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Masculine hierarchies in migrant homosocial workspaces: dominating and subordinating masculinities of Tajik labour migrants in Russia

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how masculinity practices transform in homosocial workspaces of labour migrants. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in Russia and Tajikistan, the article scrutinises the experiences of Tajik migrant men who work in the largely informal construction sector in Russia. Their interactions are thus embedded in this country's capitalist system, as well as its migration and labour regimes which are characterised by irregularity and discrimination. It is argued that work relations and hierarchies emerging between migrant men in receiving countries are shaped, on the one hand, by cultural ideas of masculinity and social norms from sending communities and, on the other, by neoliberal forms of precarity. They both contribute to creating new power dynamics, including work-related masculine practices. The article analyzes the process of how two masculinity types emerge which are situational and complementary to each other. The first is dominating masculinity which refers to practices of commanding people, in this case other migrant workers. The second is subordinating masculinity, a concept that we advance to capture the perceptions and practices of migrant men who temporarily accept the authority of other migrant men, such as intermediaries who are informally in charge of workers.

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Introduction

Gender identities of migrant men and various changes in their masculine practices have been on the radar of both migration and gender scholars for several decades. These changes occur due to the migrants' immersion in gender systems that differ from those in which they were socialised, and as a result of their need to adapt their gender practices in accordance with the gender, migration and labour regimes of destination countries (Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009; Choi 2019; Donaldson and Howson

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2009; Hearn, Blagojevic, and Harrison 2013; Kukreja 2021). One of the areas where migrant men demonstrate contextualised gender adaptability and internalisation of new gender practices is the workspace (Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009; Datta et al. 2008; Kukreja 2021). Given the importance of breadwinning for the construction of men's gender identity, paid work has always been one of the central components of men's masculine manifestation (Hollander 2014). However, in the context of labour migration, paid work acquires an even more prominent role since it is often the unavailability of work in sending countries that sets migrant men on the move (Datta et al. 2008; Kukreja 2021; Olimova and Bosc 2003). Therefore, even being employed in low-skilled, low-paid, physically tough sectors, traditionally seen as non-masculine in receiving countries, allows migrant men to maintain their masculinity, because they can remain providers and demonstrate their ability to endure hardships for the sake of their families (Gaibazzi 2010; Kukreja 2021). Migration and labour regimes, precarity and discrimination in receiving societies contribute to re-shaping migrants' gender practices and cause new hierarchies to emerge among migrant men which depend on their ability to navigate this new environment by using their individual skills (Gallo and Scrinzi 2016; Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2018; Kukreja 2021).

While masculinities in the workspace are often approached either from the perspective of male privilege and masculinity contest culture or that of precarity and feminisation of migrant men's employment (Berdahl et al. 2023; Çınar 2020; Galea, Powell, and Salignac 2023), this article focuses on work relations and hierarchies between migrant men in unregulated work settings. Exploring the work relations of Tajik migrant men who are employed in the largely informal construction sector in Russia, this article contributes new insights on power relations between migrant men in homosocial workplaces. Bringing migrant men's work relations, hierarchies and masculinities into focus, we analyze the negotiations of professional hierarchies and their outcomes. These processes involve the construction of migrant dominating and subordinating masculinities. The article argues that in the context of largely informal capitalism, which lacks state regulation of migrants' work relations, and the existing discrimination towards migrants, migrant men rely on cultural understandings of how temporary work relations and hierarchies should be maintained. Tajik migrant communities often replicate dominant Tajik social and gender structures in Russia, which are largely based on age and generational subordination. These cultural nuances are particularly relevant within Central Asian kinship relations where younger generations are expected to respect and obey whose who are older (Abashin 2014; Reeves 2013; Roche 2014; Samadov 2025a; Urinboyev 2021; Varshaver and Rocheva 2014, 19). However, in the labour migration context some new, temporary hierarchies emerge and can challenge the traditional ones. As we will show, the possession and successful application of what we define as dominating masculinity may allow migrants from younger generations to enjoy higher positions in work hierarchies, while older generations voluntarily accept subordination despite their traditional authority.

The article relies on two interrelated concepts. First, it deploys the lens of dominating masculinity which is situational and refers to practices of commanding people and events (Messerschmidt 2018, 125). Second, we propose the concept of subordinating masculinity which builds on the theoretical grounding of dominating masculinity by Messerschmidt (2018). This type of masculinity is complementary to dominating masculinity in

that it concerns practices of men accepting the dominating authority of other men in specific situations and sites such as workspaces. The two concepts do not refer to men's identities per se, but rather to situational practices that men adopt, in this case in the migration context. While these concepts might seem binary, we would like to argue that they should be viewed as relational, as they enhance the qualities of each other. The two masculinities are not fixed but rather constantly negotiated in migrants' everyday practices. Importantly, migrants' subordinating masculinity does not involve only practices of submission, but it also incorporates disagreements, distrust and negotiations of work relations and conditions. To demonstrate the complex nature of subordinating masculinity we provide two case studies: the first one is a model case of subordinating masculinity as compliance and the second involves migrant men's disagreements and subtle resistance as part of their subordinating masculinity.

Our analysis demonstrates that to successfully construct and maintain dominating masculinity, migrant *brigadirs*[1] (foremen) need to conform with a set of norms and rules that regulate migrant employer-employee relations in the context of widespread informality and precarity. Thus, Tajik *brigadirs*' dominating masculinity is based on features which distinguish them from most of their countrymen whom they manage at work. Firstly, their legal status, their knowledge of the market, an established clientele, a good knowledge of Russian and good communication skills allow men with dominating masculinity to successfully navigate in the Russian capitalist labour market. Secondly, being *shustryy* (i.e. having an ability to creatively and productively resolve problems) and possessing *mardigari,* which in Tajik refers to male dignified behaviour and generosity (the word *mard* translates as a man), allow these men to build up a good reputation and gain the trust of their migrant compatriots.

Vasquez del Aguila (2014, 226) argues that '[p]art of the expected performance of manhood is to be in control of others and not to listen and obey orders', which also shapes the masculine behaviour of migrant men. Although some men undoubtedly strive for power to manifest their masculinity, specific migration contexts introduce conditions which require men to accept subordinating masculinity to fulfil their providing responsibilities. Thus, subordinating masculinity is manifested through the apparent acceptance of a *brigadir's* authority in work settings. However, subordinating masculinity does not mean simply following orders, it also implies 'doing masculinity'. The suffix 'ing' implies a certain level of individual agency which interplays with structural dimensions. Consequently, the first added value of this concept is that it captures practices that are shaped by cultural characteristics of masculinity brought from the country of origin, which in the context of migration blend with the specific capitalist logic of the host country. This means that in contrast to Tajikistan where masculinity practices are characterised by rigid traditional hierarchies and practices, migrant work relations in the Russian labour market are largely unregulated. The second added value of this concept is that it allows us to analytically grasp how men, even if they find themselves on lower or, at times, the lowest levels of work hierarchies, simultaneously maintain their masculine status without being emasculated. Hence, subordinating masculinity does not refer to emasculating practices. It implies that subordinating men have the power to determine whose dominating masculinity is worth their support based on cultural understandings of manhood.

The following sections of the article explain the methodology, outline the context of Tajik labour migration to Russia and offer further theoretical explanations. It then

presents two cases of migrant men's work relations to exemplify processes of how dominating and subordinating masculinities are constructed and negotiated. The conclusion discusses broader analytical implications of the two concepts.

Methodology

The analysis draws on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author in several cities in Russia and in Tajikistan between 2019 and 2022. Research involved 45 Tajik migrant men employed in low-skilled sectors in Russia, such as construction, taxi and delivery services, communal service and catering. Their age varied from 19 to 45 years of age. Research methods included semi-structured, in-depth and life history interviews, informal individual and collective conversations (both in-person and online), and participant observation. The last proved to be the most fruitful method as it allowed the researcher to observe internal work relations between migrants. Masculine practices visible on these occasions often differed from idealised descriptions of work-related masculinities emerging from interviews.

In terms of positionality, the first author is originally from Tajikistan. Shared gender, as well as cultural and linguistic ties helped him to establish contact with research participants. Access to migrants as well as their trust was also facilitated through common acquaintances. These personal connections enabled the author to deploy participant observation methods while staying at migrants' places in Russia, accompanying them during their daily routines and participating at various social gatherings and events in both countries. Tajik migrant men tend to live at their place of employment, especially if they work in construction. Continuous stays on several construction sites were thus particularly beneficial in terms of gathering data on migrant men's homosocial professional and personal interactions in both work and leisure settings. After leaving the field, the author stayed in touch with interlocutors for a few years through mobile applications, thus maintaining relations with them and following their life and work trajectories in Russia.

Potential reputational damage initially made several migrant men reluctant to share their experiences, as they were unsure if their insights would remain confidential. It took a substantial amount of time to prove that these insights had not been revealed to other men in their community (Samadov 2025b). All research participants were anonymized in publications. The data were analyzed in MAXQDA using a combination of content and discourse analysis.

Tajik migrant men in Russia

Tajik labour migration to Russia started gaining momentum in the mid-1990s. This occurred because of the civil war that erupted after Tajikistan's independence which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The conflict resulted in high levels of destruction, unemployment and poverty (Olimova and Bosc 2003). In Russia, Tajik migrants mostly occupy low-paid, low-skilled and precarious jobs in sectors such as construction, taxi and delivery services, trade and street cleaning. The exact number of Tajik labour migrants is unknown due to inconsistencies between the official migration statistics released by the two governments. In 2022, the Tajik government reported that out of 10 million citizens around 693,000 Tajik labour migrants were working in

Russia (Yusufzoda 2022). However, Russian officials indicated that 952,000 Tajik labour migrants entered Russia in the first half of 2022 (Rubleva 2022). Over the last three years, the scale of migration has started to decrease due to anti-migrant sentiment in Russia, intensified migration controls and deportation measures.

Like migrants in other contexts, Tajik migrant men have developed new ways of manifesting masculinity because of their experience of living and working in Russia (Reeves 2013; Samadov 2025a). Experiences of intolerance and precarity in Russia significantly contribute to shaping migrants' masculine practices and their personal and work-related interactions (Reeves 2013; Samadov 2025a; Urinboyev 2021). Such negative experiences became even more prominent in the wake of an increased anti-migrant rhetoric after Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 and a terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall in Moscow in March 2024. In fact, a group of Tajik migrant men were subsequently accused of the latter attack.

To cope with hardships in Russia, and to minimise risks and maximise potential benefits, Tajik migrants tend to rely on support from transnational migrant networks, which facilitate the arrival, accommodation and employment of newcomers. Furthermore, they provide migrants with other types of support, such as legal and linguistic support. These networks are based on informal structures, practices and ties. Work relations are often coupled with kin, friendship and locality-based connections (Urinboyev 2021). Such social compositions of migrant networks contribute to a transnational dominance of Tajik gender norms and traditional age and generation hierarchies that tend to regulate relations among migrants. Regardless of the norms prevailing in the receiving society, a migrant network maintains 'its own forms of domination and subordination between old and young, men and women, pioneers and followers, "smart guys" and "donkeys"' (Abashin 2014, 21). Therefore, Tajik migrants continue to adhere to Tajik hegemonic masculinity and femininity ideas which rely on a complementarity of male and female social roles, Muslim norms and conventional age hierarchies.

Another specific feature of Tajik migrant communities in Russia is its predominantly homosocial nature. This occurs due to gender specificities of Tajik migration, whereby most migrants are men (Florinskaya 2022, 84). This is especially visible in the male-dominated construction sector. Homosocial relations of Tajik migrant men in Russia involve a vast spectrum of social practices that ensure a continuation of conventional relations among migrants in everyday work and social interactions. In contexts where formal legal mechanisms are absent or inefficient, as in Russia, work relations established between migrant men are regulated through a set of rules which combine street rules, ideas of masculinity, 'village rules, Sharia law, state law, or anything in between' (Urinboyev 2021, 67–68).

Given the complexity of the labour and migration regimes in Russia and the largely unregulated nature of labour relations between migrants and their employers, migrants rely on the services of intermediaries in various spheres. These include housing, legalisation of their status, procurement of work permits (so-called *patenty*), employment and healthcare (Reeves 2016; Urinboyev 2021). Given that *brigadirs* frequently share social bonds with migrant employees, their social and work-related interactions are regulated by the social norms in Tajik society, including ideas of masculinity.

Work is often seen as a space where men compete with each other (Berdahl et al. 2023; Britton and Logan 2008; Vasquez del Aguila 2014). Simultaneously, the unpredictability

and precarity of migrant work, including in the construction sector, motivates men to internalise predictable masculine practices, which ensures trust and reliability in their relations (Tallberg in Galea, Powell, and Salignac 2023, 174). Additionally, migrants' social bonds and their transnational embeddedness strengthen the level of trust and create 'a sense of social responsibility' among migrants which works both as a social glue and a control mechanism that regulates migrants' relations in the transnational context (Urinboyev and Eraliev 2023, 582–583). The idea of social responsibility also implies the responsibility of a *brigadir* to stand up for his employees. Concurrently, migration introduces new forms of inequalities among migrant men. For instance, legality contributes to reshaping social relations that are traditionally based on age divisions. Therefore, younger migrants with a documented status may start enjoying greater authority than their older but illegal compatriots (Kukreja 2021). Hence, the realities of the migrant labour market in Russia, i.e. precarity, legal inequalities and Tajik social norms, influence the work environment. Dominating and subordinating masculinities emerge and are negotiated in such contexts, as the next section explains.

Masculinities in migrant homosocial workspaces

As this article focuses on homosocial relations between migrant men in workspaces, we approached a group of migrants who work together on a construction site as a separate organisation with its own structure, norms and divisions of labour. In this case, a migrant *brigadir* is the head of the organisation and functions as a manager who identifies and secures construction projects, sets up the workspace structure, distributes tasks and deals with organisational issues.

Such an approach is important for our analysis because, as Collinson and Hearn (2005) highlight, organisations are 'particular social collectivities' (291) which are formed 'in the context of preexisting (organizational) social relations' (292). Since 'organizations … are always embodied in social contexts' (292), social and work relations among workers should be seen through the prism of their embeddedness in social and work contexts. This is particularly relevant for relations between migrant workers as 'organizations and occupations are gendered at the level of culture' (Britton and Logan 2008, 110). These relations are governed both by the social norms and social orders of sending societies, and the labour and migration regimes of destination countries that introduce new formats of work, social interactions and hierarchies. Donaldson and Howson (2009, 210) stress that migrant men 'usually bring with them firm beliefs and well-established practices about manhood and gender relations'. Indeed, Urinboyev's (2021) analysis highlights the importance of masculinity in migrants' work interactions. Exploring Uzbek migrants' work relations in Russia, Urinboyev argues that in the context where formal access to justice remains limited, migrants' intra-group professional interactions are built on a mixture of street laws, traditional ideas of masculinity, rules of the sending communities and the receiving states' laws. Because work is rarely formalised by official contracts, intermediaries' words, behaviour and positive reputation are crucial to establish trust relations with workers. Migrants' workspace organisation is further influenced by their everyday experiences of racial, ethnic and socio-economic discrimination that condition their marginalisation. Our research among Tajik migrants also confirms that in migrant networks the intermediaries' reputation is vital. If an intermediary is notorious

for unfair treatment of fellow migrants, other migrants refuse to work with him or ask for a full advance payment to avoid being deceived. Thus, subordinating migrants use collective agency through migrant networks to secure their payment and 'punish' dishonest intermediaries. It is, therefore, important for migrant intermediaries to honour their word and maintain good relations with employees. This shows that migrants with subordinating masculinity can, to a certain extent, leverage existing structures to their benefit rather than being solely constrained by them.

Organisations are not only '*social places* of organizing' but are also spaces of 'social structuring of social relations and practices' where masculinities are constructed and maintained through acts of 'control, collaboration, innovation, competition, conformity, resistance, and contradiction' (Collinson and Hearn 2005, 292). As explained in the introduction, two concepts are particularly relevant in our analysis of work hierarchies and masculine practices in migrant men's workspaces in Russia; these are dominating and subordinating masculinities. Dominating masculinity involves actions of 'commanding and controlling specific interactions and exercising power and control over people and events' (Messerschmidt 2018, 125). It is important to distinguish dominating masculinity from the concepts of hegemonic and dominant masculinities. Tajik hegemonic masculinity largely emerges and is sustained in relation to men's family members because being a good son, husband, father and provider is central for constructing hegemonic masculinity in this country (Samadov 2025a). Messerschmidt (2018, 125–126) highlights that if dominating and dominant masculinities 'fail culturally to *legitimate* unequal gender relations' they 'are thereby constructed *outside* relations of gender hegemony'. Thus, when work hierarchies and relations are established between migrant men who work together and have similar ethnic, social, class and cultural backgrounds, as well as professional skill sets, a *brigadir*'s dominance over his subordinates is not culturally or socially legitimised. His authority over other men at work is situational and temporary, as it is bound to a concrete work setting limited by specific time and place. Therefore, the construction of dominating masculinity involves contextual and situational relationships and hierarchies which do not necessarily imply practices of hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt 2018, 125). A similar process can be seen in our case studies where hierarchies between migrant men do not embody hegemonic masculinity.

Moreover, dominating masculinity differs from dominant masculinity. Dominant masculinity is formed through practices which are most recognised and lauded in a specific context but do not create masculine hegemony (Messerschmidt 2018, 76). In the case of Tajik migration, some features associated with migrant men's dominating masculinity, e.g. being *shustryy*, having valuable networks and a legal status, can also be viewed as indicators of dominant masculinity. However, when seen in the context of migrant work relations, the successful utilisation of a person's skills and assets introduces new power hierarchies among migrant workers. Therefore, although the factors that shape dominant and dominating masculinities may be similar and may contribute to reinforcing both masculinities, it is important to analytically differentiate between them and specify the context where dominating and subordinating masculinities appear. For instance, being *shustryy* in general might be seen as an aspect of dominant masculinity. However, in the specific context of migrants' work-related interactions, this skill allows *brigadirs* to flexibly and promptly solve

different work-related issues to the benefit of the whole team. It helps them to appropriate and maintain their dominating masculinity, i.e. a supervisory position and authority vis-à-vis ordinary workers. Consequently, the dominating masculinity lens allows us to showcase the intersection of professional authority and masculine identity in the homosocial settings of migrant work. Distinguishing between hegemonic, dominant and dominating masculinities shows that these masculinities might affect each other but they operate on various levels and shape different relations and hierarchies.

Tajik *brigadirs*' dominating masculinity is manifested through controlling the process of work, giving orders and exercising power over their fellow migrant employees at work. To sustain their dominating masculinity, migrant *brigadirs* must be able to identify, secure and manage construction projects, effectively communicate and negotiate with clients, secure payments and be able to perform all types of work. To do so, they need to possess legal status as well as the relevant professional and language skills, knowledge, reputation and resources required to successfully manage a construction project. As Reeves (2016, 94) emphasises, 'knowledge is often the posrednik's [intermediary's] most valuable commodity'. All of this helps *brigadirs* to navigate the complexities of unstable and competitive work relations on the Russian labour market where Tajik migrants are perceived as cheap labour, lack institutional protection and are vulnerable to fraud schemes. In such unpredictable environments, reputation and trust are fundamental. *Brigadirs* and workers often come from the same region or village back home. Although these ties ensure trust and reliability, there is also a transnational control and punishing mechanism in place that helps to regulate formally unregulated work relations among migrants in Russia. For example, if *brigadirs* do not honour unwritten agreements with team members, their family members back home might experience community pressure as a measure to force them to keep their word (Urinboyev 2021).

Apart from trust and solidarity, cultural norms including local concepts of masculinity also play an important role in regularising work hierarchies and relations of informal migrant male workers (Urinboyev 2021, 67–68; Urinboyev and Eraliev 2023, 582–583). Our research shows that since migrants' work relations are characterised by informality and vulnerability, *mardigari* is seen as a central characteristic of migrants' masculinity. It implies being honest and supportive towards compatriots. It functions as a kind of work ethic in unregulated work settings. As with being *shustryy*, *mardigari* is an important quality for men with both dominating and subordinating masculinities, as it builds an image of honest men who keep their word, fulfil responsibilities and support fellow migrants whenever possible. Importantly, *mardigari* is mostly expected in relations with fellow compatriots rather than with Russians, as cheating clients is normalised, whereas deceiving migrant countrymen is perceived as non-masculine.

In turn, to analyze gender practices of migrant men who do not enjoy authority at work, i.e. that occur in opposition to dominating masculinity, we propose a new concept of subordinating masculinity. We argue that it grasps hierarchies and power relations in homosocial work environments, which are key points in analyzing relations between masculinities. As in the case of hegemonic, dominant and dominating masculinities which materialise in different settings and contribute to the emergence of different inequalities (Messerschmidt 2018), it is essential to distinguish

between various forms of subordination. For example, subordinated masculinity emerges in relation to hegemonic masculinity and is 'constructed as lesser than or aberrant and deviant to hegemonic masculinity, such as effeminate men' (2018, 29). As an example, Connell (2005, 79) highlights that '[g]ay masculinity is the most conspicuous' although not the only form of subordinated masculinity. This concept, however, is not suitable to analyze work relations of straight migrant men in homosocial spaces. Therefore, we advance the concept of subordinating masculinity, which in our case emerges due to the professional relations of migrant men. Unlike subordinated masculinity which is imposed on men who embody 'deviant' practices and are often seen as non-hegemonic, subordinating masculinity is accepted by men voluntarily and conditionally in the context of specific power dynamics and, therefore, does not imply a deviation from established norms.

We believe subordinating masculinity fills the gap in literature on masculinities and masculine relations in homosocial work contexts. In contrast to dominating masculinity, subordinating masculinity refers to the practices of men who follow instructions and conform to the control and authority of dominating men. Lacking necessary skills, professional networks and/or legal status, migrant men who adopt subordinating masculinity accept the dominating authority of their supervisors. However, this lack of authority does not deprive subordinating men of agency or the means to negotiate existing risks. Indeed, *brigadirs* rely on their dependents' work performance and need to maintain a good reputation in their eyes to sustain the trust of both fellow migrants and clients in Russia. The sphere of work offers migrant men several leverages vis-a-vis *brigadirs*. As will be seen below, this subordination is subject to both work conditions and how the *brigadirs* manifest their dominating masculinity.

The emic notion of *mardigari* can also be part of subordinating masculinity because it assumes that Tajik men should fulfil their share of work honestly. However, it is men with dominating masculinity who bear more responsibility, as they are expected to support and represent the interests of their compatriots at work. In the largely informal Russian labour market, reputation is a valuable capital and can easily be ruined transnationally given that migrants tend to work with men coming from the same locality in Tajikistan. While facilitating trust between *brigadirs* and team members, belonging to the same locality also enables men with subordinating masculinity to exert influence on the work process and results. Consequently, the lenses of dominating and subordinating masculinities help us identify relational power dynamics which emerge between migrant men in unregulated work relations and are governed by ideas of *mardigari* in the context of informality and discrimination.

The migration and labour regimes in Russia create an additional level of hierarchy, or even reverse usual hierarchies, in that intermediaries acquire work authority despite their lower positioning in the age hierarchy. The factor of age is important because in Tajikistan it is a category that plays a crucial role in constructing dominating masculinity when men share similar cultural, economic and social capitals. However, having skills, legal status and ability to secure construction projects is not sufficient to maintain dominating masculinity. To develop lasting dominating masculinity in the context where migrants are seen as dangerous 'others', intermediaries also need to build reputation and follow

unwritten norms of *mardigari,* mutual support and trust that might contradict the capitalist requirements of a client-oriented approach.

Two case studies explicate the proposed concept of subordinating masculinity and illustrate interlinkages of dominating and subordinating masculinities.

Shifting masculine hierarchies in homosocial workspaces

Fozil and his brigade: a textbook case of dominating and subordinating masculinity

Fozil, in his 40s and *brigadir* of a team of Tajik workers, embarked on the migration path in the 1990s, shortly after the Soviet collapse. Although he worked in various spheres in Russia, e.g. bazaar trading and taxi services, he prefers construction. The group supervised by Fozil during this research consisted of eight permanent members with whom he shared kin, friendship or locality-based relations. Two men were in their late 50s, one of whom was Fozil's uncle, whereas the rest were either the same age or younger than Fozil. They have been working together for several years, with other people joining ad hoc if additional manpower was needed.

In this team, Fozil was responsible for finding clients, negotiating the terms of work and receiving payments, communicating with clients, purchasing and delivering construction materials, as well as distributing the pay between the brigade members. When Fozil was not busy looking for new projects and negotiating with clients, he also did manual work like the others given his expertise and ability to perform the same scope of work as his supervisees.

During fieldwork at the site where the men worked, it became clear that the relationships within the brigade were less hierarchical than one would expect between men of different ages in Tajikistan. Their work relations constituted an interesting entanglement of friendship and kinship ties on the one hand, and professional relations on the other. The disruption of Tajik conventional age-based subordination was manifested in Fozil's higher place in the hierarchy, although in the team there were older people with similar skills. Such distribution of power, revealing Fozil's dominating masculinity, occurred for several reasons. Only he possessed even the most cumbersome documents, including residence registration and, therefore, did not fear being stopped by the police, fined and even deported. His significantly better knowledge of the Russian language and construction market as well as the skill of being *shustryy* allowed him to strike profitable deals and solve problems. All these aspects of Fozil's professional and personal identity enabled him to appropriate and successfully exercise dominating masculinity, meaning that other team members accepted his authority thereby manifesting their subordinating masculinity.

A person's legal status in Russia does not automatically guarantee a positive outcome in the case of an encounter with the police, given the inconsistencies of the migration system and constant legal changes. Nevertheless, it allows migrants to navigate the city much more freely. Hence, legality clearly contributes to shaping migrants' gender practices and experiences in host countries (see Kukreja 2021). Although Fozil's team members did not complain about their semi-legal status, they mentioned the difficulty of being confined to one apartment for several months. For example, they had to look

out the window each time they wanted to go to the grocery store to make sure that there were no police patrols nearby. They preferred Fozil to be fully responsible for the shopping to minimise the possibility of encountering the police (see Samadov 2025a). This dependency on Fozil, even in such mundane matters, enhanced his dominating masculinity as a *brigadir* and, correspondingly, emphasised the workers' subordinating masculinity.

A key aspect of Fozil's dominating masculinity was his *shustryy* skill, which was manifested in successful management of construction projects, negotiation of terms and ability to make extra money. When the procurement of construction materials was delegated to Fozil, clients were presented with higher bills than the actual cost. Fozil was, therefore, able to make extra money by cheating his clients. This scheme became possible due to unofficial agreements with vendors of construction materials, in return for a promise to buy materials only from their shops. Even such connections with vendors displayed the dominating masculinity of an experienced and *shustryy brigadir*. While negotiating prices insured more favourable interest in payment for the whole scope of work, the cheating scheme was generally perceived positively by migrants who viewed it as an inevitable practice and compensation for their low income. Reflecting on this practice, Fozil commented that without cheating the clients it would be hard for migrants to earn sufficient money in Russia, due to the onerous migration and labour regimes and the existing competition on the labour market where migrants compete for jobs not only with the local population but also amongst themselves (Samadov 2025a). More importantly, as Fozil mentioned on several occasions, he did not put the extra money in his own pocket. Instead, he spent it on the needs of the whole brigade, for example, buying groceries. Although there was no way for workers to check how much money Fozil made from these price differences, the fact that he used the money for the good of his brigade vividly demonstrated his *mardigari*. This amplified his dominating masculinity among the workers and fostered their loyalty. Fozil's dominating masculinity in the workspace also positively affected his dominant masculinity as an honest and trustworthy man, friend and relative, as well as his hegemonic masculinity as a provider for his family.

The *shustryy* skill is also manifested in a *brigadir*'s ability to persuade clients that a renovation or construction is progressing well, despite some visible or hidden deficiencies. This allows *brigadirs* to save the time needed to correct the deficiencies and leaves a client satisfied with the scope of the work performed. Analyzing the market of temporary housing and the role of intermediaries in arranging accommodation for Central Asian migrants, Reeves (2016) highlights the importance of social skills for intermediaries' work. The central skill involves the ability to effectively present oneself as a reliable and trustworthy person with good negotiating skills 'who knows "what to reveal, and what to conceal"' (2016, 97). These same qualities were successfully incorporated into the dominating masculinity of Fozil who knew how to be persuasive towards clients.

Fozil and his brigade believed that Tajik migrants are perceived only as cheap labour on the Russian labour market. In such a context, besides ensuring that the clients are satisfied with their work, Fozil was also responsible for defending his team's interests, which is another sign of his *mardigari*. Commenting on Fozil's *brigadir* performance, one of his workers said: 'If you are a supervisor, you have to offer something in return for the ability to take something from your workers (…),

to establish mutual understanding so that your workers start trusting you'. Instead of a masculinity contest, one could observe that the men's work relations were based on cooperation which was conditioned by their experiences of marginalisation. Fozil's dominating masculinity was successfully performed not only thanks to his skills, legal status and approach to money distribution, but also due to shared views on the hardships of Tajik migrants in Russia. In return for the benefits that the workers enjoyed due to Fozil's dominating masculinity, the workers accepted their subordination and demonstrated trust and loyalty towards Fozil.

However, the nuances of dominating and subordinating masculinities became visible during a quarrel between Fozil and three temporary team members who refused to follow Fozil's instructions and decided to return to Tajikistan, leaving their assigned work unfinished. This disagreement resulted in broken trust, a larger scope of work for the others and the team's inability to meet deadlines. After returning home, the temporary workers might also start gossiping about the quarrel, which would present Fozil in a negative light and cast doubt on his *mardigari* and undermine the image of his dominating and dominant masculinities. Such social sanctioning through ostracism can occur when most brigade members working in Russia come from one small locality in Tajikistan which allows the community to transnationally monitor and regulate social and work relations. This practice also exemplifies the ability of subordinating Tajik men to oppose a *brigadir's* dominating masculinity and potentially unfair treatment by employing such methods as gossiping.

The conflict became known to other brigade members who were not directly involved as at that time they were renovating another apartment. During the conversation between Fozil and his uncle Karim, an older and equally experienced man working under Fozil, Fozil's dominating masculinity was acknowledged despite conventional Tajik age and generation hierarchies. Having heard of the details of the conflict, Karim told Fozil:

> If you're responsible for work, you're the one who should command the rest of the group, even if they're your older brothers and uncles. You tell them to sweep, and everyone should sweep, you just give them what they earn. When you're selected as the boss, no one else should decide what to do. For example, I'm 57 and when you tell me what to do, I never refuse. If anyone, even once, says no, you immediately give them what they earned and say: 'Take your things and get lost'. Even if he's an exceptional professional, you just cross his name out.

This passage showcases a peculiar intertwining of work and kin hierarchies in the form of negotiations between Karim's dominant masculinity as an uncle, i.e. the one who has the traditional authority to give advice to Fozil, and Fozil's dominating and dominant masculinities as the team's *brigadir*, which he gained in the migration context. Since their professional relations are regulated informally, Karim as an older man had the authority to teach Fozil and point to the weaknesses of his nephew in front of the rest of the team, despite his lower position in the work hierarchy. Nevertheless, Karim also clearly stressed the importance of Fozil's maintaining his dominating position and even suggested using violent methods:

> You should have hit them with a stick. Had you done it, this situation wouldn't have occurred. Now they'll go back to Tajikistan and spread gossip about you. If someone doesn't know how to work, it's ok, you can teach him. But if you taught him and he still refuses to do as he's told,

> you should immediately fire him. It doesn't matter if he's your son or brother. I've been working for you for so long and haven't said a word against your orders.

This conversation demonstrates two interconnected aspects: the neoliberal organisational norms of the migrant workspace prioritising market rationality and profit on the one hand, and the importance of a cultural understanding of work ethics and support in transnational migrant communities on the other. Although beating with a stick would have been unlikely in practice, gossiping might indeed have harmed Fozil's transnational reputation if the practices of his dominating masculinity were seen as unfair. However, the passage also shows that men with subordinating masculinity are similarly expected to follow the rules of subordination if they are properly instructed and paid by a *brigadir*.

Despite his authority as an uncle and a senior in the Tajik age and generation hierarchal system, Karim assumed and openly manifested subordinating masculinity towards Fozil. Simultaneously, the fact that Karim criticised Fozil in front of other group members and instructed him how to manifest dominating masculinity demonstrated Karim's ability to manifest non-subordinating masculinity and enact his agency. This episode thus demonstrates nuances of work relations among migrant men which are largely determined and shaped by social and cultural norms, whereby professional relations are intertwined with generation hierarchies. Cultural norms are important to analyze work relations of migrants because 'in the implicitly structured organizations neither the relationships among people nor those between people and the work are strictly prescribed' (Hofstede 2001, 375). Overall, work relations and hierarchies in Fozil's brigade present a mixture of capitalist relations and Tajik social norms that involve *mardigari*, age and generation hierarchies. Instead of engaging in a masculinity contest with each other, migrants' work relations are guided more by ideas of solidarity, support and *mardigari,* which appear necessary in the context of precarity, inequality and marginalisation. This environment allows younger men to challenge age and generation hierarchies and appropriate dominating masculinity thanks to their skills, knowledge and regularised status; factors which create new inequalities that migrant men did not experience in their home countries.

Anvar and his brigade: subtle confrontations between dominating and subordinating masculinities

The case of Anvar, another Tajik migrant *brigadir* in Moscow, and his brigade offers a different constellation of dominating and subordinating masculinity. In contrast with Fozil, Anvar's dominating masculinity has been constantly challenged because workers did not feel that he was fair toward them. Having worked in the construction field for over 20 years and having obtained Russian citizenship, Anvar managed to create a clientele and build an image of a reliable Tajik *brigadir* who performed renovations in private apartments for a low price. Like other Tajik *brigadirs*, Anvar mostly worked with Tajik migrants from his community. As he said:

> There are lots of migrant workers, they call me every day. Often, I don't even answer their calls or tell them that I have no vacancies now. Migrants call me directly from Tajikistan, mostly from my town.

This quote reveals not only the scale of Anvar's work but also his self-confidence. Anvar undertook the same *brigadir* duties as Fozil, and, therefore, took a bigger share of

payment. In 2020, Anvar was supervising a team of four migrant men with whom he shared kin and neighbourhood ties: Firuz and Daler in their 30s, and Khurshed and Eraj in their 50s. Together, they were renovating an apartment in Moscow's suburbs. As per agreement, Anvar was supposed to receive 150,000 rubles out of the 600,000 rubles payment, whereas 450,000 was supposed to be divided among the others.

The brigade members were unhappy for several reasons. First and foremost, the renovation was taking longer than expected. The project was supposed to be finished within two months but at the time of this research it was already their third month, and two or three more weeks were needed. Second, they held Anvar responsible for the delay in the delivery of construction materials. Anvar, in turn, kept blaming the client who was not in a rush and was only allocating money for the materials from his monthly salary. Third, the workers turned even more resentful when they learned that Anvar had already taken his entire share of the money, while they kept receiving payment in small tranches. Fourth, throughout the renovation process the client kept introducing adjustments to the initially agreed plan. This made the work more difficult and time-consuming and the migrants were unsure if their extra labour would be paid. Addressing their questions about extra payment, Anvar replied ambiguously that it would depend on the quality of their work. The lack of trust in Anvar's ability and willingness to stand up for them, combined with the workers' non-involvement in price and work negotiations, made them anticipate the worst. Since the brigade members perceived it as unfair treatment, they doubted Anvar's *mardigari* as a *brigadir*. Firuz was prepared to resort to the last argument against the client, which was the threat of a divine punishment: 'I will tell him: Give us our money, or if you don't, Allah won't let you live here peacefully'. Being aware of the absence of any legal leverage on the client and unsure about Anvar's *brigadir* skills and integrity, Firuz raised the only argument he could use.

Like Fozil, Anvar was the only person in this brigade who had full legal status and was not afraid of navigating the city. Although the workers possessed patents and residence registration, they had had negative experiences with the police and preferred to stay in the apartment that they were renovating. During the two-week fieldwork with this brigade, migrant workers went out to the local shop only twice. It was Anvar who was responsible for bringing groceries and anything else that the migrants required.

Although Anvar occasionally performed manual work in the apartment, the workers did not want his presence because he was always pushing them to work more. Arriving early in the morning, Anvar hurried them to start working and at times stayed with them until 8–9 pm. In addition, Anvar often asked the team to work on Sundays, which was their only day off as per informal agreement. Despite Anvar's help with manual work, his constant control demotivated everyone. Yet, regardless of the team's subordinating position, the workers did not always submit to Anvar's authority; for example, they did not immediately start working when Anvar arrived early or they refused to work beyond the agreed time. They also wanted Anvar to inform them beforehand if the client wanted to come on Sundays so that they could plan their own social activities in the apartment. They sometimes invited their own guests, although Anvar always disapproved claiming that the client would not like it. The workers considered it to be his responsibility to cover for them. When Anvar stayed at the apartment for too long, the workers would say: 'Don't you have a family and home to go?', hinting that it was time for him to leave. When Anvar stayed with them for meals, they also asked him to

contribute to buying groceries. This shows that despite their subordinating masculinity the team members did not simply accept Anvar's authority, as it is part of dominant masculinity to be more assertive.

Although the workers admitted that their work was not always flawless, Anvar would endlessly ask them to redo something. Such an approach irritated them and resulted in arguments because the workers considered the flaws to be very minor and wanted Anvar to cover for them in front of the client. As Firuz said: 'Anvar shouldn't stay here all the time, his main responsibility is to find a common language with clients and "push our work through" which he fails to do (*kora guzaronida natonistestay*)'. The team shared the opinion that Anvar somewhat lacked the *shustryy* skill, which affected their pay, work and time. According to Firuz:

> Even if you're the best expert but can't communicate properly, you won't be able to successfully work with clients. You need to have a bit of sharp-wittedness (*kamtar shustryaki dar-koray*) to divert the client's attention from flaws, talk about other things. But this moron always tells us what we should do, while he's only interested in stealing materials.

As this passage shows, there was another issue that undermined the workers' conditional loyalty towards the *brigadir*: the additional income from construction materials. The extra income was fully appropriated by Anvar and never shared with the brigade, not even in the form of covering the expenses of groceries as Fozil did. Although the team had no agreement regarding this money, the workers believed that Anvar should have shared at least some of it with them. Anvar's unwillingness to do so was perceived as a lack of *mardigari* because they felt that the distribution of money was not just, especially given Anvar's lack of *shustryy* skill. No access to this extra income made the workers resentful about their subordinating and Anvar's dominating masculinities.

Moreover, not being directly involved in negotiations with the client, they thought that Anvar was interested only in satisfying the client's demands and his own benefits. The client was planning to start the construction of another house and in hope of getting the project Anvar wanted to complete the ongoing renovation with minimum shortcomings. However, Anvar's prioritising of the owner's wishes, while leaving his brigade's interests unattended, influenced their perception of Anvar as a self-interested and client-oriented man who preferred to support Russians instead of his countrymen. Anvar's compliant and somewhat submissive attitude towards the client demonstrates a reverse hierarchy, whereby Anvar manifested subordinating masculinity compared with the client's dominating one. Anvar's compliant behaviour and his unwillingness or inability to persuade the client whilst taking his workers' side became the main reason for their disappointment with Anvar's dominating masculinity.

The dissatisfaction with Anvar's performance became visible one Sunday, when the migrant brigade had a day off. One of the older members was drinking beer in the apartment, when Anvar suddenly appeared together with the client to check on the progress. Although the owner did not show any disapproval at that moment, Anvar later told the workers that the client did not want them to drink alcohol in his apartment. To demonstrate his authority and prove his support for the team, Anvar told them that he had shouldered the blame by telling the client that he had allowed it, thus implying that

the workers had asked him for permission. The workers were not sure whether it was the client or Anvar himself who did not like them drinking in the apartment. They all reacted negatively to Anvar's comment by demonstrating their frustration with Anvar asserting that it was their day-off and they needed neither Anvar's nor the client's permission to open a bottle of beer. Even those who did not drink alcohol for religious reasons were angry at such a humiliating indication of their lower position in the hierarchy. Therefore, in their eyes, Anvar's demonstration of dominating masculinity went far beyond his professional authority. As mentioned above, the workers were irritated with his authority and openly resisted Anvar's desire to control their private space and time.

Another humorous but telling example of the workers' implicit sabotage of Anvar's dominating masculinity concerned a newly installed toilet. Despite Anvar's continuous requests that they used a different, old toilet, as soon as Anvar left, the workers immediately used the new one. Firuz commented: 'He will grumble (*khurkhur mekunan*), he will grumble, let him grumble, I don't care' which made the rest of the team laugh and follow his example. This subtle boycott illustrates the team's unwillingness to accept Anvar's dominating masculinity and a refusal to accept the subordinating masculinity that would be expected vis-à-vis the *brigadir* in the workplace.

The brigade believed that Anvar, being a *brigadir*, was not *shustryy* enough. In their eyes, he also lacked *mardigari* since he was only interested in his own gains, which resulted in more work, longer time and uncertainty for the brigade. Simultaneously, their dependence on Anvar was too high to explicitly challenge his dominating masculinity because they had already done the greatest share of the work and wanted to get their money. The precarious life of migrant workers in Russia and the absence of legal leverages over the *brigadir* made them tolerate their subordinating masculinity and maintain good relations with Anvar in case they had no other option but to approach him again in the future. This, however, did not preclude small acts of subversion against him.

Discussion and conclusion

Our article analyzed power dynamics concerning masculinities in migrant homosocial workspaces. We explored the experiences of Tajik migrant men embedded in Russia's capitalist system and migration and labour regimes characterised by irregularity. We showed how migrant men's work interactions and hierarchies are formed by both neoliberal forms of precarity and cultural ideas of masculinity manifestation. In terms of its broader contribution, besides offering an application of Messerschmidt's concept of dominating masculinity in the labour migration context, our study presented the concept of subordinating masculinity. As we have shown, this allows the practices of work-related subordination to dominating masculinity and its nuanced questioning to be examined.

While in Tajikistan men have a similar set of skills and a legal status, the harsh realities of the labour and migration regimes in Russia condition the construction of new hierarchies in workspaces. This occurs in the absence of formal mechanisms that would regulate work relations between labourers. Consequently, migrant *brigadirs* capitalise on both their soft skills and language skills as well as their regularised status and expertise in the construction field to build their dominating masculinity, supervise the team and receive a

bigger share of payment. Migrant men who either lack these characteristics or the willingness to take on more responsibilities appropriate subordinating masculinity, thereby following the instructions of a *brigadir,* despite existing age and generation hierarchies which would play in their favour back home.

As the first case study revealed, there are certain expectations between migrant *brigadirs* and subordinating workers. Given the transnational application of social norms from the migrants' pre-existing social ties in the home country, dominating migrant men are expected to bear 'social responsibility' (Urinboyev and Eraliev 2023, 582) for their brigade, manifest *mardigari*, and apply their *shustryy* skills for the benefit of the whole group. Subordinating migrant men demonstrate their support by accepting and approving the *brigadirs*' authority and following their orders despite age and generation hierarchies. This is also a sign of *mardigari* since brigade members honour their agreement with *brigadirs* and perform honest work. This strengthens work relations based on trust and mutual support between migrants and motivates workers to accept their subordinating position for the sake of practical benefits. Contrary to Vasquez del Aguila's (2014, 135–136) observation that migrant men feel emasculated when supervised by their male compatriots whom they see as equals, in our research a cooperative approach can be seen in work relations between migrant men which develops in response to alienation and precarity.

However, such a cooperative approach is not the only form of work relations that may link dominating and subordinating masculinities. As the second case illustrated, multifaceted hardships can contribute towards mistrust because of migrant workers' high dependence on *brigadirs*' services. Migrant men's dominating masculinity is thus conditioned by an environment where 'the now dominant logic of the "neoliberal" capitalist market promotes the formation of the self-interested, self-reliant "desiring subject" in an increasingly privatised, consumerised, and hierarchised socioeconomic landscape' (Hird 2016, 137 quoted in Hearn 2020, 266). In the context of migrants' marginalisation, this self – and client-orientation of *brigadirs* makes the workers subvert their subordinating masculinity and implicitly sabotage the *brigadirs'* dominating masculinity by doubting their competences and *mardigari*. This shows that migrant men with subordinating masculinity do not simply accept their *brigadir*'s authority, even though they depend on it. By demonstrating their disagreements with the *brigadir* and sabotaging his orders, they protest against the lack of *mardigari* and an instrumental approach to employees. Although their protest might not be visible to the *brigadir*, it is visible to other migrants. Should they have other opportunities in the future, they will not work with the *brigadir* who, in their opinion and experience, lacks integrity and *mardigari*.

Overall, the concept of subordinating masculinity challenges the idea that men constantly compete, striving for dominating masculinity. Instead, it allows us to analyze the practices of migrant men who demonstrate loyalty and subordination by accepting authority. However, this obedience is conditional because subordinating migrant men constantly observe other men's dominating masculinity, assessing whether these men's practices of dominating masculinity correspond to their cultural expectations *(mardigari* and being *shustryy*). Thus, subordinating masculinity is not only about being submissive because of capitalist, unregulated work relations, it also involves monitoring, assessing and regulating others' dominating masculinity based on the migrants' understanding

of fair cooperation and appropriate masculine performances vis-à-vis others. This shows that dominating masculinity is not stable and unidirectional. Applied together, the concepts of dominating and subordinating masculinities reflect relational dynamics between the two masculinities.

As for the broader implications beyond research on the nexus between migration and gender, our findings contribute to organisation and leadership studies, as well as studies of informal labour. By delving into migrant men's hierarchies in the workplaces, we have demonstrated that work relations between migrant men extend beyond merely professional responsibilities. In contrast with the common approach that looks at workplace masculinities through the prism of the masculinity contest (Berdahl et al. 2023), we have shown that migrant men's dominating and subordinating masculinities can be shaped by practices of integrity and support of fellow migrants. This is particularly the case in discriminatory environments where workplace masculinities and work-related hierarchies are not regulated by formal employer-employee rules. In terms of its analytical usefulness, the lens of subordinating masculinity can be applied to explore practices of men whose masculinity is manifested through apparent loyalty to other men or organisations, and/or other context-specific masculine traits (like *mardigari*). This concept is also applicable in other male-dominated and hierarchical settings where conditional loyalty and subordination are perceived as important sources of masculine identity, for instance in politics and the military.

Note

1. We use the Russian term *brigadir* in an emic way because it was constantly used by our research participants.

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Author contributions

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