

The Migrant Handyman Phenomenon

Summary Report for Project Participants

Background

Research over the last decade has documented the return of paid domestic labour in Europe and elsewhere. Studies have shown how it is migrant workers who are supplying much of this labour. The existing research has tended to focus on stereotypically female domestic chores: the demand for migrant domestic workers, who are usually seen as women from poor countries, is understood as coming from middle-class women in richer countries, who because of on the one hand, their increasing attachment to the labour market, and on the other hand, the continuing inequality between women and men in responsibility for domestic chores, need to buy-in help with cooking, cleaning and care. A fact that has received less attention, however, is that households' tendency to buy-in help with stereotypically male domestic chores such as gardening and household repair and maintenance, has also been increasing throughout Europe. And, research conducted in the USA suggests that it tends to be migrant men who are employed by households to undertake such chores. Our project set out to investigate this phenomenon – one we term 'the migrant handyman phenomenon' – in the UK.

The Project

Two separate studies were conducted between June 2008 and October 2009. The first study analysed a number of data sets to provide a descriptive statistical portrait of the prevalence and characteristics of the migrant handyman phenomenon in the UK. The second study was designed to investigate the phenomenon in greater depth, and consisted of almost 80 interviews, the majority conducted in and around London, with four groups: migrant handymen, British-born handymen, men and women with dependent children in households that repeatedly use handymen, and companies involved in the handyman sector.

Study 1: Key Findings

- Demand among UK households for buying-in help with stereotypically male domestic chores is on a par with feminised areas of domestic work: for example, equal proportions (6%) of households pay people to do gardening and household repairs and maintenance, as pay to have their home cleaned
- Dual earner households are more likely to purchase male domestic services than single earner households, suggesting that the phenomenon may be related to households' time squeeze; though interestingly the highest demand comes from one and a half earner households
- Compared with their presence in the workforce as a whole, migrants are over-represented among those working for pay in people's private homes
- While stereotypically female areas of housework such as cleaning and care are more migrant dense than masculinised areas, migrant men's presence in handyman-type work has been increasing and has been doing so at a faster rate than UK-born men's
- Central and Eastern European migrants, and especially Polish, have come to have a strong presence in the handyman sector, especially in and around London. These migrants are generally A8-nationals, who have been allowed to work in the UK since their countries joined the European Union in May 2004

Study 2: Key Findings

Labour-Using Households: rationale and consequences of using handymen

When we asked households why they outsource male domestic chores, we found that male time-squeeze was a key reason:

- Men reported struggling to combine paid work with family-life. There was a particular tension because while on the one hand, men were increasingly expected to be more involved in the raising of children, on the other hand, little had altered in the workplace for men, or for that matter in their own attitudes to paid work, to take account of their changing role at home
- Men reported employing a range of private strategies to resolve this tension, and for those who could afford to, paying someone else to do ‘their’ domestic chores, was an increasingly common one
- While the men we interviewed reported being more involved in the day-to-day care of their children than their fathers had been with them, this does not mean that fathers had become like mothers: reports from men and women indicated that fathers’ roles with children tended to be specific and time bounded

Buying-in help with men’s domestic chores had consequences for the gendered distribution of domestic work in households:

- It implied a double transfer from household to market and from men to women, because female partners generally took on the responsibility for organising and overseeing handymen
- This happened in part because men expressed little attachment to male domestic jobs, and in part because women, as a result of altering their pattern of paid work to fit around children, were considered to be more flexible in terms of time and location than their male partners

Handymen: experiences of work and family life

Migrant handymen who were themselves fathers endorsed active parenting and sought to act differently from their own fathers

In practice, however, they experienced more constraints in achieving these expectations than the fathers in whose households they worked:

- The uncertainty of migration meant that some men had not brought their children with them when they migrated; while migration rules meant that as A8-nationals, these men could visit home and have family visit in the UK, social and economic circumstances (e.g. lack of money, suitable accommodation and holiday entitlement), constrained such opportunities
- Those with children in the UK also reported tensions in balancing work and family-life; tensions which arose in large

That’s always slightly at the back of my mind, even when I’m with them. So, you know, when I’m putting them to bed I sometimes hurry to put them to bed a bit because then I can read [for work] just while they’re dropping off to sleep

(Householder Father)

I’m lucky enough to be quite a high income earner and, er, when I’m not working then I want to spend time with my family, not putting up shelves

(Householder Father)

But he does pick and choose what he will do, so he’s actually more traditional than he thinks

(Householder Mother)

It’s almost as if he’s let off the hook completely really and ...he just kind of doesn’t even think about it anymore

(Householder Mother)

She works three days a week...so usually we would try to arrange things to be done on the two days when she was there at the house already

(Householder Father)

It’s different, you know. I spend more time with the children. I give them more love

(Migrant Handyman)

Many have left their families behind, often wives with small children. Migrant handymen tend to send money back home so they live very modest lives here, trying to save on everything including food. The hard

part from the working conditions prevalent in the handyman-sector. Relatively low rates of pay, precarious work flows, long hours and competition, for example made it difficult to secure a satisfactory work-life balance

- Migrant handymen also felt that the long commute associated with London and the absence of informal support in the form of grandparents, contributed to the difficulties in achieving their ideal work-life balance. Interestingly, these problems were also reported by the householders we interviewed

Migrant handymen also reported positive aspects to their working lives:

- Some aspects, especially higher rates of pay compared with home, were a direct result of migration
- Others, such as the variability in type and location of work and pleasure in customers' satisfaction with a job well done, were associated with handyman work per se, and were also reported by British handymen

The handyman sector: the emergence of a migrant niche

Migrant workers are not as dominant in male areas of domestic work as they are in female areas, with British-born men continuing to have a strong presence in the handyman sector

- One possible explanation for the difference is that the rates of pay reported by householders for handyman work are generally higher than for female areas of domestic work, such as cleaning. As a result, handyman work remains a relatively lucrative source of employment for some British men. Our study was not designed to investigate the reason for the gender pay disparity, but the tendency among householders to describe handyman work as skilled is likely to be a key reason underpinning this. In contrast, feminised areas of domestic work tend to be badly paid because they are seen as requiring capacities which come 'naturally' (to women at least) and are therefore 'unskilled'. Interestingly, we found evidence that gender can trump nationality when it comes to pay, with reports of migrant male cleaners being paid more than British female cleaners

Despite the fact that British handymen remain very common, in the period we were conducting our research, Central and Eastern European migrants, especially Polish and particularly in and around London, had established sector visibility as handymen and had secured a reputation for high quality work

- This was, on the face of it, surprising, since none of the migrants we interviewed had worked professionally as handymen before coming to the UK, although several had worked in the building industry

work and not much of the social life affects them significantly

(Administrator in a Handyman Company)

It happens sometimes that we have to finish the job and we work till 9.00pm. We leave the house at 7.00 or 8.00am and work till 9.00pm and the children when we come back home we see them for an hour and they go to sleep... We are very tired... Sometimes we don't even have the energy to play with the children. It is so. And, unfortunately, people expect more and more...

It's because there is a big competition ... on the market. To get the job you have to be very flexible, at the cost of the family

(Migrant Handyman Husband and Wife Team)

I like the ability to move around all the time and the fact that I get different tasks very often

(Migrant Handyman)

I love my job because...I'm meeting new people, I'm working in different places...and you're not doing the same thing over and over [British Handyman]

- Deeper discussion with migrants though revealed that the experience of growing up in societies in which wages and wage inequalities had been relatively low, the service sector was relatively underdeveloped, and people tended to ‘make do and mend’, meant that the skills and knowledge required for handyman work had been learnt informally at home
- Householders reported valuing Central and Eastern European handymen for their skills and ability to turn their hands to anything. They were also valued over and above British handymen, however, because they were cheaper (at least in the immediate post-2004 period) and harder working.

It is important to acknowledge, though, that stereotyping was also at play, with householders and handymen alike reporting evidence of both good quality British handymen and poor quality Central and Eastern European handymen.

About this summary report

This summary report (available in English and Polish) has been produced for those people who participated in the second study. The research team - Dr Majella Kilkey, Professor Diane Perrons and Dr Ania Plomien – is very grateful for the time participants gave to the study, which was financed by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), grant RES-000-22-2590. Fuller reports on the study’s findings have been published in academic journals and in a report written for the ESRC. If you are interested in receiving copies of these, please contact Dr Majella Kilkey. Postal address: Department of Social Sciences, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull HU6 7RX. Email address: M.M.Kilkey@hull.ac.uk. Tel: 01482 465779. A summary report focusing on the policy implications of the findings will also be produced, and a copy will be sent to the study’s participants in due course.