

Migration Aspirations & Realities: Experiences of Female Polish Migrant Workers in the UK

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Abstract

The PhD research addresses the experiences of female Polish migrant workers in the UK and the influence of structures and agency on their working and wider lives. While enjoying the freedom of movement, these migrants' qualifications often do not get recognised and they often start out working in low skilled, low-paid as well as gendered employment. While some women are able to overcome barriers and progress professionally or decide to return, others can feel 'stuck' in these disadvantaged positions. By conducting and analysing biographical narrative interviews with female Polish migrant workers in the UK as well as with female Polish return migrants in Poland the complex dimensions of migrants' aspirations and realities can be scrutinised.

Research questions

- What economic, institutional, political and social structures shape the migration aspirations of female Polish migrant workers to the UK?
- What economic, institutional, political and social structures shape the migration realities of female Polish migrant workers in the UK?
- How do female Polish migrant workers in the UK mediate the influences of economic, institutional, political and social factors behind their migration experience?

Feminisation of migration and the labour market

- Polish post-accession migration to the UK: broad variety of research; numerical significance; work migration; after 10 years of EU-enlargement → diverse group
- Feminisation of migration: pushed into least desirable positions vs migrant women as agents of change
- Feminisation and segmentation of labour market, occupational segregation
- Social construction of Polish women

'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 [...] Also, to be honest maybe because I do not like it in the UK, that somehow I cannot fulfill myself professionally.'
(Beata, 54 y, food packing and own small business)

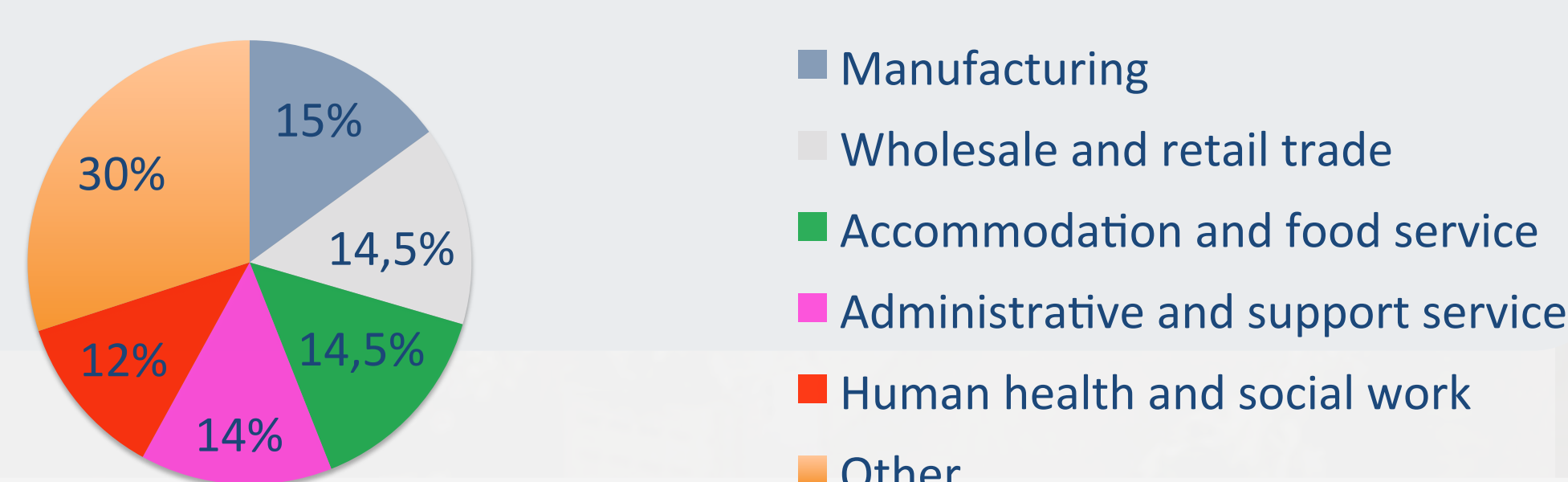
Background

- Census 2011 for England and Wales: 51% female of Polish-born

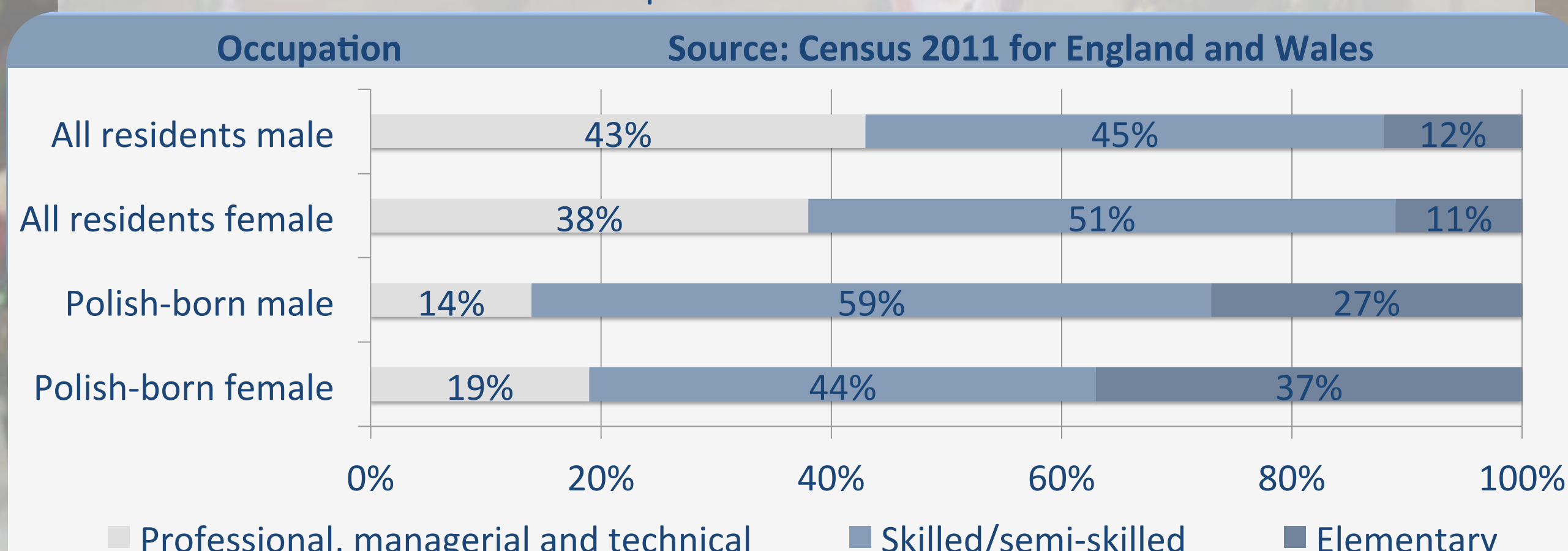
Economic activity Source: Census 2011 for England and Wales	Polish-born female	Polish-born male	All residents female	All residents male
part-time employees	16%	4%	21%	6%
full-time employees	47%	64%	31%	47%
self-employed	9%	16%	6%	14%
looking after home or family	9%	1%	8%	1%
other economically inactive (unemployed & retired & students)	16%	13%	31%	27%

- Polish women more often part-time and looking after home and family than Polish men, but more full-time than women in general → Polish women = migrant and female workers

Industry of Polish-born female, Source: Census 2011 for England and Wales



- Diverse in sectors and occupations



- Represented at all occupational levels; comparatively more elementary

Methodology

Construction of a grounded theory model

Theoretical sensitivity:

- exploring the literature
- pilot interviews
- researcher's own background

Construction of research tools:

- biographical narrative interviews
- semi-structured expert interviews
- secondary quantitative data analysis

Data analysis:

- supported by the use of Nvivo
- open, selective and axial coding
- constant comparison
- developing themes

Fieldwork:

- 31 interviews in the UK and 22 with female return migrants in Poland
- 10 expert interviews in the UK and 7 in Poland
- recording and taking field notes as memos

Theoretical sampling:

- post-accession female Polish migrant workers in main employment sectors and in the UK
- half-half trade union membership
- diverse in educational background, age, family situation, length of stay, geography etc.

'At the beginning I worked in administration, it was not my ideal job [...] and then I changed jobs and worked directly with the people as a caseworker. Later I became a manager in the office and had my team, I had volunteers, students and so after some years it all turned out great.'
(Justyna, 33 y, education project worker)

Emerging Themes

Conditions

- Post-accession labour migration from Poland to the UK
- Gender roles
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Possible dynamics

- downward social mobility
- moving up the occupational ladder
- return migration

Consequences

- Feeling 'stuck'
- Pursuing personal and professional fulfillment

Influencing factors

- Length of stay
- Educational background
- Geography
- Age
- Family situation
- ...

Strategies

- spontaneity, coincidence and luck
- Rational decision-making, family decision
- Personal and professional fulfillment
- Mobility paradigm

'They took me into catering [...] and in the meantime I did courses. I have higher qualifications from Poland, but it is not translatable here too easily [...] After 3 years of work in just catering I was promoted to hospitality supervisor.'
(Klara, 38 y, catering staff and hospitality supervisor)