

LONG-TERM EMIGRATION OF POLISH WOMEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MOTIVES AND CONSEQUENCES IN THE PROFESSIONAL FIELD

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Purpose: Contemporary international migration more and more often concerns educated women who perceive emigration as an opportunity to improve their living conditions, earn higher wages, better use their competences or explore other cultures. The aim of this paper is to present long-term emigration of Polish women from the perspective of motives and consequences in the professional area.

Design/methodology/approach: A quantitative study in the form of a questionnaire survey was conducted on a group of 126 women, followed by 10 in-depth interviews.

Findings: Most female respondents were motivated by several factors combining financial and living aspects or those related to self-development and curiosity about the world. Long-term emigration also had a significant impact on women's professional development. Almost half of the respondents improved their formal qualifications through studies or certified trainings confirming their language skills, specialisation or qualifications to perform a job. On the other hand, almost all respondents acquired new or developed their existing knowledge and skills by performing diverse and complex tasks, self-education, instructions from more experienced colleagues or internal training.

Research limitations/implications: The main limitations of the research relate to the size of the sample, which, given the scale of Polish emigration, could have been larger.

Social implications: Understanding the motives of long-term emigration of Polish women can help decision-makers create better public policies in order to create better conditions for personal and professional life. This will help to keep valuable human capital in the economy.

Originality/value: The paper presents the current motives of long-term emigration of Polish women, which, as it has been shown, have changed over the last few decades. The added value of research on migration is also the demonstration of the impact of long-term emigration of women on their professional development.

Keywords: female migration, feminisation of migration, motives for emigration, professional development, gender.

Category of the paper: Empirical research, survey.

1. Introduction

Migrations of people have become a permanent feature of the contemporary socio-economic reality. Most researchers agree that globalisation and the related relocation of the labour force are mainly responsible for this state of affairs. Until the 20th century, emigration usually meant leaving the home country forever and was dictated by economic reasons, while contemporary migration is characterised by greater diversity in terms of the directions and time of departure, as well as the accompanying motives. Initially, the participant of migration was not perceived through the prism of personal characteristics such as gender, age or education; the size of migration flows and their direction were important from the point of view of research on migration. When scientific studies started to consider the socio-cultural perspective, the migrant was a man, while the role of women was reduced to the process of family reunion. One of the characteristics of contemporary migration is its feminisation, which means both a greater participation of women in international migration processes and a change in the nature of their mobility. Among the motives of women to leave the country, increasingly frequent are those related to improved living conditions, higher wages, better use of competences and gaining experience in international markets, and not only those resulting from family and personal reasons.

In view of the above, the aim of this paper is to present long-term emigration of Polish women from the perspective of the motives behind their decision to leave the country, as well as the effects of migration in the professional field. The analysis will be grounded on the results of own research conducted in a group of Polish women living abroad for at least 12 months.

2. Contemporary migration of women in the world and in Europe

Today's population migrations are characterised by great diversity, but certain trends can be identified. Apart from the increased pace of migration and the prevalence of transit migration, the phenomenon of feminisation of migration plays an important role. Women have established a permanent presence in labour migration over the past few decades and now constitute a majority in many migration flows (Castles, Miller, 2014). According to estimates by the International Organization for Migration (Mcauliffe, Triandafyllidou, 2021), there were 281 million international migrants worldwide in 2020, 135 million of whom were women. Although they are not the majority in the global migrant population, there are many regions and countries where women clearly outnumber male migrants (Table 1).

Table 1.*Share of women in international migration 1990-2020 (%)*

Region	1990	2000	2010	2020
World	49.3	49.4	48.4	48.1
Developed regions	51.2	51.1	51.5	51.6
Less developed regions	47.1	46.7	44.1	43.6
Africa	47.2	46.9	46.4	47.1
Asia	46.8	46.4	43	41.8
Europe	51.4	51.6	51.7	51.6
Latin America and the Caribbean	49.8	50.1	50.3	49.5
Northern America	51.1	50.5	51.5	51.8
Oceania	48.9	50.1	50.3	50.5

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020.

In 2020, the percentage of women in international migration flows amounted to 48.1%, the weakest result in the entire period analysed. It is worth noting that, on the one hand, the number of emigrating women from less developed countries is decreasing and, on the other hand, the share of emigrating women in developed countries is increasing. The region with the smallest share of women in the emigration group is West Asia with 35.3% (a decrease of 6.1 percentage points compared to 1990). The next regions with the highest gender gap are North and Central Africa with 43.6% and 43.3% respectively. Among the countries with the lowest share of female emigrants are Maldives with 12.3%, Butan with 15.1% and Oman with 16.4%. On the other hand, among the regions with the highest share of female emigrants, one should mention Southern Europe, East Asia and Eastern Europe with the result of 52.7%, 52.3% and 52.1% respectively. The advantage of women over men in international migration is also observed in Central Asia, Northern Europe, Western Europe, North America and Australia and New Zealand. Among the countries with the highest share of emigrating women are Nepal – 69.9%, Montenegro – 60.6% and Kyrgyzstan – 59.6%. Particularly noteworthy is the higher than average proportion of female emigrants from post-communist countries, which in some countries persists to this day (cont. Table 2).

Table 2.*Share of women from post-communist countries in international migration 1990-2020 (%)*

Country	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Albania	53.7	53.4	53.1	49.0	49.0	49.0	49.0
Armenia	58.9	58.9	58.9	59.2	59.4	59.5	59.0
Azerbaijan	56.2	56.5	56.9	55.2	53.2	52.1	52.0
Belarus	54.2	54.2	54.2	54.2	54.2	54.2	54.2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	52.6	52.3	52.2	52.5	52.3	52.3	53.2
Bulgaria	57.9	57.9	57.9	56.5	55.6	51.5	50.3
Croatia	53.2	53.2	53.0	53.1	53.2	53.6	53.5
Czech Republic	48.0	46.7	46.0	43.7	40.7	42.6	42.1
Estonia	55.1	56.8	59.6	59.7	59.8	58.9	56.5
Georgia	56.2	56.2	56.2	56.2	56.2	56.2	56.1
Hungary	55.1	54.3	53.5	52.5	51.9	50.4	48.2
Kazakhstan	54.0	54.0	53.9	52.5	51.3	50.4	50.4
Kyrgyzstan	58.2	58.2	58.2	58.6	59.2	59.6	59.6
Lithuania	52.9	53.0	53.1	53.2	56.7	57.7	49.6
Latvia	55.0	56.5	58.7	58.9	60.3	60.8	59.5

Cont table 1.

North Macedonia	58.3	58.3	58.3	58.3	58.3	58.3	58.3
Moldova	56.3	57.7	59.2	60.3	59.7	59.1	59.1
Montenegro	59.7	60.7	60.6
Poland	57.2	58.1	59.0	58.9	59.2	58.1	52.2
Romania	57.6	55.2	53.0	51.7	50.5	47.8	45.1
Russia	50.9	50.3	49.7	50.2	50.7	50.9	50.9
Serbia	52.9	55.2	55.2	55.2	55.9	56.0	56.0
Slovakia	56.0	56.0	56.0	55.0	54.3	49.9	49.0
Slovenia	49.7	48.3	46.5	46.3	42.8	43.4	41.4
Tajikistan	56.2	56.4	56.0	56.7	56.5	56.9	56.8
Turkmenistan	56.2	51.7	53.1	52.5	54.2	53.4	52.6
Ukraine	57.2	57.2	57.1	57.1	57.0	57.0	57.0
Uzbekistan	56.2	56.5	56.9	55.7	54.2	53.4	53.2

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020.

Apart from the Czech Republic and Slovenia, which did not achieve a predominance of women in international migration in the entire presented period, each of the remaining post-communist countries located in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia was characterised by the feminisation of migration, at least for some time. In the vast majority of countries, the share of women in international population flows is still significantly higher than for men. Only in Albania, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia has this share fallen below 50% in the last 10 years.

As mentioned in the introduction, the issue of women's migration in pioneering works was addressed on the margin, as an additional phenomenon to men's mobility (Szczygielska, 2013). The same applied to women's economic migration, which was initially treated as secondary until the economic activity of women was perceived as productive for the host country (Kindler, Napierała, 2010). The decrease in demand for men's labour in heavy industry and mining, while the demand for labour in the service sector increased, resulted in women being the ones to migrate on their own to support the family left behind (Pawlus, 2017). As the examples of migration from South America to Spain show, it is women who pave the migration route and pioneer overseas labour migration, undertaking the responsibility of supporting the family left behind. In the event of migration to countries neighbouring the place of origin, with the money earned by women, husbands build houses in their home villages. In both situations quoted, it is the woman who determines the direction of activity and the standard of living of the family (Praszałowicz, 2008). An important role in the feminisation of migration is played by migration networks which, unlike those built by men, are based to the greatest extent on encapsulated kinship relations (Kępińska, 2008). The assistance of migration networks is particularly important for women with lower qualifications (Ryan, 2009). Functioning networks allow obtaining information on income opportunities and provide assistance from the environment during the stay abroad (Praszałowicz, 2008).

A factor that led to the intensification of feminisation of migration was changes in the family welfare capital in highly developed countries. Low fertility rates, better accessibility and development of education resulting in increased female labour force participation, as well as a growing number of people in the post-working age and ageing populations, have led to a large increase in demand for care services (Cangiano, 2014; Kawczyńska-Butrym, 2014). One frequently used solution to cope with this situation is the employment of immigrant women in households (Matuszczyk, 2019). From the perspective of highly developed European countries, such a change was also possible due to the collapse of communist regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which led to unprecedented human mobility and started a new phase of European migration. The previous pattern of labour migration has become more diverse and also includes seasonal or circular migration. The new forms of migration are no longer male-dominated, as the political transformation and the related socio-economic challenges, to some extent, have forced large numbers of women to move (Morokvasic, 2003).

Labour migration is usually associated with the movement of low-skilled and unskilled people. It is now well established that the migration of professionals is a permanent component of international population flows, and its volume and importance is constantly increasing (Osiecka, 2010). At present, it is already known that the migration of specialists is a permanent element of international flows of population, and its volume and significance is still growing. These are no longer only family and economic reasons, although still in many regions of the world they are the main incentive to move, but also an expression of a desire to become independent, to be an active participant in economic processes or to improve language skills (Coyle, 2007a). In contrast to men, women more often face difficulties in undertaking employment abroad that would match their qualifications. The main reasons include more difficult transferable skills from female-dominated areas (e.g. health care and teaching), having children or elderly people in the family under one's care, or gender discrimination in foreign markets. These and other factors consequently lead to more brain waste and women accepting jobs below their qualifications (Liversage, 2009).

3. Migration of Polish women in the 21st century

Migrations of Polish women after 1989 were a response to the economic crisis of the time, growing unemployment and instability of employment. It was in the last decade of the last century that new migration routes to countries in southern Europe began to emerge that were initiated by women (Coyle, 2007b; Malek, 2010). In the early 1990s, the proportion of women emigrating for permanent residence was 48-49%, and the difference in the nominal number of migrants rarely reached 1000 in favour of men. The situation changed between 2009 and 2014, when the number of women far exceeded the number of men emigrating. In some years there

were almost 2000 more Polish female emigrants than male emigrants, which translated into their 51-54% share in the total emigration for permanent residence. Recent years show an equalization of both values (CSO, 2022). On the other hand, with regard to temporary foreign migration of Polish women, according to data from the National Censuses of 2002 and 2011, their share was higher than for men. It amounted respectively to 53.8% in 2002 and 51.1% in 2011. Among the main directions of migration, where women constituted the majority of Polish migrants, we can find Italy (66% of emigrants in this country are women), as well as Germany, the United States, Spain, France, Canada and Belgium. However, as K. Slany (2004) points out, if only long-term emigrants are considered, the percentage in favour of women is even higher. The vast majority of migrant women were of working age, mobile, and the largest number of them (207 thousand) were aged between 25 and 29 years. What is equally important, women were better educated than men, prevailing among people with higher (63%), post-secondary (68%) and secondary education (61%). Among the time motives for travelling abroad for both genders, work was the dominant indication (78.7% of men and 62.2% of women), while in relation to the other reasons, i.e. family matters and education, a significant predominance of women was observed. Family reasons were indicated by 22.4% of women and only 12.6% of men. Similarly for education, where it was the main reason for departure for 8.4% of women and 3.9% of men (CSO, 2013).

Among the reasons for emigration of unmarried women, three main types of emigration are distinguished: economic, family and autotelic. B. Cieślińska (2008), on the basis of research, indicates that earning and family motivations were the background for practically every migration. Other motives related to the desire for adventure or challenge were indicated as additional in relation to some female respondents. B. Sakson (2009) notes that the most frequently indicated motive of women emigrating to the United States was economic, but not only this aspect was important for the surveyed respondents. Sometimes it was non-economic factors that were more important in the decision to migrate. Among them were political or tourist issues related to the desire to travel, experience adventure or curiosity about the world. Similar observations are presented by A. Krasnodębska (2009) who notes that current travels of Polish women are more often not motivated only by economic reasons, and non-economic factors such as the desire to learn a foreign language or get to know a different culture play an important role in them. A study of Polish female migrants by K. Zalewska-Łunkiewicz and A. Zygmunt (2018) points to motives related to improved living conditions and quality of life, prospects for higher pay, but also to the possibility of receiving a job abroad that would allow for better use of competences and career development. This brief overview of research on Polish female migrants allows us to see the change that is occurring with regard to women's motives for emigration. Besides financial reasons, non-economic motives, including those related to professional development, are gaining importance.

4. Research methodology

The phenomenon of feminisation of migration, the demographic structure of Polish female emigrants and the diversity of motives of going abroad encourage us to take up this topic in more detail and investigate the causes of current long-term foreign migration of Polish women, as well as its impact on the professional area. In view of the improvement on the Polish labour market, very low unemployment and rising salaries in the economy, emigration is no longer a necessity, as it was at the turn of the century, yet still several thousand women a year leave Poland permanently. Due to the adopted objective, the research was exploratory in nature. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used. The tools used were a survey questionnaire and an interview questionnaire respectively.

A total of 126 female respondents participated in the survey. The largest group of respondents were women aged 26-30 years (33%), followed by 31-35 years (25%), over 40 years (25%), then 36-40 years (11%) and the youngest 18-25 years (6%). The largest group of respondents had been abroad for more than 5 years (58%), while 25% of women had been there between one and three years and 17% between three and five years. The vast majority of the respondents had a university education (69%). The second most frequent indication was secondary education (25%). The remaining educational levels, i.e. vocational, lower secondary and primary, were indicated only in 1-2% of instances. The work situation before emigration was a varied demographic in the study group, as 36% of the women had just finished their education, 26% were in full-time employment in a company, 13% were unemployed, 12% were combining education and work, 7% had just resigned or been dismissed, and 6% were self-employed. The countries to which Polish women have emigrated include, in order of preference: Spain, Switzerland, Germany, United Kingdom, Iceland, Portugal, Italy, Czech Republic, Sweden, Hungary, Denmark, Norway, Slovakia, France, United States, Venezuela, Mexico, Ireland, Austria, Belgium.

The second part of the study, an in-depth interview, involved 10 women who answered questions related to their motivation to leave and the changes they had experienced in their education and professional situation as a result of going abroad. The characteristics of this group of respondents are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

Characteristics of respondents in the qualitative study (N = 10)

Name	Number of years abroad (country)	Education	Profession	Professional status before emigration
Katarzyna	1-3 years Slovakia	Master's degree	environmental protection specialist	working in a company with up to 10 people
Beata	3-5 years United Kingdom	Master's degree	financier	graduation from university
Natalia	3-5 years Portugal	Master's degree	lawyer	working in a company with over 250 people

Cont. table 2.

Barbara	over 5 years Germany	Master's degree	chemist	graduation from university
Magdalena	over 5 years Ireland	Secondary education	information management specialist	graduation
Elżbieta (1)	over 5 years Italy	Secondary education	none	graduation
Anna	over 5 years Italy	Secondary education	nurse	study and work
Gabriela	over 5 years Switzerland	Master's degree	psychologist	unemployment
Elżbieta (2)	over 5 years Czech Republic	Master's degree	economist	resignation from work
Marta	over 5 years Spain	Master's degree	teacher	working in a company with over 250 people

Source: own research.

The main limitations of the research relate to the size of the sample, which, given the scale of the phenomenon described, could have been larger, making it impossible to conclude on the entire population of women. The respondents were recruited both directly among their acquaintances and on social networking groups for Polish people abroad. It was difficult to obtain data from the diverse community of Polish migrant women due to, on the one hand, the impossibility of publishing the survey on several groups, and on the other hand, to publish it at unattractive times of the day, such as early morning or during the day.

5. Motives for long-term emigration of Polish women

Among the motives of Polish women to migrate abroad for longer than 12 months (Table 4), the desire to improve their living conditions should be mentioned above all. This motive appeared in almost 40% of the respondents' answers. The second most commonly indicated motive was the desire to travel and sightsee, followed closely by the desire to live in another country and obtain higher earnings. An important motive for every fourth Polish woman was to meet a loved one from abroad and move to their country. Also, every fourth respondent indicated that an important motive was the desire to change the environment in which they lived so far, as well as to explore other cultures. For one in five Polish women, the trip reflected the desire to acquire new competences or develop the existing ones, as well as the opportunity to work in an international environment. 15% of responses referred to the desire to have a job as a matter of fact due to the impossibility to find it in Poland. For some of the respondents the reason for leaving was having family or friends abroad or getting to know their partner in Poland and making a joint decision to leave. 10% of the respondents wanted to earn extra money for their studies or accommodation, or emigration was the solution when they did not know what to do next in life. For a few people it was also a chance to make new friends. Other individual answers included those related to a break-up with a partner, child's illness, problems with an employer or a desire to legalise a partnership.

Table 4.*Motives for long-term migration of Polish women (multiple choice)*

MOTIVE	N
desire to improve living conditions	46
desire to travel and sightsee	45
desire to live in another country	41
desire to earn more than at home	40
meeting a loved one from abroad and deciding to move there	32
desire to change the environment in which I have lived up to now	31
desire to learn about other cultures	30
desire to acquire new competences or to develop existing ones	26
desire to work in an international environment	24
desire to have a job due to the impossibility of finding one in the country	19
decision to join family, relatives or friends abroad	17
meeting a partner in Poland and joint decision to leave	14
desire to earn extra money	13
no idea of what to do next	12
desire to make new friends	6
Other	5

Source: own research.

Based on the interviews, two main groups of motives, known in the literature as the push-pull model (Castles, Miller, 2014), can be distinguished, which were indicated by the respective respondents. The first includes push factors related to poor job prospects and low wages. Such motives are indicated by the following statements.

I was supposed to start my doctoral studies in Poland, I was already enrolled. Then I found out about the salaries for doctoral students at our university and decided that it didn't make much sense to stay in Poland. My mother worked in Germany, so I had the opportunity to live here. (Barbara)

Life in Poland was a dead end. I didn't see my future in Poland. I couldn't afford to buy a flat, I couldn't afford to rent one, and I was too resourceful for communal housing. I thought about changing my job many times, but I had problems finding a job. Both in the government and in the private sector. (Elżbieta 2)

As a 19-year-old, I was not able to get a job that would allow me to rent a flat. At the time, my boyfriend was earning reasonably well, but it still wouldn't have been enough to support two people at a normal level, so we decided to move away. (Magdalena)

The second group includes pull factors related to openness and curiosity about the world, the desire for adventure, living in another country and professional development. Such motives are indicated by the following statements.

My decision was in no way related to the situation in Poland. I treat the trip to Slovakia as an adventure of sorts, an interesting experience. (Katarzyna)

My husband is Portuguese. We met abroad, but before I met him, I also knew that I would emigrate at some point in my life, because I would like to live outside Poland. (Natalia)

I thought that I could grow more abroad, for example because I would be exposed to other cultures and I would be more open-minded, which would give me more self-confidence. I decided that since I had finished my studies and had to start working, I would also look for a job in Poland, but it was based on the principle that I was just looking for something interesting. However, I was more interested in leaving the country, because if I'm going to start working permanently, I want to broaden my scope of search and try to get into deeper water right away. (Beata)

6. The impact of emigration on the professional field

Emigration makes it possible to achieve goals, whether they concern economic or non-economic issues. Remarkably, it is not without impact on the professional field, especially with regard to long-term residence. Of the women surveyed, 45% had upgraded their formal education while abroad through studies, courses and training leading to a qualification. The largest group of women, 95%, improved their language skills, 58% obtained a certificate confirming their professional specialisation, 35% obtained a professional qualification and 19% completed computer courses. The women interviewed, wanting to develop professionally, took the initiative themselves and financed the acquisition of the required qualifications, or were supported in this by their foreign employers, as the following statements indicate.

After several years of casual work as a waitress or cashier, I decided that I had to change something. At that time, there were free IT courses in Italy. This is how my career as a programmer started. (Elżbieta 1)

After 5 years of studies in Poland, I would not have been able to work as a psychologist in Switzerland anyway without the postgraduate studies in psychotherapy that are required here. The employer is supportive in this respect. A certain part of my postgraduate studies was financed by the clinic. (Gabriela)

Respondents were also asked to subjectively assess the acquisition of new or the development of existing competences in terms of knowledge and skills. 84% of them responded positively to the question stating that they acquired or developed knowledge and skills in connection with long-term emigration. 37% of them indicated that they developed knowledge directly related to their learned profession. In turn, 34% of the respondents indicated that they developed knowledge and skills that were not related to their learned profession, thanks to which they could start employment in a completely different area, and for 25% the acquired or developed knowledge and skills enabled them to perform new tasks. Examples of development methods are indicated by the following statements.

The predominant method was to learn through daily work and the support of colleagues, sharing their knowledge and experience with me, which over time I passed on by training new colleagues. (Katarzyna)

I started working in a shop and was promoted to shop manager. I saw that I had the potential to develop in that area. Then I worked as an inspector. I am a manager now. I manage 34 shops and have 250 people under me. (...) I have developed my competences through daily work and internal courses. (Anna)

The most frequently used methods of development or acquisition of knowledge and skills by long-term migrant women included: performing more complex and varied tasks, participation in training organised by the company, participation in training that the respondents organised themselves, self-education, instructions received from more experienced colleagues.

7. Summary

Polish women are motivated by many factors when making the decision to emigrate for a long period of time. The answers rarely indicated only one motive, and if they did, almost all of them concerned family and personal reasons, i.e. to meet a person from abroad and move there, to decide to emigrate with a partner met in Poland or to join family/friends already abroad. In other instances, it was a bundle of several motives, combining financial and living issues or those related to self-development and curiosity about the world.

The long-term emigration of women is not without impact on the professional field. Almost all respondents indicated that they had developed their competences by going and working abroad. For almost half of female long-term emigrants, the stay abroad was also a time to formally improve their professional qualifications. In addition, the vast majority of women acquired or developed their knowledge and skills, which allowed them to improve in their learned profession, undertake new tasks or change completely their area of employment. The female emigrants used various sources to improve their qualifications and competences in terms of knowledge and skills. These were both organised forms of education such as first, second and third degree studies, training organised by the employer and those undertaken on their own initiative. Other means of professional development included self-education, performance of more complex and varied tasks at the workplace and instructions received from more experienced colleagues.

Such a depiction of motives and changes in the professional status of Polish female emigrants leads to a cautious conclusion that for the vast majority of women, the decision on long-term emigration is connected to significant professional development. Long-term, permanent stay abroad is a form of motivation to improve one's competences in order to obtain

the best possible employment that will be both financially and personally satisfying. It is also important from the perspective of the economies of countries sending and receiving long-term female migrants. 68% of the respondents indicated that they want to stay in their current country and continue their professional life there, 18% want to return to Poland and use the experience gained abroad and 14% want to go to another country. In view of such data, the greatest beneficiaries are the receiving countries and third countries, which gain workers ready to enter the labour market right away, even if they initially perform simpler jobs. These countries gain a needed workforce and a taxpayer. Only less than one in five long-term emigrants want to return to their country of origin.

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