

# Gender and Ethnic Identities among Low-paid Migrant Workers in London

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Cathy McIlwaine, Kavita Datta, Yara Evans, Joanna Herbert, Jon May and Jane Wills

Department of Geography  
Queen Mary, University of London  
Mile End, London E1 4NS

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Queen Mary  
University of London



## **Abstract**

Recent commentary on the invisibility of women within migration studies has now established that gender is central to all aspects of mobility. Yet, research which focuses on men, on men *and* women, and on men and/or women from a range of different ethnic and national backgrounds is much more limited. Drawing on a mixed methods framework, this paper discusses findings from a project examining the experiences of low-paid migrant workers in London. It illustrates, first, the fluid and contingent nature of migrant identities from a gender, and to a lesser extent, ethnic perspective. Second, it highlights the ways in which migrants often attempt to rationalise their labour market experiences in order to validate their position in low-paid and low status jobs. For men who find themselves working in female-dominated sectors, efforts to validate their position in such jobs often move around attempts to highlight the hardships such work entails in an attempt to reclaim the 'masculine' attributes of what might otherwise be seen as 'women's work'. Both men and women also often attempt to promote the higher status of their own ethnic group through claims to be especially hard working and thus superior to other migrant groups.

## Introduction

‘Here, if you arrive on ‘high heels’ [full of pride], within the first month you will walk barefoot, the shoes and the heels will be gone. I think that when I first arrived here I was a bit on ‘high heels’. But I soon realised that you could not be like that here. My work here has nothing to do with the one I do in Brazil. I have never been a decorator. I had never done a cleaning [job]. But here, you have to give it value, because that is what you have’ (Joao, a construction worker from Brazil)

Joao is from Goiania in Brazil and arrived in London over a year ago. Unemployed during his first month in London, he has since had three jobs: as a baker in a Portuguese bakery, as an office cleaner, and as a construction worker. All three of these jobs have been accessed through ethnic (friendship) networks. At the time of the interview, he was employed in both office cleaning and construction work. Given that he has a university degree and worked as a teacher in Brazil, he has experienced significant deskilling in London. He speaks very little English, and partly due to this, most of his friends are Brazilians.

This brief account of Joao’s labour market experiences in London illustrates many of the issues we want to explore in this paper. Not least, Joao’s story captures something of the fluidity of identity that migrants experience on moving to the UK labour market. Here we want to focus especially on the fluidity of gender identities, and the way in which questions of gender are cross-cut by nationality and ethnicity. While migrants have gendered expectations of work, occupations in the UK are also gendered. At the same time, as migration works to erode traditional gender divides in the UK labour market, male migrants often find themselves doing ‘women’s’ work. Such moves impact on the identities of male migrants as they attempt to make sense of, and cope with, low-status jobs.

Scholars of migration have only recently noted gender relations as being ‘a constitutive feature of the social, economic, and cultural constellations that structure migration’ and recognised the ways in which migration processes reshape gender identities (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999: 566). With such recognition, and especially in relation to the burgeoning work on transnational migration, gender has increasingly been identified as relational and closely cross-cut by race, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality (Mahler and Pessar 2006). Yet, while calls have been made for studies of the gendering of migration, and especially transnational migration (Boyle 2002), there remains little work which

focuses on the relations between men *and* women in the migration process, and even less which considers such relations from the perspective of a range of different ethnic groups. Despite a growing and significant body of work on domestic workers and sex workers throughout the world (Anderson, 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild [eds] 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Momsen [ed] 1999), nor is there much research on the ways in which male and female migrants negotiate their gender and ethnic identities across different fields of employment (Raghuram and Kofman 2004). Such a lack partly reflects the concentration of research on Latin American migration to North America and on Filipino migration throughout the world, with much less work on other flows, especially to Europe (ibid.; Pessar and Mahler 2003). So too, the focus on migrant identities, rather than mobility behaviour, is relatively new (Silvey 2004), whilst there remains considerable scope for research on the constructions of these identities at a range of scales.

Taking gender as its primary focus, this paper explores the fluid and contingent identities that emerge as migrants enter London's low paid labour market, and the inter-relations of gender and ethnic identities. It highlights the ways in which migrants seek to validate the types of jobs they do in order to rationalise their position in low paid, low status sectors of the London labour market. Such valorisation appears to be especially pertinent to male migrants, many of whom end-up in female dominated sectors. The paper draws on work in progress and is based on 341 questionnaires with low-paid workers of which 307 were migrants, and 56 in-depth interviews conducted with migrants employed in London's cleaning, care, construction and hospitality sectors.

We begin by engaging with conceptual debates pertaining to gender, ethnicity, migration and labour markets before briefly outlining the methodological framework adopted in this study. The main body of the paper is devoted to empirical findings. These are organised in three sections, building a composite picture of migrant workers identities in London. The first focuses on migrant identities, the second on gendered migrant identities, and the final part on ethnic migrant identities.

### **Gender and ethnic identities, migration, and work practices**

While early research on gender and migration focused on remedying the exclusion of women from migration studies by making them visible in migration flows, more recent work has adopted a more holistic approach. This argues that gender is an integral component permeating all migration processes at various scales whether the individual, family, state or labour market (Donato et al., 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Cranford 1999; Pessar, 2005). Such research has seen a recurring debate concerning the extent to which migration should be viewed as empowering or exploitative

for women (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999). While early research highlighted the emancipatory potential of migration for women, more recent work has been more tempered in such claims. Such work has highlighted a range of exploitative dimensions, and noted the connections between changes in gender ideologies and differing employment histories, family and state structures and practices (Mahler 1999; Menjivar 1999), class positions and (especially) ethnicity (Willis and Yeoh 2000).

Yet, while recent years have seen increasing recognition of the role of women in the migration process, the same period has seen a growing tendency to (re)marginalize male migrants. It is also rare to consider male and female migrants together, or to explore the relational aspects of masculinity and femininity (see Gutmann 1997). Reflecting wider patterns within gender research that often highlights erroneous and homogenous representations of men as the ‘pathological other’ or ‘custodians of patriarchy’ (Datta 2004; McIlwaine and Datta 2004), migration research also tends to highlight “deficit” masculinities revolving around issues such as spousal and family desertion (although see Pribilsky 2004). Similarly, the role of migration as a rite of passage for adolescent men to become adults has focused on the performance of “hyper-masculinities” often leading to gender violence, and the fact that men left behind are viewed as failures who do not take over reproductive roles (Boehm 2004), a view that is now being challenged (Manalansan IV 2006).

The need, therefore, is for a more systematic analysis of how migration creates new gendered conventions and challenges for both women *and* men. Central to this is an appreciation that gender is a relational and fluid construction, permeated by a range of different hierarchies of power. Clearly, gender relations are crosscut by other cleavages such as race, ethnicity, nationality, class, age and sexuality. At the same time, ethnicity and nationality too are constitutive of, and constituted by, migration. This is partly evidenced in the flows and patterns of transnational migration. Within specific ethnic communities, men and women may also perform different roles – with women sometimes particularly valued as bearers of tradition and culture: as ‘ethnomarkers’ charged with the responsibility of passing on values and customs (Yeoh and Willis 2004). By the same token, ethnic traditions may reproduce patriarchal conventions which are harmful for women.

These complex processes are played out, and affected by, “different scales and transnational spaces” (Pessar and Mahler 2003: 822) such that gender identities, ideologies and practices are formulated, challenged, and negotiated in manifold ways as people move across borders and maintain ties with their home country in what have become transnational social spaces (Fouron and Glick-Schiller 2001; Mahler 1999; Pessar 2005). Thus, according to Vertovec (2001: 578), ‘the

multi-local life-world presents a wider, even more complex set of conditions that affect the construction, negotiation and reproduction of social identities'. Transnational identities challenge essentialist notions of identity construction mainly because they are formed across borders and are subject to a huge diversity of influences (Huang et al. 2000; Yeoh et al. 2003). While not always explicitly acknowledged, this has important ramifications for men and women in different ways. In particular, this depends on pre-migration ideologies, the nature of hegemonic (and counter-hegemonic) gender regimes, the extent to which gender beliefs are reproduced or intensified and the type of migration undertaken (Pessar 2005; also Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992; Parrenas 2005; Pessar and Mahler 2006).

Also important here are the ways in which migrants are incorporated in to labour markets (Boehm 2004; Pessar and Mahler 2006). It should not be forgotten that the actual lives of migrants revolve around survival for themselves and their families both in situ and in home countries. Thus, ideological changes in gender and ethnic identities must be examined not only in relation to peoples' migration histories, but also in terms of how they are inserted in the labour market of 'recipient' countries and their relations with other ethnic groups in these countries.

It is recognised that the labour market experiences of migrant women are invariably shaped out of ideologies of domesticity and femininity thus reinforcing gendered occupational stereotyping (Brah 1996). Women migrants retain primary responsibility for housework and childcare, despite their participation in paid work (as do non-migrant women) (Alicea 1997; George 1998). Women everywhere suffer from stereotyping and multiple demands on their time, and low-income women migrants are especially affected because of their unequal incorporation into the labour markets of both developing Southern and developed Northern economies (Hale and Wills 2005). However, the position of migrant men is often *not* much better, certainly in terms of their concentration in the low-paid service sectors of the economy. Thus, while the 'bottom end' service jobs of the cities of the Global North have long been associated with women's work, increasing numbers of male and female black and minority ethnic *and* migrant workers are moving into this semi-skilled, low-wage, routinised and unprotected employment (Holgate, 2004; May *et al.*, 2006; McDowell, 2004).

In turn, different ethnic groups find themselves concentrated in different sectors of the labour market – something that can be attributed in part to ethnic stereotyping, partly to the role of ethnic networks in accessing work, and partly to institutional discrimination (Rydgren 2004). Yeoh and Willis (2004) illustrate the social and economic challenges that ethnic migrant men may face as

“men of colour” are forced to compete for jobs in female-dominated low-paid sectors. Conversely, while participation in ethnic enclave economies may provide benefits for migrants in general, this may be much less so for women compared to men (Gilbertson 1995). This paper considers the ramifications of these complex processes in the context of low-paid migrant workers in London.

### **Methodological issues**

Recently, there have been calls for adopting more holistic mixed methods approaches to the study of gender and migration (Donato et al. 2006). This has mainly been to counter claims that it is difficult to make generalisations from qualitative work on gender, while at the same time recognising that such studies can successfully uncover the dynamics and processes of gendered migration in ways that quantitative approaches cannot (Pessar and Mahler 2006). Thus, a combined approach can be complimentary and productive for exploring the lives of female and male migrants in holistic ways.

In reflecting such a perspective, this paper draws on a questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews conducted with workers in low paid sectors of the London economy. Our broad aim was to explore who was working, and under what conditions, at the bottom end of the London labour market. Thus, the questionnaire survey (for which we worked with London’s Citizens and a team of eleven researchers)<sup>1</sup> sought to investigate the pay, working conditions, household circumstances and migration histories of workers in four key sectors of London’s economy (see Evans et al. 2005; May et al 2006). These were contracted cleaning staff working on London Underground; general office cleaning; hospitality workers, particularly focused on luxury hotels; and home care employment. In addition, a number of workers in the food processing industry were included in the research. These were accessed through existing contacts with trade union representatives, through snowballing and also via a random cold-calling process. In total, 341 low paid workers were interviewed of which 307 were migrants. The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face in a range of languages including Polish, Portuguese, Spanish and French. The migrants came from 56 different countries with significant numbers from sub-Saharan Africa (55%) (especially Ghana and Nigeria), Latin America and the Caribbean (15%) (especially Brazil, Colombia and Jamaica), Eastern Europe (10%) (especially Poland), and Asia and South East Asia (7%). They included a range of documented and undocumented migrants.

In-depth interviews followed on from the questionnaire survey and have been conducted by the authors. In the main, access to respondents has been facilitated by following up on people who

participated in the questionnaire survey and expressed an interest in being interviewed, while other workers have been accessed via snowballing. These interviews have gathered information on migration histories, settlement experiences in the UK, attitudes and feelings towards employment, household circumstances and coping strategies, together with issues surrounding community identity and linkages with home countries. This is work in progress and here we focus specifically on 56 interviews with male and female migrants in all of the above sectors as well as construction.<sup>2</sup>

### **Gender and ethnic segmentation in London's low-paid labour market**

It is important to begin this discussion of our findings by contextualising the labour market in which low-paid migrant workers identities are constructed and reconstructed. Our questionnaire data clearly illustrates two broad patterns operating in London's labour market: namely, what we have termed a "migrant division of labour" (see May et al. 2006), which is also cross-cut by a gendered and ethnic division of labour. A migrant division of labour is clearly evident in cities such as London where a high proportion of low-paid elementary occupations are occupied by migrants (ibid. 2006; see also Spence 2005). This demand for 'low end' workers has been created by the large amounts of office space to be cleaned and maintained, together with massive building programmes in the construction sector, and a health and care sector that has become heavily dependent on sub-contracted labour. With poor wages and conditions on offer, it is often only migrants who are willing to work in such occupations, and sometimes only the undocumented.

Cross cutting such a divide, however, are also clear lines of gender and ethnic segmentation and segregation. For example, whilst almost half (47%) of the people we surveyed were women, men and women worked in quite different jobs. Generally, women worked in 'semi-private' spaces such as hotels as chambermaids (58.5% of hotel workers), and in the case of care work, the houses of clients (81.5% of workers), whilst men worked in 'semi-public' spaces such as office cleaning (70% of workers being men) or on the Underground (64% of all workers). Sectors such as construction comprised, perhaps unsurprisingly, an all male workforce.<sup>3</sup> Particular migrant groups also tended to be concentrated by ethnicity and nationality. Whilst it is estimated that the majority of London's migrants (70%) come from the Global South (Spence 2005), within our survey Black Africans made up over three-quarters of the surveyed workforce in cleaning on the London Underground. They also represented the largest share of all workers in care work (44%) and in cleaning and other services (37%). Non British Whites, in turn, comprised two-fifths of surveyed workers in hotel and hospitality, and one-fifth of workers in cleaning and other services. More than half of those employed as contract cleaners on London Underground were from Ghana or Nigeria



(58%), with a quarter of those employed in office cleaning from Latin America (26%), and just over a quarter of those employed in hotel and hospitality work from Eastern Europe (27%) (see Evans et al. 2005).

Also important were the ways in which gender and ethnicity intersected. Again drawing on our survey, Black African men were concentrated in the ‘feminised’ cleaning and care sectors, comprising 80% of all male workers cleaning on the London Underground, over half of all male care workers (57%) and just under half of all general cleaners (47%). There were concentrations of Non British White men in the hospitality sector (33%) and general cleaning (23%). Black African women were also, like their male ethnic counterparts, concentrated in cleaning on the Underground (76% of all female workers in this sector), and in the care sector (57% of all female workers in the sector), with nearly half of all women workers in hospitality being of Non British White origin (49%).

What this data illustrates very broadly is the migrant, gender and ethnic segmentation of London’s labour market. Yet, while these broad patterns can be traced, far less is known about the experiences of low-paid migrant workers in London and in particular the gendering of those experiences (for exceptions see Anderson 2001; Cox and Watt 2002). Thus we turn now to examine the nature of low-paid migrant identities across a range of labour market sectors focusing specifically on how people make sense of their work.

### **Low-paid migrant workers identities**

From a conceptual perspective, the ways in which migrants perceive themselves and are characterised by others (Vertovec 2001: 573), or in other words, their identities in any host country, are now acknowledged as multiple, fluid and dynamic (Findlay et al. 2004). While identities are constructed through people’s interaction in a range of different and overlapping domains, we want to focus here on migrant *workers’* identities, and especially those associated with work. Despite the fact that migrants, both documented and undocumented, continue to work in the ‘dirty, difficult and dangerous’ jobs (IPPR 2006: 11) that no-one else wants, popular representations particularly in the media continue to perpetuate the view that they are lazy, taking jobs from the native-born, and unlawfully accessing benefits. As Hugo (2005: 22) notes: ‘There is a great deal of myth creation in relation to migrants and migrant workers. They are frequently made scapegoats for all kinds of problems being faced by host societies’.

The migrants in our study were fully aware of these types of images. Most complained of the difficulties of securing decent employment, often because of their migrant status or ethnic group (see below). In relation to claiming benefits, most migrants were clear that they never had any intention of accepting assistance from the state, not least because there was rarely a functioning welfare system in most of the countries they had migrated from. Christina, a care worker from Nigeria, said that, “we don’t [claim], everybody work because whoever came from my country we believe in working, nobody depended, you don’t have to depend on anybody.”

This was also born out in our survey data in that 94% of people paid tax and National Insurance, whilst fewer than 1 in 5 (16%) claimed any kind of state benefits (Working Tax Credits, Child Benefit etc.). Also significant is that contributing to the tax base of the country was not confined to documented migrants in that most of those who were undocumented also paid tax and National Insurance (see also McIlwaine 2005 on Colombians). Jose, a Brazilian construction worker pointed out:

‘They [the government] should put in their head that a person who travels 12,000 km to come to a place to work and earn money, we don’t come here just to take their money away, because I pay tax. I pay at least £400 per month. That is the minimum I pay .... Where does this money go to? If I buy one glass, I am already paying taxes, because the market pays taxes but so do I ... Not only Brazilians, it is thousands of illegal people. Can you imagine how many trillions they leave to the government? What does the government do with this money?’

In light of such discourses imposed on migrant workers as well as their own material experiences, it is perhaps not surprising that many responded by consistently highlighting the difficulties of their work and how hard they had to work. Indeed, it is indisputable that their working conditions are poor. Again, on the basis of the survey data, it emerged that workers received extremely low rates of pay with 90% of workers earning less than the Greater London Authority's Living Wage for London (£6.70 an hour), with average earnings only £5.45 an hour<sup>4</sup>, and few receiving any benefits. In turn, more than half of the respondents worked unsociable hours (the early, late or nightshift), with two fifths working overtime in order to increase their earnings, usually at the same rate (see Evans et al. 2005 for more details).

The conditions of work were also poor with both male and female migrants complaining about the unhealthy, and at times unsafe, working environment. Kwame from Ghana who was a cleaner on the Underground reported that his work was:

‘Very hard, train work is very hard, picking trains, because we’ve got a lot of rubbish inside that I open before coming here and afterwards we have to take all that rubbish outside to the bin room. Because you know carbon dioxide, sometimes if you use like cotton, white cotton, cleaning your nose you see there is a black carbon deposit because of the electricity down here and the train will be using it... put your hand on the wall or you use some glove to clean it, before you know it it’s black. It’s no good for our health’.

Women also complained about how difficult their jobs were. Zofia, a chambermaid from Poland who worked in a large hotel complained about the number of rooms she had to clean, often as many as 20 per shift.

‘I was too exhausted. In the first month I had bleeding from my nose I was so tired and weakened. Every day that I had to go there I wanted to cry. They gave this list of rooms that one has to clean. Every morning we have to go to the office and to stand in the queue to get this list of rooms and the uniform. It does make one feel like a ‘Cinderella’”.

Indeed, migrants in all sectors complained about their workloads, repeatedly arguing that they were doing the work of at least two people. This was especially marked in contract cleaning and hospitality work. Workers cleaning offices were often exasperated by the amount of work they were expected to do, saying that they had to do everything in a rush in order to meet the targets and often without sufficient cleaning material. Angela, a Portuguese cleaner who worked in the offices of a bank noted how she had to clean 20 offices in her shift, only managing to empty the rubbish bins in 3 hours, after which she only had 3 hours to clean the desks, vacuum the floor and clean the bathrooms and kitchens. She complained that her managers ‘think that cleaners are machines’. These workloads often led to physical illness. Just as Zofia had nose bleeds because she was so tired, Pedro, a Brazilian office cleaner had constant pain and swelling in both arms because of his workload: ‘The work load is too heavy, too heavy. Many people don’t show up for work because it is too much work. I have a problem in my arm, both arms, because of the workload. I’ve been in the doctor twice and he prescribed a medicine but the pain remains’.

Others felt that the main hardships they endured were not just about the hours and workload, but from their experiences with both their supervisors and managers and with their clients. In hospitality, chambermaids frequently complained about their treatment at the hands of housekeepers. While this usually involved verbal abuse and especially humiliation in front of other colleagues, in several extreme cases, physical abuse was noted. Sylwia, a Polish chambermaid in a hotel reported how one housekeeper slapped another Polish woman in the face because she didn't understand the instructions she was given in English. This same housekeeper often bullied other workers, pushing them, screaming at them and calling them names. In the care sector, workers had most problems with their clients as Gladys, a care worker from Ghana noted: 'some clients are very, very greedy, one hour they want you to do a whole lot of things, and you tell them you can't do it all. They don't understand why you tell them you can't do this before you go, "Make breakfast, make me the bed, do this, clean this."'

Such were the hardships associated with their work, several migrants were keen to stress that native-born people or English people would not do these sorts of jobs. This comment was often related to cleaning toilets, which many people felt epitomized migrants' work and was the job that no English person would do. Therefore, not only did migrant workers feel the need to emphasise how hard they worked in an attempt to counter the negative stereotypes that portray migrants as lazy and stealing non-migrant's jobs, but they also endured very real hardships in terms of working conditions. Having said this, it is also important to point out that this varied somewhat according to sector in that conditions were reported to be much worse in the hospitality and cleaning sectors compared with construction and care work which was also reflected in wage levels, provision of benefits and general working practices.

Overall, migrants self-identified as hard-working, low-paid and often highly exploited workers carrying out work that no-one else would do. Most accepted this work as part of their search for betterment in terms of well-being, justified in terms of still earning more than in their countries of origin, and of having to support family 'back home'. Often however, this search turned into one of mere survival. Benedito, a male office cleaner from Guinea Bissau voiced his frustration: 'Frankly I don't like it, but I am forced to like it, because I need to earn money to live. The day I find something better, I will probably leave it'.

### **Negotiating gender identities among low paid migrant workers in London**

With hardships experienced by migrants across all the labour market sectors in London, another important element in the construction of their identities was their concentration in low-paid

occupations which were also associated with a relatively high degree of gender stereotyping. With the exception of the construction sector which is a strongly masculinised workspace, care and cleaning have routinely been viewed as ‘women’s work’. This reflects wider patterns in the UK labour market where jobs still tend to be defined as either ‘women’s’ or ‘men’s work’. For example, the Equal Opportunities Commission in the UK have noted that in 2002, just under half of women and just over half of men were in occupations where they outnumbered the opposite sex by at least two to one (Guerrier and Adib 2004). However, it has also been noted that there has been some movement towards men and women taking up more atypical work in the UK in terms of gender (Hakim 2000), and there has also been recognition that this is occurring more rapidly at the bottom and top ends of the labour market (Rubery 1996).

At the same time, while it is now acknowledged that migrants are increasingly moving into the lower echelons of predominantly service sector occupations in the cities of the Global North (Sassen, 1991, 1996), little is known about how gender is negotiated between male and female migrants. Instead, the focus has tended to be on how migrant women have been involved in ‘global care chains’ as they take over the reproductive work of middle-class women to allow them to go out to work (Ehrenreich and Hochschild [eds] 2002). This also has important ramifications for class ideologies and the construction of racial and ethnic identities (Mattingly, 2001) (see below). While some research has begun to examine the experiences of women and men in non-traditional occupations in the UK (see Simpson 2004; Lupton 2000), this has not been considered in relation to low-paid migrant workers.

To recall, our quantitative analysis highlights that significant gender stereotyping exist, but also that the general picture is much more complex than first appears. Although chambermaids and care workers were mainly women, migrant men were also employed in these occupations. In turn, men predominated in what are traditionally seen as ‘female-oriented’ occupations such as cleaning offices and on the London underground, as well as in the more traditional construction sector (see above). Thus, a complex process of negotiation occurs whereby gender intersects with migrant status, as well as with ethnicity and class to create compound constructions of migrant identities in the workplace (see also below). These at once reinforce and subvert traditional gender and occupational identities. This is made even more complex by the fact that migrants arrive in the UK labour market with identities influenced by their experiences in their home countries as Donato et al. (2006: 6) note: ‘Migrants often become particularly aware of the relational and contextual nature

of gender as they attempt to fulfil expectations of identity and behaviour that may differ sharply in the several places they live’.

It is widely acknowledged that notions of work and occupations are critically important in the construction of masculine identities and especially hegemonic masculinities, often much more so than the construction of feminine identities for women (Lupton 2000). Yet, in all cases, workplace identities, just as wider gender and migrant identities, are negotiable and potentially fluid (Collinson and Hearn 1994). In our research with construction workers, migrants repeatedly reinforced the notion that their work was ‘men’s work’, describing it as tough, hard and requiring physical strength that only men had. Conditions in male-dominated sectors such as construction were described in especially bleak terms. Many men spoke about the difficult nature of their jobs that involved carrying very heavy material and working under arduous conditions. One Brazilian respondent, Roberto, stated that: ‘It is a very heavy and tiring job. Sometimes it is tiring psychologically but it is even more tiring physically. If it were stressful besides being physically demanding, that would be horrible.’ The climate in England exacerbated these conditions as Paulo, also from Brazil reported:

‘Working all day in the snow, [it was] another winter. The snow burned me here [hand], it was 4 degrees below zero. Pure ice! Boots, helmet, it would all freeze up, and I’d slip and fall over .... Then I worked under the snow. That was the first winter with real snow that I lived through. [it was] Eight hours of snow on your face, snow, rain and cold. Every day. There was one day when the cement mix froze up, it must have frozen up at minus 5 or 10.’

In turn, the accounts of the men highlighted the performativity of gender. They spoke about their uniforms that effectively symbolised masculinity. Their steel capped boots and hard hats were necessary because of the danger of their work; one worker, Danilo, from Brazil talked about the need for his boots: “Just imagine one of those boards on the foot. You would lose half of your foot”. There was also evidence of male camaraderie in construction work with a significant proportion of migrants referring to the fact that they had learnt to swear in many languages or had taught their co-workers to swear in their own language. Danilo spoke about his colleagues on his work site:

“There are always two to four Brazilians in the building site. There are some black men that are great fun! They try to speak Portuguese: ‘Thank you! What time is it?’ Speaking in

Portuguese and trying to mix in with us! I have already taught many people, - Thank you and please! And because they had asked me to, I taught them swearing as well”.

For women migrants working in cleaning or care work, their occupational identities were described as deeply feminised in relation to hegemonic notions of ‘natural’ caring and nurturing roles of women rooted in the private sphere of the home (Laurie et al. 1999). Hellen, a care worker from Ghana, discussed how she had trained to be a nurse but really only had to learn the technical elements as the rest was innate:

“So what happen, I went to do my Access to Nursing, even though I had the care stuff like, you know what I mean, as a woman, there’s a saying that as a woman, you have to care for somebody, it was in me, though but I didn’t have any theoretical knowledge in care ... I love caring for people. I love to look after vulnerable people, last year I left college to look after my mum, my grandma back home and my auntie’s a nurse and that used to motivate me”.

Thus, women migrants tended to reiterate that their jobs reflected their roles in the home. Daisy, a cleaner on the Underground from Zimbabwe noted that her job was, “Cleaning. Like domestic. Like you are doing in the house, cleaning, wiping everywhere, yeah that’s the job I’m doing”.

While these patterns reflected traditional patterns of what was deemed to be women and men’s work, there was some subversion of these traditional stereotypes, especially among men who worked in cleaning and care sectors. In turn, it emerged that men developed a range of compensatory strategies and rationales for coping with the challenges to their masculinity (see also Guerrier and Adib 2004; Lupton 2000; Simpson 2004). These strategies involved highlighting certain aspects of their job over others, justifying their occupations in particular ways linked both with social and cultural roles in their home countries, and in terms of the economic exigencies they faced as migrants. Few male migrants explicitly acknowledged that their work was traditionally associated with women. Instead, they stressed that cleaning in particular was not something they were used to, but something that they learnt from, as Carlos, a cleaner from Honduras noted: “It was very difficult for me because I had never held a vacuum cleaner in my life, a Hoover, never. And cleaning, I had never cleaned in my life. It’s true ... It was difficult, but you have to learn everything in this life”. In the same way, Abiodun, a tube cleaner from Nigeria said that his job was the worst thing he’s ever done in his life: “I’ve never done cleaning job in my life, never. It’s

either a teacher, or the office managing this or, yeah, never done it before. It's a new experience and it's, one never, one never stop learning". Indeed, this focus on skills was also evident in masculinised sectors such as construction work where many of the men we spoke to highlighted the fact that they had had to master various skills (such as plastering, rendering) in order to work in construction.

Just as the difficulties of their jobs were an integral part of their identities as migrants, men tended to stress this more than women, especially those working in 'female' sectors. Thus, Paulo, a Brazilian construction worker, who had moved in and out of construction jobs, described his time washing up in a restaurant as, "worse than building work" and that, "When I left this washing up job they had to employ two men to replace me.... You'd wash about 2000 to 3000 plates per day, and 300 to 400 large pans." Furthermore, he would not "advise any woman to do that, only if it is to pay for the ticket [back home]." In some cases, men and women had very different perceptions of the same job. For instance, Kwame, a male tube cleaner from Ghana complained about how hard it was to clean tubes noting, "The work is very hard, especially picking train [collecting rubbish]. It's not my job at all. You're working the platform and the train ... the trains are tips". Yet, Daisy, from Zimbabwe and also a tube cleaner said that the work was relatively easy (although she was in a minority): "there's a lot of work to do but the conditions, they are good, they are good conditions, they are very good. If you do your work you can rest, but if you don't do your work they keep on coming telling you to do your work but if you do everything perfect, no problem" (see also Lupton 2000 on how personnel management becomes tough and hard once men move into it). Migrants like Angela, a Portuguese woman who worked as a contract cleaner, illustrated how she had stepped in to help a young man who had just started cleaning in her building as he was overwhelmed by the amount and the nature of the work he had to do.

Another extremely significant compensatory strategy for male migrants to cope with their jobs in service sectors was to justify it in terms of their social roles in their host countries, however unfounded these might be in terms of gender roles and relations. For instance, Joshua, a care worker from Ghana pointed out: "For the care work, I had a passion, that passion is with them, because when I was back home I was looking for my granddad and the like, so I had a passion, that was fine". Similarly, Eafeu, also a carer from Ghana spoke about the fact that caring for the elderly came naturally to him as it was the same as looking after his own elderly relatives: "The work that you do for them is more greater than the reward that you get for such work. So you've got to be sympathetic, like maybe you helping your own old dad or your own old mum, to me that's how I



think of it”. These references to culture and tradition are particularly interesting given that it is not all that common for men in African societies to take on caring roles (see Datta forthcoming).

Therefore, although men stressed how difficult their work was in female-dominated sectors, their strategy was not only to reconstruct their jobs to highlight the more masculine elements, as has been noted in other studies (Lupton 2000; Simpson 2004). Instead, they also emphasised the need to draw on their caring traditions and experiences linked with their home cultures and domestic lives. Another male carer from Mauritius, Parvez, highlighted:

“But I personally think the work is more about loving people. If you really love human beings it’s easier for you than doing things only for yourself ... the minute you go into care only for money, but then it’s difficult because then you find case of abuse, case of negligence, you know, those kind of things”.

The final form of justification that all migrants used to explain their jobs that was linked with gender identities was to reiterate, as Benedito noted above, that they needed any form of work regardless of its nature as they had to support families either in the UK or their home countries. In other words, in order to fulfil their traditional roles of breadwinners, it was acceptable to do jobs that were both beneath them and associated with women as long as they could survive and help their families. Ryan, a tube cleaner from Nigeria hated his job, saying that that only uneducated ‘riff-raffs’ would do it in his country. Yet he did it to be able to return and be a success: “Because my vision is to be a successful man, a chartered accountant. That’s why I’m here, that’s my aim”. Ryan’s account is important for two reasons: first it highlights the deskilling experienced by the migrants in our research in that people were often well educated with professional qualifications (Datta et al. 2006; Evans et al. 2005), and second it illustrates the fact that gender segmentation within the labour markets in home countries are also being shaped by broader processes. As Ryan notes transport cleaners in Nigeria were *not* women, but rather men from a different class position from himself.

Therefore, as we have seen, migrant identities are contextual and relational, especially for men, in terms of how gender is negotiated in the workplace. Yet, as also mentioned above, these identities are heavily intersected other types of social difference that in some cases overrides migrants’ gender identities.

### **Ethnic and national identities among low-paid migrant workers in London**

Gendered migrant identities are closely cross-cut by race, ethnicity and nationality. Just as gender influences where and how migrant men and women are inserted into the labour market, it is also subverted and reconstructed in relation to their ethnic and national identities. Indeed, in terms of how migrant workers are perceived by others and where they are placed in the labour market may have more to do with their ethnicity and nationality than their gender. As noted earlier, ethnic and racial discrimination in labour markets have been explained in terms of ethnic stereotyping, the use of ethnic networks in accessing work, and institutional discrimination (see Datta et al. 2006; Rydgren 2004). The prevalence of ethnic stereotypes in the British labour market is evident in terms such as ‘the Polish Plumber’, a phenomenon which has long been noted in relation to foreign domestic workers (see Stiell and England 1999). What is perhaps less evident is the widespread nationality and racial stereotyping *among* migrants with the co-existence of both positive and prejudicial stereotypes which resist or attempt to subvert prevalent discourses. Thus, while migrant workers often self-present their own communities using positive stereotypes (see Kelly and Moya 2006 on Filipino nurses), other ethnic groups may be presented in largely negative terms.

The latter was particularly evident in our research in relation to migrants from Eastern Europe. Jose, a Brazilian man who worked in the construction sector, admitted that: “It is awful to say that, but I am an anti-Polish person,” which he based on his perception that Poles were rude, disrespectful and wanted all the jobs for themselves and their friends. Competition from Eastern Europeans was noted repeatedly by many migrants. Paula, a Portuguese chambermaid in a hotel said that: “Before there was a lot of Mongolians but now they want those from Poland because they say yes all the time [to lower wages].” Yet, several Poles themselves stereotyped other migrant workers, especially on racial grounds. Mirek, a Polish construction worker argued that: “black people, who I consider, see us as a threat. We are white, usually better educated. English, who, I think are not officially racist, but are rather open, would prefer to employ Polish, who work harder than a black person.”

This relates to the other widespread process of self-identification of nationality or racial group as superior to others, probably as a form of coping strategy. As well as using a racist discourse, Polish construction workers also repeatedly highlighted their European status that gave them a marked superiority over other migrants. As such, Polish workers claim of their ‘whiteness/Europeaness’ is a resource which gives them both an insider status while also rendering them (racially) invisible in what is predominantly an anti-immigrant society (see also Colic-Peisker 2005). Thus, Mirek argued

that: “I am coming here to work and I can work legally as a citizen of a member state of the European Union, while others often are here because of prosecution or had to escape war.” Another Polish worker, Adam noted the conflict among Eastern Europeans, and especially with Lithuanians: “Also there is a sort of bitterness between Polish and Lithuanians. I think they are trying to prove that are as good as Poles”.

While Poles were often stigmatised for under-cutting already low wages, migrants also highlighted more subtle ethnic differences. Abina, a female Ghanaian care worker said that Ghanaians were much superior and better suited to care work than Nigerians, and as a result their clients always preferred them: “Nigerians are always hard like, they wanting to do, they want you to like, things to be done the way they want it. Ghanaians are calm, they try to take their time to do things”. Most migrant groups stressed how hard they worked, not just as migrants as noted above, but also compared to other ethnic groups seeking thus to emphasise their own value in relation to workers from other groups. Thus, like Mirek’s comments about the Poles in construction, Jose said that the Brazilians were the hardest workers in the same sector. Migrants also noted how they worked harder than the English, reflected in Artur, a construction worker’s comments: “in general English work less, and Polish work more, although they may have the same position”.

Interestingly, women migrants appeared to be less likely to comment negatively or to boast of their prowess as workers belonging to a particular ethnic group than men, perhaps linked with male migrants’ need to cope with the potentially emasculating effects of their work in female-dominated sectors as well as the poor working conditions they faced. Therefore, the comments made by Sylwia, a Polish chambermaid were common among many female migrants: “We did not mind where people come from. We would sit together in the canteen; there would be a black girl, a Russian and Polish girls. There wasn’t this division according to nationality”. Indeed, some of women and men that we interviewed stressed that it was easier to make friends with migrants from other ethnic groups than with British people and that work was important as it presented an opportunity to learn about other ethnic groups. It is also important to note that there were also divisions within ethnic and nationality groups with several migrants complaining about their own people (see also McIlwaine 2005). Angela, a Portuguese cleaner, for example, said that the Portuguese were ‘gossipers’ in the workplace and that you had to maintain your distance in order to gain respect from them. In a similar vein, Ewa, a Polish hotel worker said that Poles rarely helped each other out if they were not close friends beforehand, especially when someone has first arrived.

In her view, they were only friendly to those who were established in London because they are less of a threat to other people's jobs.

Overall, ethnic stereotyping was reinforced by both institutional discrimination in the labour market and through ethnic and nationality networks. Perceived racism was widespread among migrants. This is reflected in the words of Sally, a Nigerian cleaner working on the London Underground, who commented that, "as a black person...it's really, really hard ... the most job offer the black person [can get] is a cleaner job." Indeed, even when people have managed to secure British qualifications, this was no guarantee of a professional job. Joshua from Ghana, who combined his work as a carer with studying, already had two masters degrees from a British university yet still complained that he couldn't get a job. In his view, this was because of ethnic and racial discrimination: "because of my accent and the colour of my skin."

Networks that people developed both within and beyond work were also critically important. Most migrants accessed work through ethnic networks reflected in the fact that 65% of our survey respondents used personal contacts to secure their positions (see Evans *et al.*, 2005; May *et al.*, 2006). For example, there were concentrations of Brazilian and Polish workers in construction work, as evidenced by Abel, a Ghanaian care worker who had previously worked in construction stated that, "I work with Polish, as well, they are much in the construction firm, Polish workers, very, very well, they are there. They are working in construction very much, the Polish." In particular, the role of supervisors and managers was crucial in determining the ethnic character of particular workforces as they were responsible for the recruiting process. Carlos, a cleaner from Honduras, reported how his supervisor was Bolivian and he only employed other Latin Americans (although not necessarily from Bolivia, but from a range of countries). Barbara, a care worker from St Lucia, also that her Ghanaian manager was more friendly with the other Ghanaian workers, and was more likely to employ other Ghanaians as well as give them extra shifts. However, it's also important to emphasise that while there is ethnic and national clustering, there is also some diversity of nationalities within sectors, with the main defining characteristic being that the vast majority of people working in these sectors are migrants rather than native born (Evans *et al.* 2005). Having said this, there were discernible ethnic hierarchies within sectors. For example, within construction, while day labourers came mainly from a range of Eastern European and African countries, supervisors, managers and business owners were predominantly English or Eastern European.

Finally, while ethnic and racial invisibility may be craved in labour markets so as to facilitate entry, there is clear evidence of a re-affirmation of ethnic identities in broader life illustrating the importance of ethnic communities in ensuring survival in London. As we have discussed elsewhere, ethnic communities manifest themselves through faith based, regional and national organisations and are a fundamental feature of both migrant men and women's lives beyond the workplace in the capital (see Datta et al. 2006).

## **Conclusions**

Drawing upon our research experience in London, this paper has highlighted the very complex and dense nature of migrant identities in low-paid work which are not only gendered but also rooted within ethnic and national differences. Our research highlights how a migrant division of labour works hand in glove with a gendered and ethnic division of labour and leads to the formation of new gendered identities as men, in particular, find themselves in feminised sectors of the British economy. In turn, they seek to validate their employment position by developing a series of compensatory explanations and strategies that both validate their own positions, and often denigrate others from other ethnic groups. While women's participation in male-dominated sectors is less apparent, their labour market participation is in itself significant in challenging established gender norms and conventions (see Datta et al. 2006).

Gendered identities are also clearly cross-cut by ethnicity and nationality. Here, we found extensive evidence of stereotyping, ethnic clustering and institutional discrimination. Especially significant was that migrant groups often spoke about their own communities using positive stereotypes while putting forward some very prejudiced and racist stereotypes of other ethnic communities that they worked alongside in London's low-paid labour market. Again, this can be understood as a strategy that migrants employed to valorise their own ethnic positions within the labour market while undermining that of others. Indeed, in many cases, ethnicity and nationality appeared to over-ride gender divisions within and between communities.

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<sup>2</sup> This paper draws upon 18 interviews conducted with care workers; 14 with construction workers; 10 office cleaners; 5 hospitality workers and 9 cleaners on the London Underground.

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<sup>3</sup> Quantitative information for the construction sector is not included here as it was conducted at a later date than the rest of the questionnaire survey. Information on construction is based only on the in-depth interviews.

<sup>4</sup> The National Minimum Wage at the time of the questionnaire survey was £4.85.

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email: [geog@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:geog@qmul.ac.uk)  
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