hired by a hotel, despite her qualifications and professional experience.

The threat of subcontracting

Some hotel managers look for greater flexibility by resorting to subcontractors for room cleaning. This allows them to overcome all the constraints on personnel management, the associated social and administrative restrictions, and the organization of fluctuations in room occupancy. External subcontracting companies accept contracts with hotels for specific tasks, usually part-time cleaning of rooms (between 20 and 30 weakly hours for each room attendant). This gives the hotel adaptability in the management of personnel as well as the option of giving employees fewer overtime hours. The amount of work carried out by subcontractors’ employees is generally higher than those expected of hotel personnel. An ex-employee of one cleaning company confirms: *"We had to clean four and a half room per hour. It's impossible. In fact, to clean four rooms, we had to work one or two hours more each day, for no extra pay."*

Subcontracting of room cleaning is used in one in two budget hotels, such as the Louvre Hotel Group, the second largest budget chain. However, market leader Accor has recently made a U-turn when its commercial image was dented by major industrial unrest at one of its subcontractors, Arcade. In 2002,

Arcade's employees went on strike for better working conditions and work rates. While Accor's staff housekeepers were expected to clean 16 rooms in 8 hours, the cleaning company's employees had to clean 20 to 23 rooms in 6 hours and were paid €7.16 per hour (only €0.49 more than the minimum wage). This unrest was a decisive element (Puech, 2004), hitting Accor out of the blue. It has now internalized part of the cleaning of its hotels and hired former cleaning company employees. When interviewed, these housekeepers considered that the decision had had a positive impact on their organization, work schedules, wages and social relations.

For some employers, subcontracting is part and parcel of their policy to seek flexibility and rein in costs as tightly as possible. For others, the decision to internalize cleaning is a way to reduce costs, while some managers appreciate paying a 'per room' charge at the lowest price. Direct management may also promote greater adaptability, better quality services and better staff retention. This is because the human factor is important, especially when guests insist on a room on a particular floor or the services of a specific housekeeper. The personal touch thus prevails in their choice as one manager confirms: *"In a hotel sector where we are competing on value-for-money, charm may come up trumps"*. However, opportunities for personal development remain very limited for older and less qualified housekeepers: a full-time contract is often their only hope for the last years of their working life, as we will see in the next section.

3 – A Shadow Work Force

Cleaning rooms is women's work, invisible, and the lowest paid task in the hotel industry. Housekeepers are almost invariably women, relatively old, often of foreign origin and with few or no diplomas: this makes them a captive and docile workforce. They tend to be stable in their jobs and are paid wages that barely enable them to support a family as bread-winners. In fact, employers often choose candidates with these personal and ethnic characteristics for these secondary jobs (Reich *et al.*, 1973). Working beside other professionals, housekeepers have little chance of being promoted, despite the introduction of some initiatives for them. In reality, these jobs can be considered as dead ends, in which it is difficult to find a positive way out.

Housekeepers' labor

Each morning a housekeeper is issued with her work schedule indicating which rooms need cleaning, sometimes with an order of priority or indications of guests' expectations. Her daily workload is 13-18 rooms (occasionally up to 24 rooms), at the rate of 2-4 rooms per hour depending on the hotel category. Sometimes housekeepers work to targets, and some managers take advantage of this to set unachievable goals. A housekeeper states: *"Personally I find that the 30 minutes we are allowed per room, for a four-star hotel, isn't fair, as it takes at least 40 minutes to get a room spick-and-span."* The work schedule is heavy and demanding, and all managers agree that housekeeping is very physical and tiring. One staff manager adds: *"They are stressed out by the worry of being unable to keep up the pace to meet target times and a fixed number of rooms, since the guests leave their rooms in all sorts of states"*.

Most housekeepers are foreign nationals or of foreign extraction. One executive manager sums up this stereotype: *"We have to deal with many different ethnic groups: I have Muslims, Algerians, Moroccans, Poles, Chinese, Madagascans, Mauritians, and many Comorians. Their private lives are often a shambles, lots of children, their husbands are not always there or kind to them... They are often illiterate and their only experience is in cleaning, maybe domestic cleaning"*. The work locations define which ethnic groups are represented and the locally available workforce often varies, though some hotels employ more people from the Far East, or North and Sub-Saharan Africa, which encourages recruitment by co-opting. The myriad profiles and career paths highlight the compound or *"cosmopolitan"* universe of housekeepers. Some have fled from poverty, others from conflicts in their home country. Few of them have been to secondary school before migrating.

One feature common to all housekeepers is the need to earn a living, however tedious the job may be. In fact, taking this job is often a question of Hobson's choice because no other occupation is open to these women. To be sure, men are also assigned to clean in some hotels but are usually allocated different tasks such as cleaning public areas, performing harder tasks (carpet cleaning) or handling jobs (linen, guests' luggage). Thus, there is a division of labor by gender within the cleaning sector. Housekeeping remains the province of women in a sector that purports to be mixed.

As inconspicuous as dust

Housekeepers occupy a special place in the hotel industry: a subordinate position within the ranks, invisible to guests, engaged in a tedious and servile activity. They, and the technical staff, are excluded from face-to-face contact with guests in a service activity centered on customer relations (Monchatre and Testenoire, 2004). Housekeepers' job quality is of strategic importance for the success of hotels, yet, their activity relies on them being as invisible as domestics. Rooms must be cleaned when the guests are out, to avoid disturbing them with their presence, so they are instructed to remain inconspicuous, or even apologize, when they come across a guest. In most hotels, housekeepers are isolated, out on the edge of the collective life of the establishment and reduced to spending many hours alone or only occasionally meeting their colleagues or supervisors. In the deluxe hotel market, in particular, the supervisor alone is authorized to address the guests, primarily to answer their requests.

The division of labor assigns housekeepers to an occupation that is often referred to as degrading, "dirty work" (Hugues, 1996). Other jobs, such as serving at tables or kitchen work, also entail coming into contact with dirt (cleaning tables...), but that is only one element of the job. This activity is central and sometimes remains exclusively a task allocated to housekeepers. There is a social divide between receptionists and waiters on the one hand, and room attendants in charge with "dirty work", on the other hand. Housekeepers and their colleagues are also separated organizationally. The upper floors are geographically remote from the ground floor, the area where establishment buzzes with life. Cleaning is carried out alone, each woman isolated in her own corridor, and seldom with a co-worker.

Over and above the issue of gender, the profile is defined without resort to pre-recruitment criteria, as one manager states: "The person must be serious, inconspicuous and cleanliness is an essential criterion. A housekeeper does not need to have any special skills, she just needs to know how to use the color codes, namely, read figures."¹⁰ Thus, even in deluxe hotels, there is no real need for any qualifications. There are very few housekeepers with a hotel or catering diploma, such as a CAP/BEP (a two-year French vocational training course for 14-16 year olds). However, previous experience in hotel, catering, hospital or cleaning company is an advantage for those seeking to be hired. Training is generally carried out on the job, by observing, imitating and shadowing an experienced colleague, usually over no more than one or two days depending on the hotel category. By the 3rd day, the person is broadly expected to work independently and work as fast as experienced staff. Besides, applicants are not in short supply. In Paris and in the provinces, managers are sent unsolicited applications every month. These and the social networks of existing staff are the most common methods of recruitment. While housekeepers appear to abound in the employment market, employers set more store by the supervisors that in the luxury segment go by the epithet of "rare gems". Occasionally they are promoted internally, but more often than not, they have received several years' hotel training. This managerial practice creates another dichotomy, in both hotels and the cleaning department, between selected qualified supervisors, and rarely promoted low qualified housekeepers.

A minimal wage for an essential mission

The room is at the heart of the hotel business and quality of room cleaning is decisive for customer loyalty. However, the housekeeper is invisible and the lowest paid of all hotel staff. More often, wages are pegged to the national legal minimum wage rate and only individual negotiations or bonuses, such as the payment of a 13th month by chains, make a slight difference. The net gross monthly wages declared by the housekeepers interviewed are in the range €800-1,200 for permanent staff (part-time and full-time for 30-39 hours per week). One housekeeper working 39 hours per week in a chain hotel

declares: "I think it's true when they say it's a hard job. They could pay us more. But we get the SMIC... We get just under €1,200 net per month".

In the hotel industry, wage rates have not been revised since 1997 and have now become inapplicable since they have been overtaken by the SMIC rate. The most recent survey, conducted in 2005, emphasizes that the average gross monthly wage for housekeepers (€1,350) is considerably lower than all the other hotel occupations (€1,608).¹¹ Other data shows that about 27% of hotel employees can be considered as low-wage workers, compared to 10% of the total working population (see Table 1). Moreover, this share is increasing (23% in 1995) whereas the general trend in France is a drop of low-paid workers. Women represent about two-thirds of the workforce considered as low-paid. These results are under-estimated because this data does not include undeclared or illegal work and family help. Wages in the hotel and catering industry are lower than in most other French sectors, partly due to the low job skills and the weakness of labor market regulation.

Finally, many attributes of women's occupations in France are to be found combined in the housekeeper job: continuity between their domestic and workplace activity, short-term or part-time contracts, low-wage. However, if they want to achieve high quality service, it may be in the interests of chain or deluxe hotels to gain the loyalty of their floor staff.

Little hope of promotion

In-house career possibilities are few and far between, and symbolic. They are limited to positions of assistant supervisor and executive housekeeper, which only large establishments can offer. As many hotels are small and run by their owners, in the case of family hotels, there are few possibilities of being promoted to supervisor since this function is usually held by the hotelier's wife. Most housekeepers either have no certificates, or only a certificate obtained abroad and not recognized in France, or qualifications that are too low to establish a career, especially as geographical mobility may clinch access to a supervisor's job and this may conflict with their family situation. In addition, over time and having accumulated years of fatigue, the most experienced housekeepers feel obliged to reduce their schedule or their hours: either by going back to part-time contracts or by looking for another job outside the hotel industry, which often throws them into a precarious situation or back on the unemployment line.

Some hotels are exceptions to the rule, with promotions awarded through convenience during periods when manpower is scarce, rather than by deliberate strategy. A deluxe hotel has promoted one individual to *first housekeeper* and gave her half a day's training. This enabled another person to become a floor supervisor, on the basis of a two-day in-house vocational training course, though she is still classified as a clerk. Another small hotel promoted a woman to *first housekeeper* with a new administrative role, but insisted that she retain her hourly cleaning rate of three rooms as before. Here we see the "internal market" at work, allowing employers to avoid the cost of recruitment and reduce the cost of training. This situation contrasts with the Cinderella story told by a former housekeeper in a recent study for Accor (Bosse and Guégnard, 2005). Of African origin, she arrived in France at the age of 20 and started working in a three-star hotel: room cleaner to executive housekeeper, then trainer, she traveled widely from Russia to Cuba, Egypt to Latin America before settling down in France at the head of a hotel, because in the course of her travels, as she puts it, "*she found her Prince Charming*".

There is no shortage of housekeepers in France and, in this context, managers also adopt other practices that border on illegality: paying wages according to objectives (number of rooms cleaned instead of actual working hours), and refusing to pay overtime (at best, overtime can be made up if such an agreement has been negotiated with the manager). In a confined institutionalized context with few rules, housekeepers are often untrained and uninformed about their rights and have few means for fighting against the intensification of work or the imaginative application of labor law. Most employees are vulnerable, undemanding in terms of job quality and easily dependent, due to their lack of employability on the labor market. This makes them a docile manpower, confined to the status of low-wage workers, and their jobs seem to be a trap leading to exclusion and a dead end. Housekeepers

find themselves in a spiral which links insecurity and low-wages, a spiral reinforced by managerial demands for flexibility and encouraged by certain employment policies in France.

Conclusion: From segmentation to exclusion

The housekeepers' story reveals the present dualism in the French labor market on more than one count. *"One can characterize dual labor markets by a) the institutional and other arrangements which are used to separate the stable and predictable from the variable and uncertain portion of productive activity and b) the kinds of workers in the secondary labor market and social and institutional arrangements which maintain its labor supply"* (Piore, 1978).

In France, housekeepers have secondary market jobs reinforced by industry conditions and legislative provisions: low-paid, back-breaking working conditions and few chances of promotion. In fact, the working life of a housekeeper often falls into three phases. During the first phase, she works as an extra or for a subcontractor (external management). Next, she is hired by the hotel on a more stable contract (internal management). But this phase is quickly compromised by the constraints of intensive productivity and increasingly hard work which it is impossible to sustain for more than ten years. Then when her physical health begins to suffer (back pains, allergies to cleaning products), or quite simply she is incapable of maintaining the same work schedule, she is forced either to reduce her hours or to leave the workforce, slipping into a new period of precarity, or worse, into social exclusion. It is difficult for her to escape from the vicious circle of precarious contracts and low earnings – unless she believes in Cinderella.

The hotel industry continues to be France's emblematic low-wage sector and could also set a standard in labor market segmentation. It stands out from other sectors because of its particular industrial and institutional regulations and the power of its employers' lobby when negotiating with the government and the trade unions. Frequent government incentives in favour of the hotel industry make a stark contrast with other sectors, especially as the industry is growing and already creating jobs. The hotel sector exercises so much clout that it can be absolved from many otherwise binding state regulations and benefits from dispensations to the Labor Law in terms of working hours, employment contracts and, until recently, the legal minimum wage.

The profession of housekeeper is female-dominated, under-valued, and low-skilled. It attracts a population of poorly educated people of foreign extraction, who are consequently vulnerable and captive. All case studies show low wages, job insecurity and heavy workloads combinations. Hotel directors are ready to admit that the job is tedious and badly paid, but few are prepared to adopt strategies that would benefit their staff. In this special context, hotel chains sometimes appear like a mirage and underline a new division among these workers.

Against this backdrop, housekeepers build up their job year after year, sometimes hour after hour. Most of them begin their career with short-term and irregular contracts and an obligation to take part-time work. They have to deal with job insecurity and all the disadvantages of flexibility and segmentation in the industrial labor market. Housekeepers have to overcome the same obstacles as many low-wage earners, given the difficulty of obtaining a stable job, and sometimes the impossibility of keeping it. Even though in France the Labor Code and procedures provide high protection to permanent workers and a legal framework for industrial relations, these women are caught in a spiral of precarity and low salaries, which is reinforced by certain government policies.

Housekeepers provide a perfect illustration of Piore's argument (1978) that *"In France, the dual labor market is not a matter of small and large enterprises. Much greater reliance is placed institutions which creates islands of flexibility (and insecurity) within the enterprise itself"*. Housekeepers are really lost in the land of labor market segmentation linked to governmental and managers' strategies. Thus, in the hotel industry, regulation (even weak regulation) creates precarity and, worse, social exclusion. Housekeepers have very few opportunities to develop individual strategies and to escape from their professional destiny, a fate common to low-wage workers in labor market segmentation.

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Tables

Table 1 - Share of Low-Wage Workers

	In 1995	In 2003
Hotels with restaurant	21.1%	17.9%
Hotels without restaurant	17.6%	21.2%
Low skilled employees	23.4%	26.7%
Total Hotel Industry	19.9%	20.4%
Total All Sectors	12.7%	10.4%

Source: DADS 1995 and 2003, Insee, calculated by CEPREMAP

Table 2 – Housekeepers Job Quality Management in France

	Chain Hotels	Independent Hotels
Housekeepers Characteristics	Women, mainly of foreign extraction, low-skilled or unskilled	Women, mainly of foreign extraction, low-skilled or unskilled
Type of Management	Directly managed. Paternalistic and hierarchical management in large hotels. Controls or self-controls for room-cleaning (for senior workers). In large hotels: some male room cleaners do physical tasks (e.g. carpet cleaning, stairs or window cleaning, laundry transportation).	Directly managed family-owned businesses. Paternalistic management. Direct control of room-cleaning by the manager/owner.
Number of rooms / day	13-18 rooms	14-18 rooms
Subcontracting practices for cleaning	- Used for common areas (lobby, meeting rooms, window-cleaning...) and outside areas or gardens. - Sometimes used for room-cleaning, except in deluxe hotels.	Internalization or externalization of room cleaning and other common areas.
Labor contracts: - Up-market segment - Mid-market segment	- Full-time permanent contracts (based on 39 hours or sometimes 37 hours a week), and some “extra” contracts. - Combination of part-time contracts (permanent and fixed term for 30 hours), and an increasing number of “extra” contracts.	Regardless of the market, many full-time permanent contracts based on 39 hours a week), and some “extra” contracts.
Wages and other benefits	Basic pay. A 13 th month after one year tenure, sickness and pension schemes, profit-sharing, traveling card offering discounts in the chain brands... A continuing training program.	Basic pay. Specific bonus may exist for loyalty or for very specific opportunities (e.g. Christmas). Continuing training is not a priority, except for on-the-job training.
Career Ladders	Few opportunities.	Few promotional opportunities and none towards managerial positions where these are occupied by owners.
New practices	- Developing social monitoring and communication practices, - Organizing work/family balance, - Innovating multiskilling, - Introducing working in pairs.	Developing a social watch and guidance.

Source: Low-Wage France, final report for Russell Sage (Guégnard and Mériot, 2007)

Notes

¹ This research combines a quantitative and a qualitative approach conducted in two phases. First, the main trends and characteristics of the hotel industry in France were studied, based mostly on available data, academic publications, and hotel industry magazines. Then it was followed by an analysis of eight monographs of hotels selected in France on the basis of criteria set jointly with the other European countries. Interviews were held with the managers, middle management, and floor staff of each hotel. These were supplemented by interviews of sector representatives, unions and the main hotel chains, as well as training organizations, representing a total of 65 individuals interviewed. The interviewed persons' comments are given between quote marks and in *italics*.

² UMIH (Union of Hotel Professions and Industries, created in 1946) includes 80,000 employers whose 12,000 independent hotel and 1,600 chain hotel employers. Other organizations are less preponderant: CPIH (Confederation of Independent Hotel Industry Professionals, created in 1970), SYNHORCAT (National Union of Hotel, Restaurant, Coffee-shop and Delicatessen workers, 10,000 members), and FAGIHT (General Independent Federation of Tourist and Hotel Industries, founded in 1968, 6,500 members).

³ The 5 trade unions are CGT (General Work Confederation, created in 1895), CFTC (French Confederation of Christian Workers, founded in 1919), CFDT (French Workers' Confederation created in 1964), CGC (French Confederation of Executives, created in 1944), and FO (Workers' Force, founded in 1947).

⁴ Although May 1 is a public holiday in France, article L. 222-5 for the Labor Code, the hotels, restaurants and cafés managers were exempted from applying this rule and allowed to make their employees work without paying double time until April 2007.

⁵ Definition of low-wage: a wage less than or equal to two thirds of the median wage (rate calculated by CEPREMAP, *see* Table 1). The net hourly cut-off corresponded to an average of €5.09 in 1995 and €6.23 in 2003, all sectors taken into account (DADS surveys, INSEE).

⁶ Nearly 38% of room attendants are of foreign extraction, compared to 12% in the French workforce (Labor Force Survey INSEE, 2004, calculated by CEPREMAP).

⁷ The black market is difficult to measure. According to the Labor inspectorate in Marseilles, more than a third of hotels and restaurants are using illegal workers (*20 minutes Marseille*, Magazine, June 15, 2006).

⁸ "Equilibre" is a Equal project, a community initiative programme backed by the European Social Fund (www.equal-equilibre.com). It is based on a set of experimental actions carried out from 2002-2004 to reconcile arrangements between work and personal life (Guégnard, 2004).

⁹ For example, having been employed as an extra, one housekeeper was hired on a part-time permanent contract for 10 rooms a day (her full-time colleagues clean 15 rooms) and says she earns less now: *"I was paid more as an extra: 54 euros net for the day, and now I'm paid 30 euros per day. All in all I earn 550 euros per month."*

¹⁰ In the many hotels visited, the housekeepers have colour-coded boards for identification purposes *"marked in blue, they are the rooms due to check out and in yellow, the rooms that will be slept in again... and the crew is highlighted in orange..."* explains one supervisor.

¹¹ Survey carried out by *CHD Conso* in 2005, based on a sample of hoteliers and restaurant owners (342 establishments) (*L'Hôtellerie*, 2005).