

# Female Migrants' Work Trajectories: Polish Women in the UK Labour Market

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*The present paper examines how, at a time of post EU-enlargement migration, female Polish migrants in the UK act within, despite and against the social structure of gender regimes in the origin and host societies and how female migrant agents are actively mediating structures in a quest to fulfil their aspirations. Biographical narrative interviews conducted with female Polish migrant workers in the UK and semi-structured expert interviews provide the empirical data for the analysis of how employment trajectories in migration can challenge or reinforce gender roles, and of the role of female migrants' agency. The paper shows how some women are limited in their opportunities by gender roles and familial obligations, while others are able to progress professionally either by entering a typical 'migrant' sector, by undertaking UK education, or by starting their own businesses, challenging the gendered expectations they face. The paper thus contributes to the discussion on female migrants as disadvantaged migrant workers or as active agents of change.*

*Keywords: female migration; gender; work trajectories; women's employment*

## Introduction

In May 2014 a report published by the Migration Policy Institute and the International Labour Organisation (Fratini 2014) suggested even in its title *Moving up the Ladder?* the changed reality of migrants' employment trajectories. While discourses around downward social mobility and brain waste had for some time dominated in relation to post-accession Polish migration to the UK, these findings suggest that migrants are in fact able to move up the occupational ladder. The present paper looks into these potential dynamics in the experiences of female Polish migrant workers in the UK and asks how Polish women perform as agents in the UK labour market.

Post-accession female Polish migrants to the UK have been described as young women often migrating alone and thus as mobile female workers characterised by reliability, efficiency, cheapness and commitment (Slany 2008). This could potentially challenge or reinforce the Polish nationalist version of femininity as represented by Mother Pole (*Matka Polka*) – a figure limited to procreation and domesticity (Ignatowicz 2012: 125). Polish gender relations are far more complicated than this simplified ideal might suggest. While during the socialist era the labour market participation of Polish women far exceeded that of women in Western European countries, this development has faced something of a backlash during the more recent transformation, with female workers turning out to be the losers through the capitalist dynamics of a changing system and the revival of this nationalist, sexist ideal. The present paper examines this dynamic and its

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relevance to the phenomenon of female Polish labour migration to the UK and the role migration can play in challenging or supporting prevalent gender relations.

Therefore the following research questions are being pursued: *How do the work trajectories of female Polish migrant workers in the UK challenge or reinforce gender roles? How are employment trajectories actively mediated by female Polish migrant workers in the UK?* In pursuit of these questions the present paper obtains insights from literature on Polish post-accession migration, on female migration, and specifically on female Polish migration. In conceptualising the phenomenon, the construction of Polish women is examined and combined with a view of the career trajectories of female Polish migrants. Quantitative data on Polish women in the UK and their characteristics, putting the research into context, is followed by an examination of in-depth biographical narrative interviews.<sup>1</sup> These biographies enable migration and work trajectories to be analysed and the role of female migrants' agency to be examined.

### **Polish post-accession migration to the UK and the feminisation of migration**

The phenomenon of Polish post-accession migration to the UK has, in the light of its numerical significance, new politico-institutional developments and broad spectrum, attracted a substantial amount of research into various aspects of its dynamics. Following accession in 2004, the UK opened up its labour market for citizens of the new member states<sup>2</sup> and the number of Polish migrants in the UK has risen significantly. Although a certain amount of return migration has been detected and researched since the economic crisis beginning in 2007 (Anacka, Matejko, Nestorowicz 2013), the implementation of the European principle of freedom of movement has affected the size of the Polish population in the UK so substantially that Polish is deemed to be the second most widely spoken language in England (Booth 2013). In 2011 Poland was estimated to be the top country for citizenship of foreign citizens, at 15 per cent, and the second country of birth for foreign borns, at 8 per cent (Rienzo, Vargas-Silva 2012). The 2011 census data for England and Wales list a Polish-born population of 579 000, constituting 52 per cent of all Central and Eastern European migrants (Migration Observatory 2012). Migration from Poland to the UK *has proved to be of interest across a wide range of academic disciplines, has been a topic of great concern to local authorities across the UK and has loomed large in general public and media debates about immigration* (Burrell 2010: 297). Such studies have revolved around key themes of academic research such as staying, returning, working and living (Burrell 2010). Economic reasons such as high unemployment in Poland have been identified by pivotal studies as the main migration driver, characterising this movement as economic migration (Drinkwater, Eade, Garapich 2006). Certain demographic characteristics have been ascribed to the new Polish migration to the UK, seen as consisting of young (White 2010), highly educated people, whom Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich (2006) describe as 'searchers' looking to meet new people and to improve their English language skills. Hence observers have not merely conceptualised life strategies in economic terms, but have also taken account of the social and cultural capital of migrants (Burrell 2009: 298). Attention has been paid not only to standards of living and mobile young people (Cieřlik 2011), but also to family strategies and migrant workers. In parallel with the description of Polish migration to the UK as economic migration, Polish migrants have generally been defined as workers undertaking work migration (Burrell 2010: 300). *Whether about opportunity, vulnerability or integration, most reports and studies acknowledge work as central* (Burrell 2010: 301). Researchers such as Galasińska and Kozłowska (2009), Rabikowska (2010) and Lopez Rodriguez (2010) have established that Polish migrants do not argue that their move is to do with the search for a 'better' life, but for a 'normal' life: 'normal' referring to the perceived standard of living of Europeans. Kaźmierska, Piotrowski and Waniek (2011: 143) illustrate this desire with an image introduced by Morawska (1985) of migrating 'for bread with butter'. The idiom 'bread and butter' refers to one's basic income or

livelihood and migrating ‘for bread’ referred to the push factor of survival, whereas the modification to ‘for bread with butter’ expresses the migrants’ economic and social expectations acting as pull mechanisms (Każmierska *et al.* 2011). While different types of migrants have been identified, some agreement has been reached *that post-accession migrants are a diverse, not entirely predictable, population, all existing within the same economic framework but formulating different strategies of migration and return* (Burrell 2010: 299).

In addition to Polish post EU-enlargement migration to the UK being researched extensively as a specific migration phenomenon, for the present paper another dynamic within migration research becomes relevant: the focus on women as migrants. Kofman, Phizacklea, Raghuram and Sales (2000) detect blindness to the diversity of the female experience, articulating that there are many migration movements in which women are not simply the followers of men as wives or partners. The feminisation of migration has been widely acknowledged. While gender studies are located in an interdisciplinary area of research, there have been *sociological studies of gender and migration, which include analyses of national data sets on country of origin, global studies linking micro and macro causes of migration, national-level studies of immigrant groups, and refined case studies of immigrant groups in a single locale* (Moch 2005: 95). The structuralist perspective focuses on immigrant women in work, mainly in the informal and secondary sector in which they are the *underdog in the world capitalist system* (Moch 2005: 97), pushed by patriarchy into the least desirable positions (Anderson 2000; Morokvasić 1984). Less structuralist research has studied immigrant women as actors with varying degrees of agency in families or communities. Mobility has the potential to impact on the position of women in society (Morokvasić 1984). Adopting a transnational approach, researchers thus conceptualise women as agents of change for their countries of origin, on the one hand having stronger ties than men to their home countries, leading to high remittances, and on the other hand having a higher level of participation in the receiving communities (Kofman 2004). Including gender in migration research enriches and deepens the study of movement and its consequences (Moch 2005). In order to understand migration experiences a gendered perspective appears to be relevant, since migration can be different for men and women, possibly changing gender relations or entrenching traditional inequalities. Research on mobility has found that for some women in Europe migration has become a lifestyle choice and a strategy for gaining social status (Ignatowicz 2012). This conclusion appears to be overly optimistic, when looking at the main sectors in which immigrant women find employment, since these often reproduce traditional gender relations and the intersection with class and ethnicity. Various forms of intersecting inequalities – being a migrant, a woman and a member of an ethnic group – have been detected (McCall 2005). The feminisation of the labour market, its continued segmentation, and the occupational segregation between men and women in the UK, is the context within which migrant women seek employment and combine their reproductive and gainful work (Aufhauser 2000).

While the transition phase following 1989<sup>3</sup> has triggered mobility, including that of women (Morokvasić, Münz, Metz-Göckel 2008) employed in low-paid jobs in the service sector, female emigration from Poland has a long history and has been associated with economic and family factors (Ignatowicz 2012: 36). Past research (Coyle 2007; Cyrus 2008) shows that mobility plays an important role in enhancing opportunities related to paid and unpaid work (Morokvasić *et al.* 2008) and at the same time creates a hybrid existence in the receiving and origin countries (Cyrus 2008). Cook, Dwyer and Waite (2010) illustrate additional advantages of migration to the United Kingdom.

*For some Polish women their new life abroad had opened up the space for them to critically review their own attitudes and beliefs. (...) Gender and ethnicity remain important factors in the lives of A8 migrants. The act and experience of migration offers new individual and collective opportunities and potentially opens up spaces for people to negotiate structural constraints and reconfigure aspects of their identity* (Cook *et al.* 2010: 73).

While *female emigration from Poland has not been fully investigated [and] much of the previous research on gender and migration concentrated on females with families, neglecting the young, single and childless migrants* (Ignatowicz 2012: 37), some new research has been published recently by Duda-Mikulin (2013) on Polish women actively exercising their EU citizenship rights. For Polish migrants and female Polish migrants in the UK, the labour market situation has become diverse in terms of occupational levels and industry sectors.

### **Polka – the construction of Polish women**

To understand the social construction of Polish women it is necessary to understand the interconnectedness of the role of women, gender relations and the tragic history of Poland. Following the traumatic experiences of the Second World War, the socialist leadership was perceived as being external, which sustained the dichotomy of ‘us’ against ‘them’ and thus prevented the internalisation of the socialist ideal of gender equality. Instead, traditional understandings of gender roles prevailed, combining the image of the sacrificing *Matka Polka* with traditions of Polish aristocratic society portraying men as knights and women as ladies. Aristocratic gender relations were referred to as ‘soft patriarchy’ in which women were valued highly and treated in a gentlemanly fashion, but at the same time subordinated and assigned to the private, female sphere, clearly separate from the public-political, male sphere. During the partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793 and 1795, which ended the existence of an independent Polish state until 1918, the family and the church had been the only spaces in which a Polish national consciousness could be created and upheld under foreign rule, rendering the role of the self-sacrificing *Matka Polka* a political one as well. In this role women kept the national identity alive within the family and supported their husbands’ struggle for independence by efficiently taking on all other necessary duties (Janion 1996). This gender solidarity in the fight against the ‘others’ led, following Polish independence in 1918, to the acknowledgement of the role of women by the extension of the franchise to women without their needing to fight for it; during this interwar period women also participated actively in the attainment of higher education. In times of Polish autonomy it seemed that the idea of the emancipation of women progressed and the ideal of the *Matka Polka* was less powerful than later on, when the genders were faced once more with a common enemy (Pickhan 2006). During socialist rule the equality of men and women was propagated and discrimination against women was denied. The state would take over the work of caring for children and thus declare women free to work as if there were no need for reproductive work in the household. In contrast to some patriarchal Western countries following a sole-wage-earner model, whereby women could only earn additional pocket money, in Poland men and women earned the same. However, neither would be able to maintain a household alone, since the wages were basically cut to 50 per cent of living expenses, creating co-dependency which, combined with other economic problems such as housing shortages, supply shortfalls and poverty, worsened the situation of women (Petrowa-Wasilewicz 2006). The emancipation of women ‘from above’ during socialist times collapsed in parallel with the collapse of the socialist system and was due to a lack of functioning organisations with the power to prevent the closure of kindergartens or the introduction of a law prohibiting abortions.

In collective memory the role of women during the uprisings and demonstrations of *Solidarność* was merely a supportive one. Although they were even asked not to disturb the men during their struggle, it was established that women were able to irritate the authorities even more than did the oppositional male actors (Graff 2006). Following transformation the unemployment of women rose faster, their wages decreased in relation to those of men, and it took them longer to find new positions, being asked routinely about their personal life plans during job interviews. Nevertheless a higher degree of equality has been achieved and sustained in contrast to some other Western democracies in which patriarchy dominated (Petrowa-Wasilewicz 2006). It is suggested that the backlash in women’s equality after 1989 was connected to the circumstance that these

rights were not perceived as specifically women's rights, but were taken for granted and rather seen as needing improvement. Some years had to pass before changes in the area of women's rights could be conceptualised as part of the neoliberal transformation project. On the one hand the idea of women's rights being rooted in socialist ideology led to their rejection, but at the same time the extreme form of economic liberalisation and the focus on fiscal arguments led to their weakening. The closing of kindergartens and the referral of care duties back to women were understood both as ways to save money and as ways to encourage women to exit the labour market and therefore reduce unemployment amongst men. The discontent of some women with these developments led to the foundation of various NGOs, but it took 20 years for the women's movement to be strongly organised within the Women's Congress (*Kongres Kobiet*) in the fight for women's rights. Most recently media debates have dealt with public criticism of gender ideology and its proclaimed dangers by Polish priests and some politicians (Fuszara 2014).

### **Employment trajectories of female Polish migrants**

As stated above, there has been little research on the employment trajectories of female Polish migrant workers. Studies relating to this issue would either focus on certain sectors and include various migratory backgrounds or investigate the female experience as wives and mothers. Nevertheless some studies have been undertaken in relation to the employment trajectories of Polish migrants and within these the researchers also examined the differences between men and women. In their research on the meaning of migration for careers, Grabowska-Lusińska and Jaźwińska-Motyłska (2013) detected differences between men's and women's approaches to migration. They found women to be more determined and to make better use of the opportunities that arise in connection with staying abroad. The migration experience helps women to achieve radical changes in their employment trajectories. Migration therefore becomes a step in their careers which does not depend on their position or family situation. For men, by contrast, migration is more of an interlude than a part of their career, which they use to achieve other goals. The researchers explain these differences in terms of the greater challenge migration poses to women than to men, because their more difficult position in the labour markets of their origin as well as of their host societies calls for greater determination. While men were found to take a more conformist approach and subject themselves to institutional conditions, women have been innovative in using their opportunities for professional development and have reacted quickly to changing conditions (Grabowska-Lusińska, Jaźwińska-Motyłska 2013). In addition to these insights, a typology was created in relation to the employment trajectories of migrants in general. Grabowska-Lusińska (2012) developed four types of employment trajectories of migrants, featuring a basic differentiation between stable and changing careers and an assessment of the different influences of structure and agency. She distinguishes both the 'fixative' and the 'project' trajectories as stable types, with the 'project' being realised by a higher level of agency. The 'coincidence' and the 'exploration' on the other hand represent changing career paths, with the latter in need of more individual enforcement.

The present paper makes use of two insights provided by these studies: the need for a greater determination on the part of female migrant workers and the relevance of individual agency for Polish women's performance in the UK labour market.

### **Quantitative data: Polish women as migrants and as female workers**

Before moving on to the qualitative exploration of interview data, which is the core of the present paper, it is necessary to put the phenomenon into context and take a look at the available quantitative data on female Polish migrant workers in the UK.

As mentioned earlier, after 10 years of EU enlargement, the picture of Polish migrant workers is highly diverse. When looking at available data, certain limitations have to be taken into account. First, freedom of movement and the development of circular migratory patterns have led to a dynamic picture, in which data can only provide an idea of the situation at a certain point in time. The definition of a migrant is itself challenging and is always accompanied by constraints. In most studies Polish migrants are understood as persons whose country of birth is Poland; some studies are based on the country of citizenship, and others on the intended length of stay. The only reliable large-scale data set is the British census, the most recent one undertaken in 2011, but this does not show what has happened in the years since it was conducted. The other means of accessing information of this kind is to look at the Labour Force Survey, but here the problem, especially with migrant groups, lies in the small sample size.

The census of 2011 shows that in England and Wales 51 per cent of the Polish-born population is female and 49 per cent is male, with a total number of 579 121 Polish-born people living in England and Wales, constituting 1 per cent of the total population. As described earlier, this group is characterised as rather young, with Polish women appearing to be slightly younger than men and predominantly aged 20–29, which mirrors the previous picture of mobile, young, single women, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Polish-born population by age and sex in England and Wales**

Age	Female (per cent)	Male (per cent)
< 16	11	12
16–19	3	3
20–29	38	33
30–39	29	35
40–49	8	9
50–59	6	5
≥ 60	5	4

Source: Census 2011 for England and Wales.

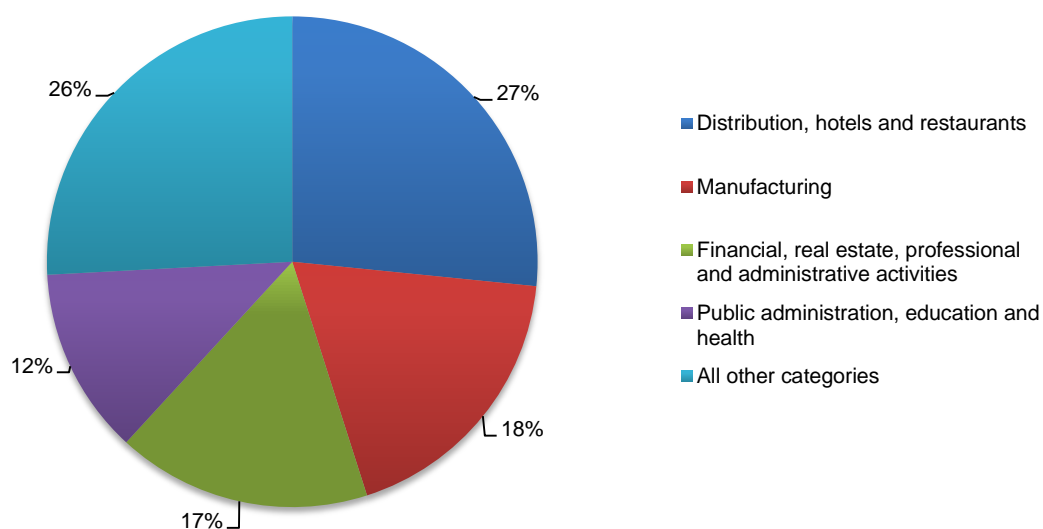
When we examine the information on economic activity in Table 2, Polish women appear more likely to be employed part-time, at 16 per cent, compared to 4 per cent for Polish men, but at the same time they are less often employed part-time than female residents in general (21 per cent). While Polish-born men are more often in full-time employment, at 64 per cent, compared to 47 per cent for Polish-born females and male residents in general, they also have a higher percentage of self-employment, at 16 per cent compared to 9 per cent for Polish women. In relation to full-time employment, it is interesting that Polish women are employed full-time as much as men in general and far more than all female residents, with 31 per cent. Polish-born women dominate in the gendered category of ‘looking after home or family’ at 9 per cent, in stark contrast to 1 per cent for men. These data on the one hand show the gendered dimension of economic activity as between Polish men and women in the UK, in the differences in part-time and full-time employment as well as in the category of ‘looking after home and family’. On the other hand they reflect the characteristics of this population as migrant workers with lower rates of members in retirement or economically inactive, and higher rates of those in employment.

**Table 2. Polish-born population and all usual residents by economic activity and sex in England and Wales**

Economic activity	Polish-born female (per cent)	Polish-born male (per cent)	All residents female (per cent)	All residents male (per cent)
Part-time employees	16	4	21	6
Full-time employees	47	64	31	47
Self-employed	9	16	6	14
Unemployed	4	3	4	5
Students	4	4	6	6
Retired	5	3	16	12
Looking after home or family	9	1	8	1
Other economically inactive	4	2	6	4

Source: Census 2011 for England and Wales.

Figure 1 highlights the circumstance that while distribution, hotels and restaurants still form the biggest employment sector, accounting for 27 per cent of all Polish migrants in the UK, it is undeniable that these migrants are also a relevant population in other sectors, such as manufacturing (18 per cent), finance (17 per cent), and public administration, education and health (12 per cent). The data on industry in Table 3 show, on the one hand, the relevance of traditional migrant sectors and, on the other hand, the differences between men and women, following the gendered division of the UK labour market. In manufacturing, for example, there are many more Polish-born employees, and while there are fewer Polish women (15 per cent) than Polish men (22 per cent), these represent many more than women in general, with only 5 per cent. Other migrant sectors for the Polish born appear to be accommodation and food services, and administrative and support services, and for Polish-born men transportation and storage as well as construction. While Polish-born women outnumber Polish men in traditional female industries such as administration, health and education, they are less likely to be working in these than female residents in general.

**Figure 1. Polish-born population by industry in England and Wales**

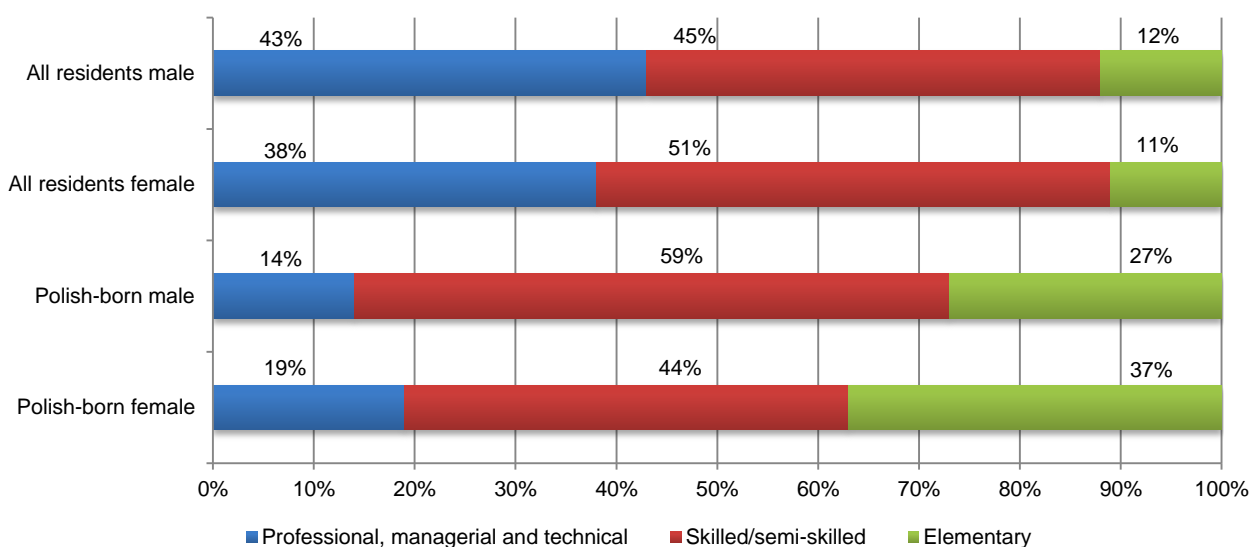
Source: Census 2011 for England and Wales.

**Table 3. Polish-born population and all usual residents by industry and sex in England and Wales**

Industry	Polish-born female (per cent)	Polish-born male (per cent)	All residents female (per cent)	All residents male (per cent)
Manufacturing	15	22	5	13
Wholesale and retail trade	15	15	16	16
Accommodation and food service activities	15	10	6	5
Administrative and support service activities	14	8	5	5
Human health and social work activities	12	3	21	5
Education	6	2	15	5
Transportation and storage	5	11	7	2
Professional, scientific and technical activities	4	3	6	7
Construction	2	17	2	13
Other	15	11	17	29

Source: Census 2011 for England and Wales.

Polish migrants are represented at all occupational levels, with 52 per cent in skilled and semi-skilled employment and half as many managers, professionals and technical staff (16 per cent) as in elementary occupations (31 per cent). However, as Figure 2 shows, in contrast to the general population it appears that Polish migrant workers are less often in managerial and professional occupations and more likely to be in elementary employment. Polish women are less often employed in skilled and semi-skilled occupations, with 44 per cent, than Polish men, with 59 per cent, and they are also better represented in elementary occupations, with 37 per cent, than men, with 27 per cent. These data suggest that Polish women are often not able to progress professionally or to have their Polish education acknowledged in the UK labour market. Nevertheless the number of Poles in skilled and semi-skilled as well as managerial, professional and technical occupations shows that they are not exclusively low-paid migrant workers. The study by Frattini (2014) suggested that within sectors such as hotels and restaurants, migrants from the new EU member states were able to move up the occupational ladder.

**Figure 2. Polish-born population and all usual residents by occupation and sex in England and Wales**

Source: Census 2011 for England and Wales.



These data paint a picture of Polish women as migrant workers, slightly younger than their male counterparts and more economically active than their female counterparts in general. While they do engage in certain gender-specific activities, such as a greater degree of part-time employment and looking after home and family, compared to Polish men, at the same time they are more nearly equal to men in general than all female residents. This is further reflected in the data on industry, where first and foremost they are migrant workers and better represented in migrant sectors, but secondly they are female and outnumber Polish men in traditionally female sectors. The same pattern can be observed in the data on occupation. This information supports the suggestion that migration can have an emancipating effect, challenging traditional gender roles, with Polish female migrant workers being better represented in certain employment types, industries and occupations than women in general. At the same time gendered divisions of the labour market still exist and might reinforce gender roles, with Polish women being overrepresented in traditional female sectors and gendered employment categories in contrast to Polish men. For the present paper four relevant sectors for Polish migrant workers were chosen for sampling: manufacturing; distribution, hotels and restaurants; local government, education and health; and banking and finance.

### Research design

In order to understand the phenomenon of female Polish migrant workers in the UK labour market the present paper takes a qualitative approach. On the one hand the available quantitative data do not provide enough insight into employment trajectories; on the other hand the role of these trajectories, the way women make use of opportunities, and how this relates to gender relations cannot be explored by a merely quantitative approach. In this section on research design data collection and analysis methods are discussed.

By using a biographical narrative interview approach (Schütze 1983) the researcher can analyse the complex dimensions of migrants' aspirations and realities. This method also helps to ensure theoretical sensitivity during the data collection stage, avoiding the imposition of theoretical ideas through the formulation of interview questions. Another argument in favour of biographical narrative interviews is the observation, gained from semi-structured pilot interviews, that some interviewees were aware of the issues and knew what a researcher might want to hear; they were too interview ready. Because the phenomenon of Polish migration to the UK has attracted much public, political and media debate, respondents are aware of the discourse and might be influenced by it in their responses.

The biographical narrative interview has three stages, starting with the spontaneous main narration, following the researcher's request for the whole life story. Only after the independent completion of the narration does the second phase of questioning start: first with supplementary, internal narrative questions, and finally with theoretical, external narrative questions based on ideas constructed beforehand. By combining a transnationalism approach with biographical research perspectives, Apitzsch and Siuti (2007) illustrate how this framework is useful *for investigating processes of change and the mingling of individual and societal positionings and identity constructions in migration processes. The embeddedness of gender and migration as well as generational relations become visible through the biographical perspective* (Apitzsch, Siuti 2007: 19).

Thirty-one biographical narrative interviews were conducted with female Polish migrant workers in the UK. The sample consisted of women working in the sectors outlined above, with and without trade union membership, in order to detect possible differences between individual and collective agency. Besides the sector focus and an approximately half/half sampling in terms of trade union membership, the sample is very diverse as regards educational background, age (ranging from 20 to 54), length of stay (ranging from 2 years to 14 years), occupational level and family status. The interviewees come from rural areas, industrial regions

and cities in Poland and now live in the same variety of geographical locations in the UK. They were accessed through initial contacts with stakeholders such as trade union officers and community organisers, followed by snowballing and advertising on online forums and on Facebook. In the use of snowballing a researcher has to be careful, since there is a risk of accessing only respondents with a similar profile, but the method also enables contact with people who might not be organised within other categories, such as online or community groups. In the case of the present research these additional contacts have led to a very diverse set of respondents, who would otherwise have been difficult to reach. Interviews were carried out either at the respondents' homes or in coffee shops throughout England. The biographical narrative interviews were conducted in Polish, with the exception of one interview in which the respondent felt more comfortable speaking English. Eleven semi-structured expert interviews, following an interview outline tailored to the specific respondents, were conducted in English with trade union officers, community activists and organisers, as well as with academic experts, which provided additional insights into the subject matter and further reflection on the developments observed.

The method of data analysis follows the basic ideas of grounded theory, which aims at the generation or discovery of a theory from data (Glaser, Strauss 1968). The grounded theory approach used here aims at the creation of analytic codes and categories developed from the data while providing theoretical sensitivity (Charmaz 2006). In the present analysis, this theoretical sensitivity is mainly derived from concepts related to the social construction of Polish women and the *Matka Polka* as well as to the work trajectories of migrant workers. Nevertheless, the data coding and analysis were not directed, but rather informed, by these ideas, and the coding process was realised by developing themes directly from the data, including a variety of *in vivo* codes, which use the participants' own words. Constant comparisons of the cases and their individual persons, places, conditions and so on help to refine a 'grounded theory' model.

### **Employment trajectories between feeling stuck and moving up**

Following the conceptualisation of the topic of female Polish migrant workers in the UK, this section examines in depth the findings retrieved from the fieldwork conducted from January to May 2014. Here insights from the biographical narrative interviews as well as from the semi-structured expert interviews are drawn and analysed within the framework of the research questions on how the work trajectories of female Polish migrant workers challenge or support prevalent gender relations and how employment trajectories are actively mediated in the quest to fulfil their aspirations. The analysis follows patterns and pathways of work emerging from the data and reflects upon their meaning for the respondents.

The notion of a proactive female migrant worker aware of her rights and opportunities had already emerged during the pilot phase of the research. This high level of determination, also described by Grabowska-Lusińska and Jaźwińska-Motyłska (2013), was reflected upon during an expert interview by a senior expert with long years of experience in researching female Polish migrants, and was connected to the *Matka Polka* ideal as having to confront structural constraints in the attempt to sustain the Polish household.

*The women seemed very sure of themselves, really quite confident, doing things that I would find scary. You know, going across Europe, starting a new job. There is definitely, I mean it's a cliché, but there is definitely this sort of strong Polish woman, that is not afraid to speak out for herself. Historically there is this Matka Polka, this confident strong [woman]. (...) You know, you get a woman from Poland speaking much more straightforward, which maybe actually works quite well in Britain (Expert interview with senior researcher).*

The *Matka Polka* traits of being efficient and taking care of everything are reflected in the action of female Polish migrants confidently moving to the UK, where their direct way of expressing themselves might even promote their occupational progression. However, many Polish women are unable to move up the occupational ladder, experience professional stagnation and feel stuck.

### *Feeling stuck*

As outlined above, the sample for the present paper is very diverse in terms of work experience in Poland prior to coming to the UK. The younger respondents in particular, who came to the UK immediately after graduation or often as a working break from university, but ended up not going back, had no previous work experience in Poland. Those who had worked prior to migration had either encountered problems living on their wages, changed work a couple of times, or recently lost their job due to structural changes such as the closure of workplaces or staff redundancies. Highly educated respondents found it particularly difficult to find employment in their professions. Migration provided a way to sustain livelihoods and in some cases to realise career ambitions.

Despite these negative examples of work experiences in Poland, some interviewees expressed their appreciation of their former jobs. Beata, who is 54 years old, reflected upon her 27 years of work as a teacher in a very positive way. While she only came for a few months to work in the food packing industry, her move initiated a migration process for her whole family, who one by one joined her in the UK and in the same occupation. For Beata, the family situation and especially her gendered role, the expectations placed on her, and her familial obligations, prevented her from going back to Poland even though she disliked life in the UK and suffered health problems due to the physical nature of her employment.

*And at that moment, if I wanted to go back to Poland I would no longer be able to, because I could not leave my family here. (...) I am a very caring mother maybe too much, I have to know everything, to control everything, but absolutely not such a control that limits any activities of the children, but I like to do a lot. I like to help and probably take on a little too much, like the care of the grandchildren and I started my small business with home-made dinner delivery since nearly three months now (Beata, 54 y, food packing and own small business).*

While Beata feels stuck in her work life and in the UK, she pursues other endeavours in order to fulfil herself personally. She co-created a women's forum for Polish trade union members, but has taken a back seat since starting her own small business preparing and delivering home-made Polish dinners for the Polish community in her area. This entrepreneurial project, on a sometimes formal, sometimes informal level, can represent an alternative or supplement to formal employment.

Kinga also had a very positive experience with work in Poland, which made starting in the UK especially problematic for her. However, her husband was already working and living in the UK and they have a son, whom she cared for on her own during the time of geographical separation. Following an ultimatum she joined her husband and felt that giving up her job in Poland was like a punishment. Added to this experience of sacrificing her professional career for the sake of the family, her work in the UK has not been satisfactory, starting with work for an agency, and now working in the food packing industry. She tries to have a more active social life through involvement in her trade union branch, but she does not necessarily connect this to her working life. This arena is devoted more to socialisation with other Polish women than to efforts at collective organisation. Kinga is trying to find a new job, ideally in her profession.

*In September it will be seven years [working in food packing] including the time with the agency. (...) It is true that I am looking for a new job. I started last year, I do not want just another job immediately, because I have this job, I'm looking just for something better (Kinga, 35 y, food packing).*

People caring for a family are less able to risk becoming unemployed or to move somewhere else to look for a better job, so Kinga is looking for a new position and going for interviews at the same time as working in a physically demanding job. In her case and in Beata's, the local geography of an industrial region is relevant, since it imposes limits on opportunities which they cannot overcome due to their family's permanent settlement there and a lack of mobility within the UK. The notion of feeling stuck, which seems to be influenced by the gendered role of the respondents within their families and the expectations placed on them, in some cases corresponding to age progression and geographical location, was also reflected upon during an expert interview by a Polish community organiser.

*Yes, there were women, probably younger ones, who were very ambitious and went to English classes and they really treated this job [cleaners in hotels] as only something temporary, knowing that they, they have a plan. They have a plan that they will move on, but then I also met a lot of women in their late 30s, 40s, who were stuck in this job. I think they initially thought the same, that it would only be a temporary thing, but they actually stay in the same place and there is not much movement going on in their lives and they feel a bit stuck (Expert interview with community organiser).*

As Grabowska-Lusińska (2012) explains in her concept of the stable 'fixative' trajectory, these feelings arise in the face of structural constraints, especially the gender role as influenced by age, family situation and geography. In this context female Polish migrants correspond to the ideal of the *Matka Polka* by sacrificing their opportunities in order to take care of their families (Janion 1996). Nevertheless the women who reported feeling stuck showed agency in innovative ways, such as trade union activism and building their own businesses.

#### *Moving on and moving up*

Most interviewees experienced some kind of occupational movement, often connected to their length of stay. While the present sample was diverse in length of stay, most had at the time of the interview already lived for two to seven years in the UK. The women who had been in the UK less than two years had lived in the UK before, but had gone somewhere else in the meantime. One went back to Poland and managed a shop and then a restaurant, but came back after its closure; the other managed a hostel in a different country and came back to fulfil her professional career goals. Both respondents, after their return to the UK, started out again at lower levels of employment than previously but had very clear goals of progressing within one to two years. The majority of respondents had been in the UK longer and had either progressed within their sector, moved to and often progressed in a different sector – sometimes having completed additional further education, less often by gaining recognition of their Polish educational qualifications – or in some cases pursued additional informal or formal entrepreneurial endeavours.

#### *Moving up within the same sector*

Female Polish migrant workers in the present research project had a high likelihood of progressing within their sector and thereby 'moving up the ladder' (Frattini 2014). Sara, for example, came to the UK during her

studies and ended up staying. First she, together with her partner at the time, moved to an area in the UK where they had friends, later moving to Scotland. Her early work experiences are characterised by low-paid, labour-intensive jobs, during which time decisions on movement were made together and were somewhat dependent on benefits for both partners. Sara started out in typical low-paid ‘migrant’ jobs as a cleaner, waitress and salesperson, and initially changed her job frequently, but these changes were later on embedded in a career path. Sara is following what Grabowska-Lusińska (2012) called the ‘project’, that is a stable trajectory which needs proactive engagement.

*I started as a sales assistant, and then went on to be a cashier. Then I moved up to head cashier and then there I was already head cashier. And then I moved to another store as supervisor and then moved up to assistant manager. And then I moved to another store on the same position, but only due to the fact that I wanted to go back to fashion. (...) That’s why I decided to move into the same position and then I moved up to the store manager here (Sara, 28 y, store manager).*

Sara is finally talking about bringing some stability to her working life. As a store manager she now has fewer opportunities for progression, so her more recent plans include buying a flat together with her new partner. While Sara experienced rapid occupational progression, it all took place in a traditional ‘migrant’ sector. On the one hand she progressed as a strong-minded woman taking risks and often changing places and jobs, while on the other hand she remained within the realm of opportunities available to migrants.

Respondents who had actively involved themselves in trade unions sometimes connected their professional progression with this engagement, especially in relation to the training they received from their unions.

*They took me into catering and I worked in catering selling coffee, tea, that sort of thing, and in the meantime I did courses because when you work in a college, a lot of these things are for free for staff. I have higher qualifications from Poland, but it is not translatable here too easily, so I did it again, a GCSE in mathematics, in general to refresh my mind, I did a diploma in employment law, because I am also in the trade union, and customer service; well all of these courses that were available for free. And after three years of work in just catering I was promoted to hospitality supervisor (Klara, 38 y, catering staff and hospitality supervisor in higher education institution).*

Klara also moved up the occupational ladder in the traditional ‘migrant’ sector of catering, making use of the limited opportunities available to her. Neither Sara nor Klara had family responsibilities or reflected on expectations they might have to fulfil as women. The fact that they could forget about their gender roles supports the idea of migration and upward employment trajectories as challenging these traditional roles. However at the same time they are employed in jobs that are marked by the gender segmentation of the UK labour market fulfilling the gender construction of the host society (Anderson 2000). As the case of Klara also shows, most women reported problems in getting their Polish qualifications acknowledged by employers and would often refer to a wish to work in their own profession (*w swoim zawodzie*).

#### *Moving on and often up in a different sector*

The experience of moving on and often upwards in a different sector was also very common among research respondents. For some it fell more into line with Grabowska-Lusińska’s ‘exploration’ (2012) of new possibilities because of problems in their prior employment. For others it was part of a career path which was

always pursued, but with an interlude in a lower position as a newly arrived migrant. As mentioned above, most interviewees were unable to find work in areas suited to their Polish qualifications and thus often worked in typical migrant sectors. The case of Lydia shows that, despite these constraints, some migrants can be successful in this endeavour. Although she liked her work in a warehouse and was offered a position as supervisor there, it was more important for her to seek personal fulfilment through a job in her profession.

*I very dearly remember [my former job], I still have contact with the majority of the people. (...) But there came the moment that I knew what I came here for and that I want to look for work in my profession. They offered me a position as a supervisor. (...) During this time I started to look for a new job and in fact in my profession, I sent out my CV (Lydia, 30 y, food analyst).*

Lydia was successful in finding a job in her profession, but most respondents have not been so lucky. They are still regarded first and foremost as migrant workers in the UK labour market.

A different pathway of moving on and up in a different sector was experienced by Klara, who was not prepared to start over again by proving herself to her new superiors. The notion of having to start again or to start from scratch was very often cited by respondents, not necessarily in connection with the migration experience, but frequently in relation to starting a new job. It was not associated with a positive vision of freedom to start over and leave all problems in the past, but rather with the need to build up one's reputation and career again from zero. Moving on to another sector and often progressing within it usually requires a high level of agency. In most cases the old place of work would have been easy to stay in and would have provided the workers with a livelihood, but their personal and/or professional fulfilment was more important, which shows a reluctance to conform to a given situation and negotiating structural constraints (Cook *et al.* 2010).

#### *Moving on with further education*

Another way of moving on for many of the respondents was additional and further education in the UK, often followed by a position in their newly acquired profession. In the case of Lidia this further education provided her with an escape from a cycle of exploitative and unfulfilling work. Lidia's case is interesting because she came to the UK immediately after taking her A-levels in Poland and was accompanied by and still lives with her mother. In this context, her mother fulfils the *Matka Polka* ideal of sacrifice by providing, through her demanding work as a care worker, the opportunity for her daughter to study.

*We realised that the person that was running the place, was expecting basically slave labour. Very demanding for very low pay and I wasn't ready for that, to put up with that. So we sort of changed jobs a couple of times. (...) And I worked for a year as a care assistant and my mum actually still works there, eight years later. (...) I made an agreement with my mum that I would work for a year and I would save all the money and I would save up enough to go to college, cause obviously I wanted to continue with my education (Lidia, 27 y, local government office worker).*

Despite the efforts Lidia had to make to achieve her goals – working and saving up money for a college course (which she explained was a very difficult one, with only two persons passing the final exams), plus the challenge of studying in English, and the additional circumstance of her mother having to provide for them both during this time – she does not associate this achievement with her successful agency, but rather declares that it was due to luck. The respondents often understated their abilities by making this connection between success and luck. This was also the case in relation to the migration movement, which Lidia and

many others reflected upon as a spontaneous rather than premeditated action, not requiring any decision making. As Grabowska-Lusińska and Jaźwińska-Motyłska (2013) state, migration, especially for women, needs some degree of determination, but the ideal of the subordinate woman might interfere, as here, with the women's self-perception. Despite the women knowing what they want, going for it and being successful, it is all explained as coincidence and luck. Nevertheless Lidia's mother is fulfilling the ideal of the sacrificing Polish mother, while Lidia mainly acts as a migrant worker with high aspirations.

However, not all respondents were able to take on additional education in the UK, because of time constraints imposed by long working hours and caring responsibilities, together with the high costs of study. Wera is 30 years old and managed to progress professionally after simultaneously working and studying for some years. For most respondents who pursued further education in the UK, it was clear that they had to work at the same time to support themselves, which was also the case for many women who had studied in Poland.

*And during these four years and until graduation I worked in the same place. (...) And then I graduated, which went very well. And immediately after graduation that company for which I worked for closed, I found a temporary job but generally I was in the mindset that I would like to do something in the field of my studies (Wera, 30 y, office worker in finance department).*

Wera went on to find a job in her newly acquired profession, as did all respondents who gained additional education in the UK. This dynamic shows that female Polish migrants are first and foremost perceived as 'low-skilled' migrant workers, despite possibly holding Polish academic degrees. The women who were able to work and study at the same time, then attain a higher position in their profession, were acting despite the expectations of their families and origin communities that they would settle down and start a family. They challenged the ideal of the Polish mother by either deciding against having children or by postponing this experience in order to fulfil their professional aspirations (Cook *et al.* 2010).

### *Entrepreneurial endeavours*

Some respondents, in addition to regular employment, were actively pursuing more informal small businesses: Beata with Polish home-made dinners and Ewa, 20 years old, with translation services. Despite the low income associated with these activities, both women saw their businesses as potentially successful ventures for the future. While Beata lacked the capital to open her own Polish restaurant, her work was a path to self-fulfilment and building up a customer base; for Ewa her translation work was perceived more as a community service and as experience that might help her achieve her goal of working for a trade union. These informal businesses can be a source of additional income which is more compatible with family responsibilities, reinforcing the gender role of the women. While structural constraints were the reason for some women to engage in those activities, others would pursue such entrepreneurial endeavours for other reasons, such as greater autonomy and personal fulfilment. Kaja's endeavour is the most formalised; since returning to the UK, she has been building up her own care business with a colleague. Before that she had moved away from the UK in order to help her then partner fulfil his wish to run a hostel in another country. She came back in order to pursue her own professional goal.

*So I'm still, I'm not married, I don't have children, my parents ask: when will you get married, when will you have children, when this, when that? Every year already you lose money, also with this business. They worry, but they are not negative. I would like to just get them away from that kind of thinking, you*

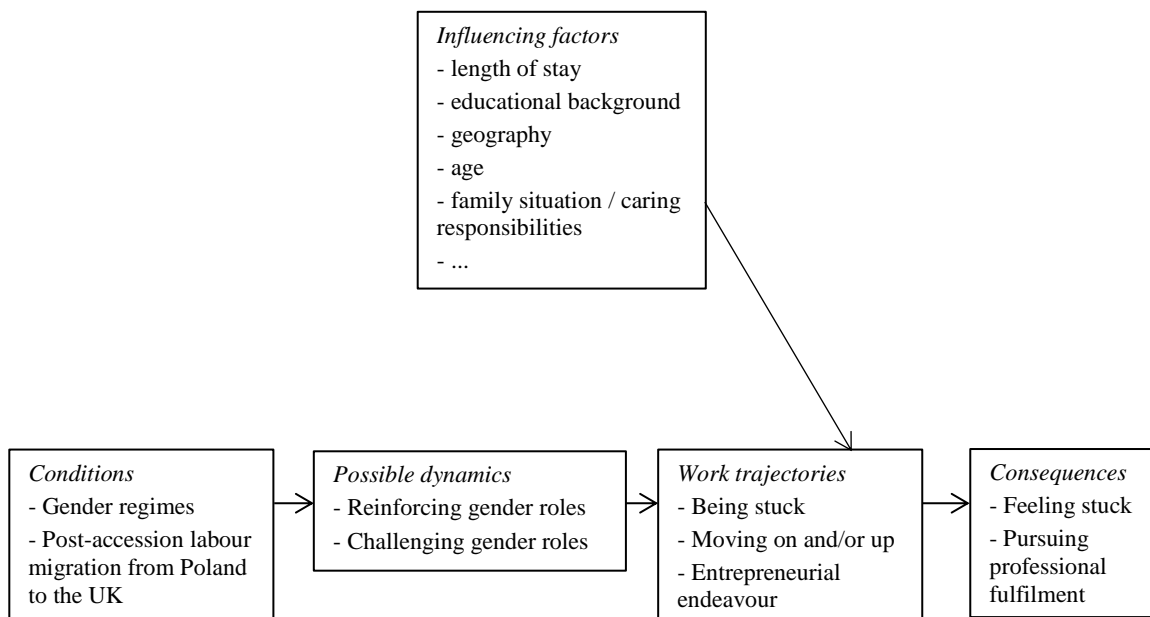
*know, just typical for people for whom this is just their life, I have a life. That's it* (Kaja, 34 y, care worker and building up own business).

She actively reflects upon her gender role and the expectations of Polish society and her family that she should get married and have children, but chooses to build up her business and live her own life. Kaja therefore challenges the established Polish gender roles with her migrant employment trajectory (Ignatowicz 2012).

## Conclusion

This paper has examined research questions on how work trajectories in migration can challenge or support prevalent gender roles and how female Polish migrant workers in the UK are actively mediating their pathways. The empirical analysis has shown that various factors determine work trajectories, which are interconnected with gender roles and at times reflect a conservative ideal or undermine traditional roles by actions, and at other times actively reflect upon, challenge and act against societal expectations. If gender roles are challenged they are those from the origin country, while the status of migrant worker dominates the experience and the gendered segmentation of the UK labour market is continued. Some respondents feel stuck in their employment situation, which is often related to geographical location, age and the family situation, while many pursue what Grabowska-Lusińska (2012) called a stable 'project' or a more flexible 'exploration'. These two pathways require active agents, who either pursue personal and professional fulfilment and have made conscious decisions as to what this trajectory should be, or are not willing to put up with unsatisfactory work conditions and want to explore what they can achieve elsewhere. Age and family situation are also relevant to experiences before, during and after transformation, which can shape aspirations and the idea of decent work.

**Figure 3. Sketch of a 'grounded theory' model of female Polish migrant workers in the UK**





A more complex answer to the research questions is outlined in Figure 3, a sketch of a ‘grounded theory’ model. In the context of prevailing gender regimes and post-accession migration, the model represents how the possible dynamics of reinforcing or challenging gender roles by work trajectories in migration are influenced by different factors and can lead to feeling stuck or pursuing professional fulfilment. The model is not supposed to simplify complex developments and experiences; therefore it is important to point out that all the dynamics discussed and especially those in the model are not static or case-specific, but rather change continuously within cases and themes as well as within trajectories, which themselves are not clear-cut, but overlap.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> These interviews were conducted as part of the fieldwork for a PhD research project from January to May 2014.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Poland the following countries joined the EU in 2004: Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. Citizens of these countries were allowed access to the UK labour market, and the Workers Registration Scheme, which ran out in 2011, was implemented in an attempt to track EU migrants.

<sup>3</sup> Following the landslide success of the *Solidarność* movement during the partially free elections of 1989 the political system in Poland changed from socialist to an open democracy and was followed by a harsh economic transition to a capitalist society.

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