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Palenga-Möllenberg, Ewa

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Dr. des. Ewa Palenga-Möllenbeck*

Polish "handymen" in Germany: An example for the neglected "male" side of commodified reproductive work?

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University of Bielefeld
Center on Migration, Citizenship and Development (COMCAD)
Postfach 100131
D-33501 Bielefeld
Homepage: <http://www.comcad-bielefeld.de>

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Introduction

In the industrial era, labour migration has long been virtually synonymous with male migrants in *productive* work, most typically in heavy industry. In the last decades, though, *women* working in the *reproductive* sphere have become a significant part of global South-North migration. These migrants usually perform domestic work and/or care work for children and the elderly—that is, activities traditionally associated with women, and thus account for the oft-cited "feminization of migration". The increasing demand for their services has to do with changes going on in Western societies that can only be hinted at—ageing populations, a middle class under pressure, etc.—and that make "having staff" a welcome status symbol for some, but also a perceived necessity in order to keep up with the ever-increasing demands of the job market (or "the Joneses") and to reconcile them with their family lives. In other words these women help to establish an acceptable work-life balance for those who can afford it, or feel they have to.

One thing that often gets overlooked is that "reproductive work" is not strictly female: There are also "typically male" tasks around the house that can be classed as "reproductive", such as renovations, repairs, or gardening.

The study: Polish "handymen" in Germany

The research project whose aims and initial results I would like to present here¹ looks at this "male side" of reproductive work and its commodification — that is, its "outsourcing" outside the family. It asks how male migrants who do such work help the families that hire them to manage their everyday lives—in particular, the issue of balancing career and family—, but also how the migrants themselves tackle this problem.

¹ An exploratory study on Polish handymen working in German families with dependent children. In the study I combined three methods: secondary analysis of regional statistics on handyman activities on the labour market; analysis of "brokering firms" and internet fora used by handymen and households; and finally – 35 in-depth interviews with Polish handymen, their partners, informal brokers and companies in the handyman sector, men and women in households with dependent children employing Polish handymen. The ongoing project started in May 2011 and was funded by Hessisches Ministerium für Wissenschaft und Kunst.

In Germany, as in other some countries, it is Polish men who make up a significant part of this phenomenon. As it happens, the proverbial "Polish plumber" is not just a plumber, but a "universal handyman", that has by now turned into an ambiguous (auto)-stereotype.. Accordingly, another question raised by the project is that of "gendered" national stereotypes, and how class, ethnicity, and gender intersect in what can be considered as an emerging trans-national division of labour that involves not only female but, increasingly also male domestic work.²

The strong presence of those Polish handymen is widely known in German society. At the same time, it is very hard to capture it in numbers due to the fact that a large part of this work is performed informally – something that is typical for migrant domestic work³ (although "cash in hand" is a common practice with non-migrant technicians, too, of course.) As with female Polish care workers, their presence can be called an "open secret"⁴. To illustrate this, German internet forums are full of exchanges like this one:

"Hi, can someone help me find a 'hobby handyman' who can do some small things around my apartment for 10 Euro an hour? Things like mounting ceiling lamps, installing a new kitchen sink, shower fittings and maybe some other small things."

One response to this was:

"10 Euro? I mean, the Polish guy around the corner is gonna do it for 4. That's what I keep hearing anyway..."⁵

² Compared with so called female domestic chores, the male share of commodified work is much smaller however steadily growing – e.g. at the end of 90ties averaged 10% of outsourced domestic work in 15 EU-member states was carried out by males. (Cancedda 2001, nach Kilkey 2010: 131).

³ Domestic work employment generally has unstable and low work standards which makes legalization less profitable (Geissler 2006).

⁴ This rather under researched research field (there are only few studies: in GB, USA, France, Italy) has not been explored in Germany until now although, everybody seems to know about Polish "All-Rounder"; the situation which very strongly reminds of the informal but strong presence of Polish female domestic workers, labelled by Helma Lutz as an "open secret" (Lutz 2007, Lutz/Palenga-Möllenbeck 2010).

⁵ - „Hallo, wo kann ich in Berlin einen Hobby-Heimwerker (Rentner usw.) finden, der mir Kleinigkeiten in der Wohnung für 10 Euro die Stunde macht? Dabei geht es um: Deckenlampen anschließen, neues Spülbecken in der Küche (Einbauküche) einbauen, Duscharmatur im Badezimmer anmachen und evtl. andere Kleinigkeiten (...) Karin.“

- „10 Euro? Der "Pole" um die Ecke macht das doch für 4. Höre ich doch immer wieder. :-(

Gruss Siggj“

(Quelle: <http://de.narkive.com/2006/1/14/1088105-hobby-heimwerker-stundenweise-gesucht.html>, Date accessed 28 November 2010)

To give at least an idea of the dimension: When registering a legal business, "universal handymen" usually choose the category "construction work" (Baugewerbe). Out of about 2,300 self-employed "construction workers" who registered or de-registered a business in Frankfurt in 2009, almost 1,200 were Polish.⁶ The records of the local Chamber of Industry and Commerce, membership in which is not obligatory, show a similar picture: In 2008, almost 45 percent out of 10,000 small business owners were Polish.⁷

“New fathers” and outsourcing male domestic work

Let us now have a closer look at the social settings and conditions in which the hiring of "handymen" in households takes place. Outsourcing household work seems to be something typical for the so-called "new man"⁸ – a committed father and husband who, whenever at home, is expected to spend "quality time" with his family. However, although those "new men" may spend more time with their families, they find it hard to give up their role as the main breadwinner: Therefore, somewhat paradoxically, when they have children they even tend to work longer hours than before⁹—which leaves less time for building or fixing technical things. Outsourcing such tasks becomes a solution to the predicament of having to balance the traditional male breadwinner role with fulfilling the expectations made towards them as "new men". In the ambiguous tension between traditional and modern male role expectations¹⁰, it often actually leads to a *strengthening* of the "male breadwinner model" and a reinforcement of traditional gender roles¹¹: It is usually the women who organize the outsourcing to the "technical reproductive work" that husbands traditionally used to do "after hours".¹² The handymen's work is thus strongly anchored in the existing gender relations and division of labour within the employing families. Interestingly, almost all families employing handymen that I interviewed also outsource their "female" domestic work (usually to migrants)¹³; also,

⁶ The official statistic only records cases of businesses being registered or de-registered, not the number of businesses existing at a given time.

⁷ Total: 10,468, Polish 4,663. See: Hille/Stücker 2009:4f

⁸ Edwards et. al. 2009: 8.

⁹ Maier/Küster/Zander 2003, Grunow 2007.

¹⁰ Edwards et al. 2009.

¹¹ see also Kilkey 2010.

¹² see also Kilkey 2010.

¹³ See also Kilkey/Perrons 2010

some of the women I interviewed encouraged the male breadwinner model and welcomed the fact that their partners worked long hours—as this allowed them to hire the domestic workers and handymen in the first place. At this point it also becomes clear that being able to live up to the role expectations of "modern" partnership and fatherhood is very much a privilege of the middle and upper-class. Even so, it would often remain impossible without the availability of "cheap" migrants for (male and female) reproductive work.¹⁴

Handymen work as reproductive work?

To come back to the aspect of "reproductive" work: At the beginning, I hinted that the handymen's work is "reproductive" in a similar way as the traditionally female chores that also often get outsourced to migrants. However, there is one difference not to be overlooked: Unlike typical "women's work", even simple technical work is perceived as "skilled work"¹⁵. Why then are (mostly Polish) "universal" handymen in such high demand, as opposed to more narrowly "specialized" German craftsmen? To a large extent, of course, this has to be a question of money. However, these days, also German providers are lowering their rates and willing to work "informally", so the money aspect only explains so much. The things I learned in the interviews with handymen and employers seem to point at yet another aspect. The Polish handymen usually come to Germany to work and leave their entire private lives at home. This means that they are prepared to work extremely long hours, or show up at short notice. Also, they tend to "understand" the preferences of more or less long-term employers. As a result, (especially male) employers have to care less about the technical details - like cleaning or childcare, technical jobs suddenly "just get done" without too much planning or hassle, or even having to worry about matters of taste. As one employer I interviewed put it:

"There's always something that needs to be fixed or to be done somewhere in our house. Then I just call him and he gets it done. Yeah, and he doesn't just know the ropes, but he proactively puts forward good ideas... [the business speak is authentic!] He also has good taste, I mean, he relatively quickly understood my taste and provided me with good tips then." (Stefan)

¹⁴ see also Gilles 2009, Kilkey 2010.

¹⁵ See also Cox 2010

We know from earlier research that "soft skills", a "hands-on" attitude, permanent availability and overall trustworthiness are precisely what employers appreciate in migrant domestic workers. Very much the same becomes apparent here: It is taken for granted that commodified technical chores around the house are carried out reliably and professionally (just as German professionals would do it at a higher price). At the same time, the "commodity" is immediately de-commodified¹⁶ or re-privatized: The chores are expected to be done just "like father would have done them", that is flexibly, individually and with a hands-on attitude. In the course of this, the distinctions between the spheres of "the professional" and "doing it yourself", "public" and "private", and not rarely business and friendship, are increasingly blurred. This also makes work once seen as unambiguously "productive" more similar to reproductive work—and the people who do this work more similar to what Helma Lutz has termed the transnational "new maids"¹⁷ (or, more aptly, to "new butlers") than to their local professional colleagues.

Handymen work and social inequalities

Although there is an obvious class distinction at work here, we should not be too quick to conclude that the Polish handymen are underprivileged because they are being pulled into the domestic sphere. Despite the similarities with "new maids", they are still on the side of skilled workers, which gives them more scope for negotiations about prices. In addition to their actual professional skills, factors such as language, social and networking skills have a decisive influence on how successful they are on the market—to a much greater extent than with female domestic workers. This also results in a much greater social mobility and income differences: While some of the handymen I interviewed live on welfare benefits and "moonlight" only occasionally, others seem to make a relatively comfortable living; some of them declared to earn up to 4,000-5,000 Euro per month. Nevertheless, even the most successful handymen have a relatively precarious existence in comparison with the standards of German society—strictly speaking, many of them would qualify as "bogus self-employed". It must also be noted that precarization and loss of standard employment relationships is also facing the resident workforce in Germany and other countries.

Next, let us look at how the domestic "handymen sector" became an employment niche for Poles. First, of course, there is a long tradition of labour migration between Poland and Ger-

¹⁶ Hochschild 2012

¹⁷ Lutz 2011

many. This results in a specific path-dependency—pre-existing networks and "success stories" make Germany a relatively easy and attractive target country for Poles. Second, the German labour market was not legally opened to Polish self-employed workers until 2004, and even remained closed for employed workers until 2011, so labour migrants were in constant danger of being deported—an experience that several of my interview partners had actually made. This meant that with all potential disadvantages, private households were effectively the safest places to work. Of course, this did not apply only to Poles, so it is not a sufficient explanation for the current Polish dominance of the sector.

Yet, there seems to be another reason, why Polish men work rather as handymen than in gastronomy or in trade. As has already been hinted at, national stereotypes considerably influence how handymen and their employers see each other. There are very strong positive ethnic stereotypes produced by both employers and employed which I found in every interview I conducted. Much like Polish elderly carers are seen as warm-hearted and committed—"female" virtues that are supposed to have been lost in German—, Polish men are constructed as their male counterparts: hardworking, uncomplicated, resourceful "jacks of all trades", just like German fathers are supposed to have been once, before those qualities supposedly deteriorated as a result of professional specialization and taken-for-granted wealth. The Poles, by contrast, are said to have developed a specific resourcefulness in order to cope with scarcity and poverty. This is well illustrated in the following statement by a Polish handyman:

*"The Germans may be good workers, but... they think 'why should I cheat the mechanic out of his income by fixing my car myself? That's what the mechanic is for. The water tap is broken, all you have to do is replace a gasket—that's what the plumber is for. That's not my job! I'm an office worker! [...] Do you know how many Germans don't even have a screwdriver at home? And no spanner? [The German] has no use for it. If anything happens – why, some company must be responsible."
(Jan)*

This is echoed in a statement by a female employer:

"And that's actually my experience with Poles, they're very creative when it comes to solving minor problems, they don't just buy what's available, but, maybe because they experienced scarcity, they developed creative approaches [...] A German worker would simply say 'it just doesn't work', and off he is [...]. The Poles, they don't hide themselves behind some job description—they just do it." (Anna)

So far, we have seen how the handyman's situation is influenced by inequalities in terms of class and the construction of ethnic/national traits. Finally, when we look at the category of *gender*, we see that it also has its effects: Often, the decision to take up work in Germany as a temporary migrant is motivated by a strong adherence to the traditional breadwinner role-model in the first place – not least they work in Germany allow their partners back in Poland to be stay-at-home mothers. Most migrant handyman I interviewed justify the long periods away from their families as the price they have to pay in order to secure them a relatively comfortable existence. At least as far as temporary migrants who leave their families behind in Poland are concerned, it can be said that it's their very uncompromising "*traditional man*" role that helps German middle and upper-class husbands live up to the ideal of a "new man" and "new father". This is yet another similarity with domestic female migrants in reproductive work, and in particular care-workers—often their services allow German women and mothers to focus on their professional careers. Thus, if we consider both the receiving and the sending country, it turns out that the increasing emancipation of men and women from their traditional roles in the receiving country is, at least to some extent, made possible by a reinforcement of gender roles in the sending country. To put it more bluntly, more equality for some is made possible by greater inequality for others, both in terms of class and gender roles.

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