

Escaping workplace gender discrimination through mobility?

Labor-market experiences of Polish female migrants in the West

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There is little doubt that migration and employment in the foreign labor market are linked (Piore 1979; Borjas 1991; Pries 2003); and it is the emergence of migrant women in the international labor force that has foregrounded the specifically female experiences of mobility (Sassen 1984, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003, 4–11). Studies of women leaving Poland for destinations in the West over the last several decades have followed this trend, substantiating both the tensions stemming from women's emotional and financial obligations to their families, and the range of outcomes of mobility projects, from advancement (higher income, career progress, new skills, etc.) to obstacles (deskilling, non-transferability of capital), that are present in multilateral and extra-nation-state labor market trajectories (see e.g. Morokvasic 2004, 2006; Slany 2008; Prasałowicz 2008; Smagacz-Poziemska 2008; Slany and Małek 2005; Fihel and Pietka 2007).

This paper seeks to contribute to the discussion regarding migration as a means to achieve greater gender equality on the labor market by implementing a comparative framework, one that involves examining the nexus of gender and work along a temporal axis, from pre-migration to post-migration (work abroad) experiences, among contemporary Polish female migrants in Western Europe. The arguments here attempt to »link self to society« (May 2011) in reference to the macro-level dimension and economic indicators on the one hand, and to subjective, micro-level experiences and the significance of work for individual biographies

on the other. The relevance of Poland—the sending country where all of the respondents had their first (and sometimes major) employment experiences—is also demonstrated, especially in regard to how it compares to evaluations of foreign work endeavors. Nevertheless, the novel contribution of this paper involves taking the notion of labor-market **discrimination** as its point of departure, a salient issue that emerges in the analysis. From this perspective, the article demonstrates that notions of escape, empowerment, and agency are very much present in the migration stories of intra-European female migrants. The evidence encompasses a discussion of factors in migratory decisions that while not entirely economic are related to the labor market as well as to the range of migrant career paths and workplace experiences abroad. More specifically, individual agency in response to social change stemming from post-1989 democratization and neoliberal marketization is examined. The article aims to show how a qualitative and respondents-driven methodological approach can aid in challenging certain assumptions about gender and ethnicity in discourses on women’s mobility in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly with regard to highly-educated migrants.

Methodology

The results presented here stem from data collected as part of a Ph.D. research project,¹ including biographical and semi-structured interviews, with respondents chosen by means of a non-probabilistic deliberate recruitment process. Overall, the study comprised a total of 37 biographical/semi-structured interviews conducted with Polish women parenting abroad between 2011 and 2013. All study participants were female, married, aged between 23 and 64 (average age was 37.9), and had arrived in

1 The project was funded from the 125th Anniversary Research Scholarship (2010–2013) awarded by Bangor University. The fieldwork in Germany was partially supported by a DAAD short-term visiting fellow grant (2011). The Ph.D. thesis *Polish Mothers on the Move: Gendering Migratory Experiences of Polish Women Parenting in Germany and the United Kingdom* was defended in 2014.

their destination countries between 1980 and 2010, with an average length of stay amounting to just under nine years. They resided outside of metropolitan urban centers (in villages, small towns, and suburbs) together with their immediate families (partners and children).² The women mostly led middle-class lives, though there was a purposeful diversity in relation to their education level (with a rather high education level prevalent), which translated into a diversity of occupational statuses.

The aim of the study is not to generalize its findings, but rather to draw attention to the multidimensional and often subtle factors at play in the detailed narratives women provide about the intersections of mobility and motherhood. This small-scale qualitative feminist inquiry has been guided by a transnational lens, and it engages the experiences of migrant mothering among Polish women, addressing in particular changes in family and parenting practices, constructions of belonging, and gender issues in everyday lives led in a transnational space. Without being directly solicited for data on discrimination, and barely prompted for information about the labor market, every single respondent nevertheless provided extensive data on the topic of work life. The multitude of narratives featuring work was linked to broader gender dilemmas: work-life balance, household division of labor, values to be transferred to children, and so on. All together, the narratives illuminate the significance of employment in the individual biographies of women and in the general context of migrant trajectories.

Polish women and the labor market: A complicated affair

Despite the qualitatively small-scale focus on »selves,« it is vital to acknowledge the critical characteristics of the wider social surroundings

2 This signifies that even if a circulatory/temporary migration pattern was a feature of the respondent's biography at an earlier stage, the family reunification at the post-transnational stage occurred at least one year prior to the interview, and the women were more or less settlement-orientated.

(May 2011), which here pertain to the Polish labor market. Broad feminist critiques of neoliberalism notwithstanding (e.g. Federici 2012; Dijkstra and Plantega 2003; Perrons et al. 2007), the arguments here are presented as contingent upon the specificity of Polish female employment. Together with feminized international mobility flows, which will be discussed in the next section, these kinds of macro-factors contextualize women's multi-local experiences of work.

Historically speaking, although at first glance a socialist state might have appeared beneficial to women—by encouraging a high ratio of working women, for example, or providing affordable institutional childcare—gender relations remained inherently patriarchal, while imposing on women a *double burden* of work in both private and public spheres (Zembrzuska 2000, 9–10; see also Dunn 2008, 157–81). Taking a broad, post-1989 perspective, Burrell (2008, 65–66) points out that as democratization began, the social and, especially, economic consequences of the transition were much greater for women (e.g. Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2010; Sztanderska and Grotkowska 2009). Although men also experienced factory close-downs and subsequent sky-high unemployment levels, leading to significant drops in the standard of living in Poland in the early nineties, it was women who bore the most noticeable consequences. They experienced all of the above macro-economic factors, compounded by discrimination and the gender gap in the labor market (see Dunn 2004; Titkow, Duch-Krzysztozek, and Budrowska 2003, 2004; Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2010). With the collapse of the state industries, job positions were cut, and the private business sector did not offer women alternative employment. The experiences of those individuals, who were highly disappointed and scared of not succeeding in the new capitalist economy, were later described in the EC (2009) and World Bank (2004, 2012) reports, which stated that the new private sector in Poland was marked by an extremely high degree of gender segregation and visible differences between the incomes of men and women holding similar job positions and qualifications (see also Sztanderska and Grotkowska 2009).

Discriminatory practices were, and still are, widespread and illegal in Poland, yet they remain uncontested. A recent study attempting to diagnose the complexities of the labor market for Polish women found that one in four of the participating companies demonstrated discriminatory practices³ and behaviors towards women, ranging from the gender pay gap to glass ceilings, sticky floors, and glass escalators (Auleytner 2007, 85; see also the CBOS 2006). Women earn 17% less than their male counterparts (Eurostat 2008; WB 2012), a phenomenon that is even more apparent in leadership roles, where salaried women earn only 63.9% of their male colleagues' salaries (GUS 2010). Within the workforce, women are largely situated in the lower wage segments, with 21% of women earning the lowest income as compared with 16.2% of men. They find themselves in more precarious positions as holders of temporary employment contracts and they lack the tools for building solidarity through unionization (Maciejewska 2012). The research also demonstrates that gender is the third most important factor taken into consideration during the hiring process, in clear violation of the law (Auleytner 2007, 80–96). In many professions, women have little chance of being hired for higher-level, better compensated posts, circumstances that have been described by the terms »glass ceiling« and »sticky floor« (World Bank 2004; Titkow, Duch-Krzysztozek, and Budrowska 2003; Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2010). Furthermore, on-the-job sexual harassment is not uncommon (UNICEF 1999, 24).

As mentioned above, this situation had not improved by the time of EU accession in May 2004. General employment rates fell in all countries accessing the European Union; but in Poland, the largest country of the group, the decline was the highest (GUS 2010, 7). Female labor market activity indicators fell from 52.2% in 1994 to 47.9% in 2003; and

3 Certain discrepancies in the measurements across studies can be attributed either to what is defined as a discriminatory practice in various projects or, when definitions are absent, to what respondents understand as discrimination. For these conceptual reasons, it is useful to pair statistical data with in-depth qualitative understandings.

unemployment among women was 20% at that time (by comparison, male unemployment was 18%). Additionally, the generation of recent college graduates proved particularly vulnerable (Drela 2012), with 40% of the youngest alumni being unemployed as of the 2004 accession, the percentage being even higher for female graduates at 47.4% (Auleytner et al. 2007, 9). Women are generally more likely to succumb to long-term unemployment, especially if they are between the ages of 18 and 34 and believed likely to become pregnant (Titkow, Duch-Krzysztozek, and Budrowska 2003, CBOS 2006). Unsurprisingly, as the work of Auleytner et al. (2007) has shown, employers have used various strategies to force women to declare that they will put their procreative decisions on hold. Consequently, since young women who have taken time out for motherhood often face lower salaries upon returning to the workforce, respondents tended to view taking maternity leave as a negative factor for their professional career; and almost 40% of women claimed that pregnancy had a negative effect on their standing with employers (see also Plomien 2009). Furthermore, as many as 40.5% of the respondents agreed with the statement that childlessness signified better career prospects (Kotowska 2007). Women aged 50 and over were also excluded from the job market, so much so that they were practically non-existent (World Bank 2004, Auleytner et al. 2007). The precariousness of career paths for Polish women is generally unrelated to their increasingly high education levels, qualifications or highly-mobile attitude, and is viewed as attributable to the perception of female employees through the lenses of familial and gendered trajectories (Auleytner 2007, 11; Titkow, Duch-Krzysztozek, and Budrowska 2003; Choluj 2007; World Bank 2004). According to Kotowska, the criteria for evaluating the work of men and women are not the same; in comparison to men, a larger »body of proof« is required of women in order to show that they are good workers. Positive judgments about the quality of a man's work are based solely on the job having been done by a man; while claims that a woman's work is acceptable must be supported by references to specific traits or skills (2007, 46).

Similar arguments have been raised by Sztanderska and Grotowska (2009) and come up as well in Coyle's political analysis, in which she

justifiably argues that accepted perceptions of contemporary gender relations contribute to the country's economic problems:

The idea that women should not be taking up the available jobs has taken a strong hold in conservative Poland. Successive governments have adopted neoconservative and pro-family social policies that attempt to reconstruct anew a traditional gender regime in which men are the sole earners in the family and women their dependents. Many childcare and reproductive health services have been withdrawn, access to contraception can be restricted, and legal abortion is rarely attainable even within the very narrow scope that the law permits. (Coyle 2007, 41)

While the EU15 has been criticized for not fully eliminating workplace discrimination in accordance with policy prescriptions (Dijkstra and Plantega 2003), the differences between those countries and their Central and Eastern European (CEE) counterparts remain enormous. Western policies are effective in diminishing gender-based workplace discrimination. Polish women, however, remain highly vulnerable, as the data from the Global Gender Gap Index Report 2014 clearly illustrate. Poland has been falling behind other European, including other CEE, countries; and generalized national scores show developmental differences between the three countries used for comparison in this study. Poland placed 57th, while Germany and United Kingdom are ranked 26th and 12th respectively (GGGR 2014, 8–9). With regard to the most relevant aspect—labor market engagement—Poland ranks 72nd worldwide (2012, 12), with the authors commenting that compared to 2011 it »loses eleven places due to a drop in categories of wage equality, the education sub-index, and women holding ministerial positions.« While the female labor-market presence reached 71% and 69% in Germany and the UK respectively, only 56% of women participated in Poland's workforce (2012, 44), a result that has been further supported by the enormous pay gap documented by the corresponding wages' survey. This should make it clear that the presence of Polish women on the labor market is in fact vastly affected by the notions of gender and reproduction which, in brief,

frame female employment and income as secondary to male breadwinning.

Gender and mobility entanglements

Contemporary thematizations of gender and mobility revolve around seeing migration as a *gendered and gendering process* (Szczepanikova 2006; Parennas 2010; Smagacz-Poziemska 2008). The main areas of studies can be categorized into (1) dedicated to transformational societies, (2) institutional welfare critiques, and (3) individual biographic focus.

Current research on female migrants points to the urgency of critically canvassing the »structural conditions and the transformations of societies« (Szczepanikova 2006) as well as their gendered consequences. Thus a group category for ethnicity-bound migrant women may reflect relevant themes within the broader global flows of care and paid employment (Sassen 1984, 2007; Lutz and Palenga 2010; Sørensen and Olwig 2002), as well as in the specific context of geopolitical transitions of the late 1980s—the end of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union—which conditioned gendered currents with a specific directionality (Morokvasic 2004). In order to counter exclusively economy-driven approaches, »power relations enmeshed in the changing migration patterns and processes associated with post-1989 economic globalization« must be explored through an intersectional and gender-centered lens (Nagar et al. 2002, 260; Silvey 2004) that locates the respondents' trajectories in reference to the timeline of historical processes.

With regard to labor, the targeted recruitment of foreigners for home and care sectors has been addressed; and the earlier economic explanations offered by theories of market dualism and labor-market segmentation (Doeringer and Piore 1971; Piore 1979; Kaczmarczyk 2007; Górny and Kaczmarczyk 2003) have been supplemented by several care economy studies (Anderson 2000; Charkiewicz and Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2009; Sørensen and Olwig 2002). Analyses of female migrant labor have resulted in a thoroughly feminist critique that sees

»global women« as inadvertently assisting Western women in avoiding gender issues at home by serving as cheap foreign domestic help (Lutz and Palenga 2010; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Bradley 2008, 226; Szczepanikova 2006; Kofman et al. 2000, 136–46). In other words, migration has helped to sustain the »hegemony of the white male breadwinner model,« as female migrants »filled a gap in the labor market that indigenous women might otherwise have been expected to fill« (Tacoli 1999; Kofman et al. 2000, 144). So-called »global women« from migratory backgrounds (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003) have been grouped together with local working-class women in order to constitute a labor force that allows affluent and middle-class mothers to become »mother-managers« instead (Nakano Glenn 1994, 7). It is worth pointing out that this situation results in a phenomenon that Hochschild calls the »emotional surplus value« of imported maternal love and the »exploitation of care« in a global context of varied levels of development (2000, 133).

Advancing the question of mobility, the scholarly conversation has moved beyond the above outlines to cover broader or cross-sectional topics, as in Chant's suggestion that the political dimension that governs gender orders at home be taken into account when patterns of female and male migration are compared. This is due to the level of female autonomy and societal views on reproduction and domestic labor, as well as to the impact of labor-market opportunities on ideas of mobility (1992, 197–98).

Focusing on Central and Eastern Europe, Morokvasic claims that the post-communist transition period induced significant growth in mobility, especially among the Polish women she interviewed (Morokvasic 2006, 5), as they were the ones who searched for the new opportunities abroad in hopes of managing the reality of the emerging market economy. Coyle observes that »Polish women have very much been at the forefront of the new paradigm of cross-border working and transnational lives« (Coyle 2007, 7). Indeed, roughly 50% of the female population of recent graduates indicated readiness for a temporary relocation abroad for work

reasons and many consider a permanent job move (Auleytner 2007, 16–17). Moreover, as Morokvasic (2006) argues, for decades Polish women successfully created and made use of informal, pre-1989 migratory channels from East to West, while clandestine irregular and undocumented flows of cheap labor corresponded to the unemployment pushing Polish women to search for income elsewhere (Morokvasic 2003, 38–39). At one point, women dominated migration flows from and within CEE,⁴ yet many of these flows remained unnoticed due to the gendered character of the labor-market positions that women had taken on. Two examples of this phenomenon can be drawn from a study of nurses and domestic workers. Organized groups use legal three-month visas to allow nurses to travel abroad on a circular and rotational basis (Morokvasic 2006, 6). This strategy allows them both to keep their jobs in Poland, and thereby maintain health insurance and pensions, and to supplement their regular income with foreign-currency earnings. Domestic care workers⁵ have proven harder to capture, prompting Lutz and Palenga to coin the term »twilight zone« or »open secret« to describe the gap between large numbers of CEE female employees in domestic

4 I am intentionally excluding statistical data on Polish migration; sources not only vary drastically, but many of them are gender-blind, assuming that male or »genderless« persons cross borders solely for economic reasons and obfuscating the numerous family-related or non-monetary reasons that are major factors in female mobility (see e.g. Szczepanikova 2006; Parreñas 2010). Instead, I provide illustrative examples that provide evidence of the gendered character and elusiveness of these particular migratory currents. Readers may consult studies by Kaczmarczyk and Lukowski (2005) or Fihel and Pietka (2007) for overviews of quantitative currents.

5 Broader debates involved in definitions of care/domestic work have had to be left out; care economy terms are used in their critical social meaning. A more complex discussion about the care work and domestic services sector can be found in England 2008, about migrants in Lutz (2011), and for the Polish case, in Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz and Charkiewicz (2009).

service and their complete invisibility in state policies (2010), a situation that obscures the female presence within the labor market.⁶

There are relatively few studies that adopt a transnational perspective and a qualitative approach, and in which women speak about their own work experiences. Slany and Małek (2005), however, drawing on the long history of studying migratory orientations and rationales, have delineated four categories of Polish female migrants to Italy and the USA: those leaving as a consequence of the »new trauma« of economic destabilization in Poland (the largest group); the »individualists/seekers/romantics,« who hope to fulfill their life goals through mobility; the »escapists,« for whom migration neither enhances their status in life nor serves as an investment in it; and the »family« migrants, who leave under the auspices of reunification.⁷ Outlining the three major reasons for migration among unmarried women from the Podlasie region in northeastern Poland, Cieslińska (2008) has mapped out the family-related grounds for mobility, two kinds of economic causes (unemployment risk/low salaries and earning money for university studies), as well as a class of autotelic causes that includes adventure, challenge, and self-actualization (267–77). In accord with the autotelic and romantic categories mentioned above, Kindler and Napierała argue that contemporary women often narrate their journeys as stories of gaining independence and integrating into modern, cosmopolitan Europe (2010, 25). This resonates somewhat with earlier studies, in which young women were seen as migrating for »the new life« (Praszałowicz 2008, 59;

6 Also, in Poland women are much more likely to work in the shadow economy; see e.g. Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz (2010).

7 Importantly, despite a shift towards allowing more multi-faceted explanations of mobility, the economic activity of women is qualitatively different, given their need to move back and forth in order to reconcile work and family obligations (Morokvasic 2006; Judd 2011) and to delegate care. Gendered expectations of Polish women nevertheless remain stable, with the notion of the »good mother« (Titkow, Duch-Krzysztosek, and Budrowska 2003; Titkow 2007), for instance, continuing to stigmatize migrant mothers.

Cieślińska 2008). Thus, comparatively speaking, while Polish women of earlier decades were said to migrate primarily for economic reasons, the new female mobility, as enriched by a gender studies perspective, now allows for the inclusion of other migratory goals—be they political, social, cultural or cognitive—and for the expression of individual perspectives and experience (Kindler and Napierała 2010, 25).

Some qualitatively positioned studies of Polish female migrants and employment include, among others, studies by Kalwa (2007), Slany and Malek (2005), Cieślińska (2008), and Judd (2011). Recalling her research on social care providers in Britain after 2004, Judd states that her respondents described migration as an »escape« or the »only choice« and referred to parochialism, social deprivation, and unemployment as being key features of their existence in their home country (Judd 2011, 190). She argues that economic gain has never been the sole reason for migration, pointing to a multiplicity of motivations, with »being in control« and »agency« at the forefront (Judd 2011, 194). Finally, following studies of the Polish labor market (e.g. Dunn 2004; World Bank 2004) and Chant's line of argument (1992), Coyle's work on migration as resistance (2007) engages the often-overlooked fact that the political transition initiated systemic political change, leading those women formerly employed in state-run industries on Poland's peripheries to decide to migrate to Britain. Her respondents often described typical struggles that can be ascribed to the labor-market gender inequalities discussed above, framing migration from Poland as a form of resistance to the situation of women in Poland in general (Coyle 2007, 39; see also Titkow 2007). The hypothesis that women's human rights have been eroded is in line with the mass-migration of highly educated, experienced women who often go on to work illegally as low-paid, low-skilled workers, such as domestic help, nannies, and elderly care providers. Coyle aimed to assess EU accession, wondering about the effect on Poland of EU directives pertaining to employment and mobility; but she concluded that Polish governments so far have shown a degree of resistance to gender equality and mainstreaming policies in the labor market. This led Coyle (2007) to conclude that much time will need to pass before Polish women will be

willing to return or to settle permanently in Poland. This final point provides the backdrop for stories related by respondents in this study.

Gendering labor mobility

Having graduated top of my class from the University of Silesia, I could never have anticipated the job problems that I would encounter. I quickly learned that [...] being a young woman predestines you not to have a job, and that once you get one, you had better get used to sexual innuendos and constant stereotypical maltreatment simply because you are a woman and happen to have a kid [...] I worked hard and ignored it. I never took a day off when my daughter was sick; I let one scary incident pass when a drunk client tried to force me into his room during business negotiations. And then the day came when they let me go, making no secret of the reasons why: It was either me or a much lower-performing male colleague, who, however, was a son of somebody important [...] At that moment, I felt I had to run away. (Ola, 26, DE, m: 2007, int. 2011)⁸

The above quote arguably evokes the difficult times of the early nineties and the devastating effects of Poland's post-transition economy for educated young women. However, it was made only a few years ago by Ola, a young woman who was born in an urban and rather prosperous Polish region in 1982 and received a university education under the blossoming democracy and the new neoliberal economy that came with it. Shortly after becoming unemployed in 2009, Ola moved abroad and currently resides in Germany, where she enjoys a promising career in an international finance venture. Ola's narrative echoes those shared by many respondents, although varying degrees of discrimination are indicated.

8 To inform the readers about the basic background of our respondents, annotation to the interview quotes is provided in the following format: /Pseudonym, age of the respondent, destination country (DE-Germany, UK—United Kingdom, US-United States), m: year of migration, int. date—year of the interview/.

Tracking discrimination as a theme across the narratives yields evaluations of several salient stages in women's career lives. These include hardship and struggles in the Polish workplace, followed by the experience of agency in conjunction with the decision to emigrate, and references to characteristics of employment abroad.

Unsurprisingly, the respondents' experiences of the labor market were conditioned by age, education, and other factors in a comprehensive, intersectional way. The matrix of multiple disadvantaged positionalities (female gender, foreigner status/ethnic origin, class status, etc.) thus mattered in a way that was much more powerful than the simple sum of these dimensions of underprivilege (Harvey 2002; Reid and Comaz-Diaz 1990). The following discussions of the findings, which progress along a temporal axis from pre-migratory experience to work-life abroad, aim to account for some of these differences.

Pre-migratory work experiences as alternative mobility explanations

Starting with pre-migratory findings, the gender and age axis in the workplace from first entry into the labor market—job applications and recruitment processes—highlighted the relevance of earlier scholarship (Kotowska 2007; Titkow, Duch-Krzysztozek, and Budrowska 2003, 2004). The notions of being either »too young« or »too old« for the Polish labor market were often expressed in these narratives; and a multigenerational and cross-border comparative perspective is already present in the account of one respondent, Matylda:

It seems to me, in retrospect of course, that as a woman you just can't ever be of the right age for the labor market in Poland. Unlike here [UK]. You're not allowed to work when you're still in school. Well, maybe if you are a boy you can help out some place, but not as a girl. And by the time you finish your studies, it is suddenly high time for weddings and babies. That is simply how it goes—in my family and among my friends [...] We had our [2] boys in close succession, and I was never able to earn enough to

pay for child care for them, so I just stayed home. They did not get into kindergarten, so I was home until they were of school age and I was almost 30 myself. This 30–40 age should be good, right? Wrong! In employers' minds, you either have small children that get sick or you will have children, or probably both, so they won't hire you. [...] I saw my mum go through the next phases: She lost her factory job at 43 and could not get rehired [...] She came here to live with us. She never had a job she liked, where people valued her, not until she came here. Women just aren't respected as workers in Poland; they are simply discarded as being somehow less worthy of having an income. (Matylda, 39, UK, m: 2005, int. 2013)

Unfair gender- and age-based recruitment practices were reported especially by women aged 45 and older, who talked about long-term unemployment following the loss of a steady job. This was crucial for Marzena (aged 61, moved in 1992), now a cleaning agency owner in Germany, who lost her position in a feminized garment industry near the Polish town of Łódź. Afterwards, she could not get another position primarily for transition-related structural reasons, but also because she was considered »too old to re-qualify,« hence the forms of governmental support and activation programs were not available to her (see Maciejewska 2012). Similarly, Ewa (aged 57) from the northeast of Poland reported feeling »useless« when she was told at a local council office that she would not get any work without being computer-literate and then, upon expressing her willingness to learn, was met with consternation and laughter from the office staff, with one person telling her that she had better go and take care of her husband and grandchildren, clearly leaving the then-active 40-year-old at a loss.

At the other end of the age continuum, Sylwia and Agnieszka, both highly educated specialists in international business and biochemistry, respectively, talked about how their »young« age at graduation impeded their chances by comparison with their male colleagues. Both in their thirties and living in Germany, they recalled being unable to get hired while male alumni of the same university department received the major-

ity of available jobs despite being less qualified. Furthermore, when one of them did manage to get a job interview, a large array of personal questions was posed illegally. All the other women in the group recalled a similar situation in which they were asked specifically about their family situation and whether they had children. Ola, a degreed accountant, reported being questioned about issues such as whether one child was enough for her and if she planned to refrain from having more in case the company hired her. Due to job scarcity, or perhaps due to discriminatory practices being ingrained in everyday Polish reality, none of the affected women reported unfair treatment. Often it was only after migration that they understood those behaviors to have been unjust and illegal, especially when they discussed gender-equality ideals with their friends and co-workers abroad.

All of the women respondents who had children in Poland before moving abroad identified the multiple ways in which being a mother had impacted their labor-market experiences. Agata, a 43-year-old psychologist who has lived in Wales for almost five years, raised this concern several times during the interview, asking rhetorically, »Do you really think anyone would hire a 40-year-old mother of two toddlers in Poland?« Surprisingly, educated women, with experience and eagerness to progress in their professions, early on experience forms of ageism. Respondents who were employed while pregnant added another dimension to the discussion, demonstrating that legal solutions had been bypassed. Weronika, for instance, recalled:

Theoretically, they cannot fire you when you're pregnant, but my boss was a master when it came to disobeying this law in a manner that all was still »legal.« As it happens, I was the third one from our team to get pregnant. The first one was let go due to »restructurization« and her position was cut. The second girl went to tell him that she was expecting and left crying—he told her that she had made a crucial mistake in calculations last month and that he had to let her go. She denied having told him about the baby, but we know she did. [...] [With] me, well, it was brutal, he told

me I could either resign or I could stay on, but that he would fire me the first chance he got and make sure I never got a job in this town again. (Weronika, 39, UK, m: 2007, int. 2011)

It appears that education did not mitigate the precarity of labor-market positions ascribed to women on the basis of gender, since they were perceived primarily as mothers and homemakers. The findings support other studies (e.g. Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann 2012), which underscore research results concerning the persistence of the gendered division of domestic labor, with a »partnership penalty« affecting women upon entering a shared household relationship and a »motherhood penalty« leaving them economically in a much worse condition across their life-cycle than men and childless women .

Women from peripheral Polish towns experienced the corrupt nature of local employment politics conducted by means of personal connections and »old boys' club«⁹ rules. Hania, 36 and now based in the UK, talked about the mechanisms of sustaining male privilege in the workplace in her mid-size Polish hometown:

Before leaving, I had a decent job in my field, but I simply could not advance! I think it was largely due to how things were decided during bridge and poker nights, to which men were invited, regardless of their time or position in the firm. After one such late-night buddy event, the guy that I was training suddenly became my boss. (Hania, 36, UK, m: 2004, int. 2012)

Women employed in assistant/support roles in traditionally »feminized« sectors described situations in which »femininity« was a professional

9 Aside from a typical meaning of alumni networks, the term highlights workplace/business disadvantages faced by women, as described in Lana Nino's feminist work. »It is naturally easier for men to socialize with each other after work, such as having drinks, playing golf on weekends, or socializing with clients. A lot of information sharing occurs at such informal events without time pressure of the workplace. Women find it difficult to break into these circles« (Nino 2006, 5).

course and provided examples of sexual harassment (see e.g. Roth 2008). Lidia, a nurse who worked in Polish hospitals and medical practices throughout her twenties and thirties, reported:

I was addressed as »dear child« or with »hey little girl« well into my thirties and often felt like I was looked at more as a pretty-but-stupid girl rather than a professional colleague [...] I remember this one doctor who for six months would say hello by slapping me on the butt, until I could not take it any longer and left [...] My job in a doctor's private practice was not much better. I was both nurse and receptionist, and the doctor in charge practically made me his secretary, having me serve coffee at meetings while wearing a »work-uniform« that included a tight skirt. (Lidia, 35, DE, m: 2001, int. 2011)

This type of patronizing treatment of female subordinates is also reflected in the semi-legal employment that occurs when small business owners use female family members as free unregistered labor. This was demonstrated in Celina's story. She had worked long shifts at her parents' store since her teens, only to be left with no proof of her experience and no entitlement to benefits when the business went bankrupt. Her example additionally illustrates the intergenerational reproduction of gender inequalities within family structures. Significantly, it is not always external conditions that contribute to respondents' poor prospects, as some women have expressed views that can only be interpreted as an internalized agreement with the patriarchal nature of private and public division of gendered spaces. The traditional structure of the male breadwinner, the female homemaker, and the dependent persist in the stories of contemporary relationships. Women born in the postwar socialist reality of the fifties have expressed such convictions just as often as those born and raised in the post-communist era of the late eighties and throughout the nineties (Titkow 2007), a situation that parallels the increasing conservatism of values in contemporary Poland (e.g. Titkow 2013). It is rather striking that in times when dual-career and

dual-income households have become standard, women themselves fail to recognize gender imbalance as potentially disastrous in the long run.

Post-migration work lives: Multifaceted narratives of success

In approaching the topic of the move abroad and its consequences, difficult economic circumstances should be noted as a consistent feature of narrative recollections of migration. Respondents usually referred to job-related mobility at the outset of the interview, often in the form of a shallow »obvious answer« embedded in discussion of the dominant paradigm of labor migration. The framing of financial hardships was very different for this group, a dimension possibly attributable to two aspects, the gender of the respondents and the fact that they had children. Let us turn to a narrative example of this in Ania's account of her family's trajectory:

We had a mortgage on the house, and my husband lost his job, and everyone was saying that Britain was the place to be—all our friends had already gone. So obviously I stayed behind with the little ones, and he [the husband] went and stayed with his high school buddies in Liverpool and found work. For some months everything was fine, but in the end we missed each other too much: me and him, him and the children. He was saying good things about England; he liked it and said it would be good for us. He was working in factories despite having a degree, and he said then and there that English was so important that we should come just for the sake of the children going to school here [...] So I packed our things, stored the rest, and rented out our house. The children were happy to see their dad, and it all worked out in the end. Things are good, we are happy. (Ania, 34, UK, m: 2006, int. 2011)

It is evident that many factors are at play in this one story—from economic distress to personal feelings to children's future lives. This mirrors other stories where migration was never »just about the money,« and where a combination of factors was in place, indicating the complexities of individuals' familial and non-familial engagements.

In general, the narratives provided by respondents support the thesis of migration as a form of resistance (Coyle 2007) involving a political component of liberation or emancipation and termed sometimes simply »escape.« At the same time, many defined their mobility in less negative categories, as »something of an adventure,« which resonates with the findings of studies by Cieślińska (2008), Slany and Malek (2005) and Kindler and Napierała (2010). In general, the women interviewed saw migration as effecting positive changes in many areas of their lives, especially in terms of improved family relationships and labor-market experiences. It is here that this article's methodological value may be found, as many projects that employ simple probing methods for assessing migration motives group the variety of issues involved under a vague umbrella term, »economic reasons,« and thus add bias to the data. However, as has been shown, when women are asked to elaborate or are given time to reflect on their trajectories, they report a plethora of non-economic motives for their decision to leave Poland. It thus stands to reason that the significance of financial/employment factors is overestimated in the literature on the whole, and may operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy or a biased research assumption.

Comparing pre-migratory experiences with labor-market success stories¹⁰ abroad clearly led to the respondents to feel a sense of empowerment. The notion of »agency« was involved in overcoming obstacles stemming from the overlap of gender and ethnicity (as in the status of the »foreign female« worker). Karolina, a 41-year-old French teacher, moved to Britain eight years ago from a large Polish city. Her professional trajectory appears linear: she was a language teacher back home, and continued to work in the same capacity in a British school. However, what she experienced was a »qualitative« change:

Work [in Poland] was not a problem, but with two state jobs [her husband is also a teacher], we could not make ends meet [...] and

10 This article focuses on gendered practices, thus discussions of initial de-skilling are omitted. Generally, over time, women developed a more positive outlook on their jobs abroad by contrast with their Polish past.

could not afford the life we wanted [...] I took time off to have children, which was detrimental to my career—I was unable to get ahead based on merit, I wasn't connected to anyone important, and so I had to work extensive weekly hours, I think eighty or more [...] I ended up having two jobs at two schools and tutoring on the weekends. This is no way to live [...] Here you are valued because of your professional conduct—no one asked me about my age, marital status, or children when I interviewed for this job. It happened just three months after we came here, so you can imagine how unsure I was and how imperfect my English was. No one asked where I came from—it was surreal! They only judged my relevant skills and qualifications. I felt welcome and appreciated from the very start. (Karolina, 41, UK, m: 2006, int. 2012)

Karolina has been steadily advancing in her career abroad and reported »loving her job« (the same one she had hated in Poland), as well as finding a balance between her work and family life.

Having lived in the UK since 2004, 36-year-old Hania had a more complicated trajectory, working her way up from an entry-level office job to an appointment as junior manager just a few months after she received a British university degree. Reflecting back on her experiences, Hania was highly critical of how things were done in Poland compared with the UK, and singled out the treatment of mothers. She was quite clear in saying that as a career-oriented person, she would not have decided to have children if her family had remained in Poland. Despite the difficulties of managing childcare without grandparents being present to help, she reported believing that all her employers had supported her as a mother-to-be and as a parent. It is quite telling that although in terms of policies, Poland appears to be a better place for pregnant employees, as women can request paid medical leave from the early weeks of pregnancy until the birth, and are then legally offered generous maternity and parental leaves. Hania voiced the same view that Polish feminists bring to the table: The solutions implemented in Poland hurt women in the long-run. Namely, the inflexibility of acceptable forms of employment

and the lack of childcare facilities, together with the overuse of pregnancy-related medical certifications, reflect badly on the female population as a whole and deter women from entering the labor market over long periods of time (Kotowska 2007; Choluj 2007; Titkow, Duch-Krzysztosek, and Budrowska 2003). In the UK, on the other hand, Hania never felt that she was treated differently because of her origins; and she reported believing that her knowledge of Polish and Russian had in fact contributed to her being promoted when her company expanded its international operations and began dealing with businesses in Eastern Europe. The language she used to describe her experiences was marked by a sense of empowerment and pride in her own achievements; she used expressions like »I was determined to become a manager« and »I made my husband understand that housework is hard work,« indexing a shift in the internal dynamic of the couple.

What is interesting about Sylwia's accounts is that gender appeared to disappear completely from her story once she began narrating her post-migration experiences. Getting married (a fact that was known in her town and stereotypically associated with the rapid transition to motherhood) had negatively affected her prospects, already hindered by the existing nepotism conditioning the hiring process. By contrast, in Germany she not only had no problem finding a job, she also managed to re-qualify and pursue a career in her field of choice, human relations, which likely contributed to her practice of eliminating gender as a labor-market factor. Sylwia's life was transformed:

I did it—I moved and achieved what I always wanted [...] It felt like I was a broken housewife one day, and a confident manager the next—surreal. (Sylwia 35, DE, m: 1999, int. 2011)

In her line of work, Sylwia had a chance to observe what she referred to as the »pecking order« of ethnic backgrounds, explaining that agency recruitment still discriminated against non-EU nationals. At the same time, she saw Poles as being looked on quite favorably, observing colleagues hiring them for a range of positions—from seasonal farm worker to technology sector CEO. While this claim can by no means be taken at

face value, it does depart from the common preconception of migrants as being universally at a disadvantage. This argument is reflected in discussions of labor-market segmentation (de Beijl 2009; EC Report 2009), but it appears to be mitigated by many Polish women (and men). Poland's proximity in the intra-European context benefits Poles given their classification as EU/European (and sometimes as white/Caucasian, Catholic, educated in Europe, and so on; see also Praszalowicz 2008, 2010) and places them in stark opposition to those excluded as third-country nationals.

Especially since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, Polish employees abroad have regularly been conceptualized as hard-working and reliable (see Judd 2011; Fihel and Pietka 2007). The assumption is that women who had experienced gender discrimination in the Polish workplace are inclined to perform at the highest level in the foreign workplace. Alina, a dentist in Germany, explained:

I would never have been able to get as far as I am now professionally, to have my own practice, and to have a managerial position, if I had stayed in Poland. The German system promotes people who work hard, regardless of their origins—you can see that in every sector, you can see it in the streets. Yes, your German needs to be perfect, but it is an investment and the state will then help you to be good at what you do and earn a good salary for that work. (Alina, 57, m: 1984, int. 2011)

Amazingly, Alina had been outside the work force for 12 years. A semi-legal immigrant with no knowledge of German and two small children, she experienced considerable isolation. Regardless of a certain naïveté about there being equal access for all, her conviction that she was able to advance further in her career abroad is that much more powerful. Ideas of »loyalty« and »gratitude« for perceived support (be it informal, institutional, or other) received in the destination countries, was commonplace in respondents' stories with reference to the labor market and beyond. The accounts underscore the women's active and self-oriented role in decision-making and in independent career endeavors, even if the initial

migration resulted from a decision made by their husbands (family reunification). While improvements in external circumstances through migration might be relative, the narratives show in-depth shifts in the agency of Polish women migrants, suggesting that migration in fact had emancipatory effects in the area of work.

It would be impossible to overlook gendered discourses in the role of the global care chain in determining certain migration trajectories. Polish women are often employed in this sector and research indicates they are viewed through the lens of their »caring femininity« (Palenga and Lutz 2010). Agata, a psychologist who became a social worker, reported:

We have a lot of compassion, I think. That was how we were raised in Poland. Maybe it's because of the church, or, I don't know: I think it's different here—women and men are ingrained with same values, the same ways of doing things. Maybe when you are a carer, this particularly feminine quality of appearing fragile but being strong helps patients to handle their predicament better. Several clients of our services prefer women and often ask for Polish social workers. They praise our cooking, our efficiency, our smiles [...] (Agata, 43, UK, m: 2006, int. 2012)

By linking the latter three notions from different spheres, namely cooking (for the most part a domestic task), efficiency (associated rather with business language), and smiling (a personal trait), Agata's statement illustrates the degree to which perceptions of caregiving as a form of work are multidimensional and somewhat confused, with the lines between professional and personal engagements blurred for many. Lidia's account of working as a nurse in Germany is reminiscent of the reports of Polish medical personnel in Sweden presented by Wolanik Boström and Ohlander (2011; see also Berdahl and Moore 2006), in which differences in gender-appropriate behaviors were marked. She recalled feeling different in the workplace, where men and women dressed the same way; no unwanted sexual advances occurred, and the nurses were treated as professionals entitled to express opinions and make decisions. Her physique was no longer a topic of conversation, with the sole exception of

one doctor who ascribed her »delicate« approach to patients to her Polish Catholic upbringing and »Virgin Mary-like« empathy. Several respondents had started their careers abroad as caregivers. Those in Germany worked largely in the semi-legal sector and were paid less than certified local personnel, but nevertheless earned enough to support their families. Women employed in the UK drew attention to the flexibility of the shift patterns enjoyed by caregivers and how they facilitated juggling work and family obligations, or, alternatively, studying while working. Issues in caregiving are difficult to tackle from the standpoint of a feminist critique. On the one hand, the discourse indeed positions Polish women in regressive roles inasmuch as they supply care for their Western counterparts who can afford to outsource caregiving/domestic work outside their respective families, thus reinforcing the patriarchal gender order by ignoring the problematic character of caregiving work in a neoliberal economy (Palenga and Lutz 2010; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Nakano Glenn 1994). In addition, the construction of womanhood in terms of femininity involves rhetorically framing caring as »appropriate« and as a (solely) female (primary) responsibility. However, a number of women's narratives suggest that providing care and domestic work can be rewarding and, more importantly, that it continues to be economically crucial for the survival of Eastern European women and their families (Morokvasic 2003, 2006; Lutz 2011). The economic disproportion between Western and Eastern Europe, which is especially evident in the difference in wages, overshadows the struggle for gender equality, and in the process incontrovertibly assists in reproducing injustice globally through the tacit endorsement of lower wages and non-standardized working conditions.

In comparing conditions between the home and destination countries, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that German and British labor markets are also not free of gender-based discriminatory practices. It must be emphasized that various measuring instruments, such as research and legal frameworks, consistently register the uneven treatment of (native) men and women in Western economies (EC 2014 Report; Matysiak and Steinmetz 2006). Likewise, there are feminist critiques that specifically

see migrant women as being victims of discrimination on the one hand (Anderson 2000; Roth 2008; Berdahl and Moore 2006) and, as mentioned earlier, as being enablers of stagnation within gender orders, on the other (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003, Nakano Glenn 1994). While the significance of these broader debates should be kept in mind, the focus here is on the individual accounts of women. Such subjective perceptions tend to reflect a »here vs. there« dichotomy, in which the negative portrayal of Poland stands in opposition to positive experiences abroad. While this might not be useful from a macro-standpoint, it presents an issue that is sociologically vital, which attests to how problematic issues abroad are often overlooked and the relation of perceived and experienced discrimination affects individual narratives.

Contributions and concluding remarks

This article draws attention to several issues that are sometimes sidelined in the gender and migration debates, and it does so in several ways. First, it integrates a long-term perspective, from pre-migration narratives to settled-abroad narratives; it illustrates that although the post-1989 transition logic should have been lifted by the combined factors of Poland's EU accession and its relatively strong economic performance despite the global financial crisis, practices of gender-based labor market discrimination still cause difficulties for women in Poland and equally affect educated women who have recently finished university and those nearing retirement age. Second, inasmuch as the division between East Central and Western Europe still holds, it also helps to frame certain findings about migration as a means for achieving greater gender equality in the various spheres of women's lives (Kay 1988; Morokvasic 1984, 1993, 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; 1994, 101). While this thesis might be countered with the line of argument on women's re-traditionalizing after migration (Szczepanikova 2006, 2012; Reid and Comas-Diaz 1990; Morokvasic 2007, 71), the discussion is limited here to labor market-related narratives, which consistently demonstrate subjective satisfaction with having contravened or escaped the unfair gendered practices that respondents experienced in their country of origin. It is therefore im-

portant to note that while gender equality might not be a priority or a possibility for women in their domestic lives, such as when they choose traditional framings of their roles as mothers and wives, the role of work in those same subjects' lives cannot be overlooked and should not be restricted to its income-producing function. For example, both deskilling and low income jobs performed by women can be seen as objectively negative outcomes of migration; nevertheless, actual workplace experiences in which unjust gendered practices are absent, the acquired ability to contribute to the domestic budget, and work satisfaction all may be interpreted subjectively in conjunction with individual achievement and female agency.

Finally, although the post-migratory labor market experiences of the women interviewed are not free from certain problems—as women in other studies on Polish female labor abroad have pointed out (Slany and Małek 2005; Małek 2010; Kałwa 2006)—the general conclusion is that even a plethora of factors, that normally would lead to oppression and did in the pre-migration context, were largely overcome thanks to migration. It may thus be argued that a transformation of one's gendered circumstances on the labor market is an indirect result of the move abroad and signifies a hitherto often overlooked dimension of contemporary Polish mobility. This finding is more in line with explanations drawing on theories of political resistance and escape (Małek 2010; Coyle 2007) than with frameworks relying on purely macroeconomic factors. In this regard, it must be noted that the dominant economic paradigm used to explain contemporary Polish mobility says very little about women's experiences, as it usually disregards differences between the respective labor market positions of men and women and their varied entanglement with home realm obligations. It is not that women do not migrate for financial reasons—they often do, even more so than their male counterparts—but their exposure to professional life in Poland makes the process of familiarization and adaptation to the foreign labor market entirely different for them. Likewise, the family situation has a much greater impact on women's work life than it does for

most men. Having been *tied-stayers*¹¹ for a long time, women have now become primary agents in their households' migratory endeavors. Additionally, the generally precarious position of women on the labor market, when paired with sociological knowledge of the feminization of poverty in Poland, could also contribute to the alternative, though sometimes hidden motivations for changing one's residence, as enforced by global regimes of care (Charkiewicz and Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2009). Political aspects have contributed as »push factors,«¹² since women's narratives focus on the way mass mobilization is not merely a matter of economic struggle, but also involves willingness to belong to a new, future-oriented, modern, and culturally open European society. The mobility of Polish women in global capitalism is by no means identical with the pursuit of consumption in the world economy; rather, this mobility strongly encourages the creation of alternative empowered identities, both in private and professional life, thereby partially liberating Polish women from gendered, conservative discourses and facilitating new reconciliations between private and public and between work and family as key spheres of women's lives.

11 *Tied-stayers* are featured in New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) theory, which moves away from individualist reductionism and assigns the power in deciding »who migrates« to the household/family unit. It explains how women were assigned to mobility or immobility for historical reasons and reasons related to gender and reproduction (see Stark 1985; for the Polish example, Górny and Kaczmarczyk 2003; for a critique of it, see Faist 2004, 41–42).

12 I am referring to a broad interpretation of push-and-pull theory (Lee 1966) that focuses on all types of factors (economic, political, personal) acting as an encouragement for people to leave one country and stimulating them to settle in another state (i.e. workplace gender discrimination present in Poland—a push factor—versus equality abroad, which is understood as a pull factor).

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