

Solidarity and resistance: Key to Las Kellys making themselves seen

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Las Kellys' fight, based on solidarity and resistance, has inspired other social movements. Credit: Xavi Ariza, Fotomovimiento

"We are the women who clean." With this phrase, which unites all women who work in the care and cleaning sector, Las Kellys have

succeeded in consolidating a struggle that has made them seen, brought dignity to their profession, and defended their rights as workers.

Behind this and other slogans is a movement in defense of their working conditions that has become an issue for public debate, the focus of media attention, and even had political repercussions. It is a unique social movement that can provide inspiration for other groups.

With their study entitled "We are the women who clean and the structural base of the hotel': Las Kellys, the collective agency and identity of Spain's room attendants," the researchers, Alan Valenzuela Bustos, from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB); Ana Gálvez Mozo, from the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC); Verna Alcalde González (UOC), and Francisco Tirado Serrano (UAB) examine how the Las Kellys collective has constructed its identity as a group, and coordinated its actions through solidarity and resistance.

From Facebook to a collective struggle

Cheaper dismissals, more corporate power, and an increase in open-ended contracts. The reform of employment laws in Spain in 2012 had direct and highly [negative consequences](#) for thousands of workers. One of the groups that experienced the most negative consequences was hotel room attendants—the [female workers](#) who clean the rooms in hotels.

These room attendants very often work long and exhausting hours, for very low wages and under precarious working conditions. In addition, their work is feminized, undervalued and often invisible.

"There are several dimensions that contribute to the invisibility of Las Kellys, in which factors of gender, race and [social class](#) converge. Likewise, they do cleaning work, which historically has been required to be invisible in the social space of hotels," explained Valenzuela, a Ph.D.

student on the UAB's Person and Society in the Contemporary World program and the lead author of the study, supervised by Gálvez, at the UOC, and Tirado, at the UAB.

The Las Kellys organization emerged to fight against this situation, and to improve their conditions through collective action. This social movement began as a Facebook group in which hotel room attendants shared their experiences at work, listened to each other and offered each other mutual support. The movement to improve their working conditions was officially launched in 2016.

Since then, Las Kellys have managed to shine a light on their working conditions. "Not only have they made the precarious nature of employment in the hotel cleaning sector the subject of media attention, but also they've placed it at the center of public debate. They've shown society the terrible working conditions which they are subjected to on a daily basis in a very shocking way," explained Gálvez, who teaches Industrial and Organizational Psychology in the UOC's Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, and is co-author of the study.

A strategy based on solidarity, their capacity for mobilization and activism, and the enormous empowerment they have achieved as a collective are behind these achievements.

Solidarity and resistance

The Las Kellys movement was created based on two concepts: solidarity and resistance, which are in turn represented in their most evocative slogans. The first—"We are the women who clean"—creates a relationship of solidarity among all women who do this work.

"This solidarity establishes the strength for them to change their working conditions. With this slogan of 'We are the women who clean,' they

create a community, a collective composed of everyone who cleans, regardless of their employment status in hotels, where they come from, etc.," explained Gálvez.

"In addition, by saying that they are the women who clean, and not just room attendants, they extend their horizon of reference to many other women who also work in care and in cleaning," said Valenzuela. "They create a structure for identification rooted in solidarity with many other women who are in the most precarious layers of society and employment subject to the most exclusion," he added.

The second of the slogans is "We are the structural base of the hotel". This acts as a slogan of resistance aimed at maintaining and improving their employment conditions, mobilizing room attendants against hotels and the state. As the authors of the study point out, unlike other slogans that focus only on improvements in employment conditions (such as wages or contractual stability), this slogan aims to identify room attendants as key workers in the hotel business.

"Why should cleaning have negative connotations, if it's an essential job? Nobody's going to book a dirty hotel room. Nobody. Why isn't it given its real value? I've said it many times: we room attendants are the structural base of the hotel," said one of the workers interviewed in the study.

"This slogan empowers them, as they reassert themselves as key, active agents in a hotel's operations," said Gálvez. "What they want to convey is 'without cleaning there's nothing; it all collapses.' There are no guests, no enjoyment, no hotel... They demand recognition for the value of the work they do, and call for respect in terms of fair and decent conditions," said the expert in social psychology of work and gender.

Las Kellys' achievements

With these two slogans based on the concepts of solidarity and resistance, Las Kellys have succeeded in raising their profile and empowerment, which has helped to reinforce their message, and convey the importance of their work to society.

Furthermore, Las Kellys have succeeded not only in dignifying the image of their work that society has, but also the image that the workers have of themselves. This is essential in an organization that is striving to improve their rights and their social and working conditions.

"From the individual perspective, these female workers are not only reinforced within the social sphere of work, but also in other areas of their lives, such as in the home or the street. Being a 'Kelly' acts as a much more visible and political position, which overlaps with and enhances their other social positions, such as being a woman, mother, worker or caregiver," explained Valenzuela.

This empowerment ultimately strengthens their ability to organize, to carry out individual and collective actions, and to convey their demands to employers, unions and society in general. Feminism, which has provided the movement with basic conceptual resources to understand that its work is feminized and undervalued, plays a fundamental role in this change.

"They are very much aware that the limited attention they've received from the management structure of hotels and conventional trade unions originates in sexist conceptions that discriminate against and undervalue women's work, in general, and their work as cleaners in particular," said Gálvez.

Inspiration for other groups

Much of the work done by Las Kellys can provide inspiration to other social movements and collectives. First, their intensive use of social media to create a community, challenge their situation and raise the profile of their own aesthetic and image is important.

Other groups can also draw inspiration from their creativity in proposing alternatives and doing things differently, and from their strategies to enhance the visibility of work that was previously hidden and undervalued.

Las Kellys have succeeded in taking their struggle beyond their profession, and have involved female workers from many other sectors that are invisible, feminized and precarious. They have also succeeded in making society understand that the consequences of their working conditions are not limited to job instability and low salaries.

The study is published in the journal *Current Issues in Tourism*.

More information: Alan Valenzuela-Bustos et al, 'We are the women who clean and the structural base of the hotel': Las Kellys, the collective agency and identity of Spain's room attendants, *Current Issues in Tourism* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2023.2198119](https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2023.2198119)

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