

The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on migrant women in Poland

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This briefing outlines the Polish migration context in Poland and provides an overview of the vulnerabilities and heightened inequalities experienced by women engaged in international mobilities in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Migration to Poland

After the Second World War, Poland was characterised by negative net migration, as more Polish citizens were emigrating abroad than migrants arriving to Poland (Okólski, 2012). During the Communist regime (1949-1989), international mobility was significantly restricted due to political reasons (Stola, 2010; Pilch 1984). After 1989, emigration of Poles recommenced and intensified even further with Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 and the Schengen area in 2007, with a significant exodus of Polish citizens (Lesińska et al., 2014). Since 2016, the outflow of Poles abroad has gradually decreased, while the inflow of migrants increased significantly, leading to positive net migration (GUS, 2020b). This trend continues with a high number of economic migrants coming from Eastern European countries, mostly in search of better employment opportunities (Górny et al., 2013).

Poland has a considerable number of migrants from its neighbouring countries, Ukraine and Belarus, due to geographical proximity, but also culture and language similarities (Górny, 2019). For example, close border cooperation has enabled citizens living in the border zone (up to 30 km) in Ukraine to cross the border using only local border traffic permits. Since 2017, the introduction of a visa-free regime for Ukrainians with biometric passports contributed to the growing numbers of Ukrainian arrivals. Additionally, a simplified access to seasonal work in 2018 enabled migrants from Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine to migrate for seasonal work. In 2020, the highest numbers of migrants with seasonal work permits were registered in the following regions: Mazowieckie (45%), Lubelskie (15%), Łódzkie (9) and Wielkopolskie (6%) (USC, 2021).

In 2019, Poland recorded just over 2 million foreign-born nationals; the top five nationalities included Ukraine (1.35 million), Belarus (105,404), Germany (77,073), Moldova (37,338) and Russia (37,030) (GUS, 2020a). After the outbreak of COVID-19, the total number of foreign nationals in Poland decreased by 223,000. As of April 2020, the highest number of migrants returning to their countries of origin were Ukrainians (160,042), followed by nationals of Belarus (33,987) and Russia (9,517) (GUS, 2020a). Migrants from Ukraine, Belarus, Germany, Russia and Vietnam have continued to arrive in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit in lower numbers. The drop in the first few months was later balanced by accelerated employment mechanisms introduced for seasonal workers, due to the urgent needs of the agricultural sector (Kaczmarczyk and Górny, 2018).

In 2020, 80% of all residence permits issued in Poland were issued for temporary residence. Especially Ukrainians, as the most represented nationality, were coming to Poland under the visa-free movement or visas issued for seasonal jobs and only 9% of Ukrainians in Poland had a permanent residence permit (Cope et al., 2021). Currently, Ukrainians mainly reside in Mazowieckie (22%), Małopolskie (12%), Wielkopolskie (12%) and Dolnośląskie (9%) regions (USC, 2021). Apart from the Mazowieckie area, where the number of foreign-born people has remained the same, the population of foreign-born nationals has increased in all the other three regions. Migrants also prefer to move to big metropolitan cities, namely Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań and Wrocław. About 77% of all migrants who obtained a residence permit did this through employment, while 12% secured residence via family links, 2% cited education purposes and 9% gave "other reasons" (USC, 2021). Migrant workers are particularly concentrated in building and heavy industries, craft work, equipment operations, service provision, retail and professions that do not require recognised qualifications and/or advanced language skills, e.g. cleaning, informal care, food industry and tourism (USC, 2021).

Migration flows have changed radically after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. While an estimated 7.6 million Ukrainians crossed the Polish borders, only around 1.5 million were recorded through the national protection scheme for refugees (UNHCR, 2022). While data reports vary, according to recent estimations, Poland has a total of 3.4 million Ukrainian nationals, of which 1.5 million were already in Poland before the war (UMP, 2022). Given this significant increase, Ukrainians account for 8% of Poland's current population, the majority living in the big cities or their suburbs. Due to the martial law in place in Ukraine, where most men cannot leave the country, 97% of refugees are women and children, which requires special adjustments in the labour market. The doubling of the number of Ukrainians residing in Poland in a short period of time and their demographics has stretched the country's services, especially during a pandemic. The legislation first adopted by Poland to support Ukrainians is currently under review and it is likely that more financial responsibilities for living costs will be imposed on refugees (Business Insider, 2022).

The Polish immigration system

In the last decade, Poland has transitioned from a country of emigration to a country of immigration. Okolski (2021) claims that this has been a turning point from "being [among] countries with "redundant" populations ready to emigrate to becoming a magnet attracting people from other countries or regions" (p.154). This has presented an additional challenge for the Polish government, which has had to adjust its migration policies and integrate rapidly an increasing number of new migrants. The Polish immigration system deals with migrants coming predominantly from the neighboring countries at its East, unlike other EU countries which receive higher numbers of migrants from the Middle East and Africa. It currently issues the highest number of residence permits among the EU countries (Eurostat, 2022). Individuals who can prove cultural and ethnic connections to Poland can apply for the so-called *Poles' Card*, a document which allows them to legally reside in Poland. The Amendment adopted in 2017 to the *Act on*

Repatriation (2000) stipulates repatriates' rights to benefit from state subsidies to buy or rent a home, with up to fourth-degree descendants of Polish nationals allowed to apply, including their spouses, with rights to later obtain Polish citizenship.

The absence of a comprehensive strategy for migration in Poland continues, as indicated in the report by the Supreme Audit Office in 2019 (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2019). An initial document entitled *Migration Policy - Current State and Postulated Actions* (2012) was canceled four years after being adopted, including its implementation plan. In the meantime, migration policy was characterised by its fragmentation and lack of cohesiveness. Various institutions have attempted to adopt regulations that in the end lacked a unified strategic vision. The need for a migration strategy was also supported by evidence on Poland's rapidly aging population and predicted demographic crisis. The report prepared by the Supreme Audit Office mentioned that in order to maintain current employment levels, the country should aim to increase its migrant workforce to 8% of total workforce (Dragan, 2016).

In 2020, the Ministry of Interior and Administration initiated a review of migration policy for Poland and announced the appointment of an Inter-Ministerial Team for Migration. A resolution entitled *Poland's Migration Policy - Action Lines for 2021-2022* was adopted, stating that preference should be given to employing migrants from Eastern countries (Council of Ministers, 2021). The document also stipulated that professions in high demand (many requiring high-level qualifications) should be given priority, through an accelerated process of recruitment. The policy also supports foreign nationals with access to education and employment after graduation, in order to fill gaps caused by demographic decline. The opening of Integration Centers for Foreigners in four regions aims to provide all services needed by new migrants, based on a "one stop shop" approach. In addition to activities promoting social inclusion, the Centers provide integration courses, covering aspects such as the Polish laws, social rules, traditions and customs. However, the

successful implementation of the policy requires coordinated engagement of local authorities and the civil society.

Though the adoption of *Poland's Migration Policy* was an important step, the document lacks clear goals or defined timeframes. An inclusive and sustainable migration policy requires legislation changes, changes in attitudes towards immigration, structural and institutional developments. The current document reflected a short-term, ad-hoc approach, whereas a long-term vision is needed to deal with the complexity and gradual change of the policy (Instytut praw migrantów and Fundacja Ukraina, 2021). Under the current policy, undocumented migrants, who may have overstayed or encountered procedural difficulties to secure their status, are expected to leave, with no solution offered to legalise their stay.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to challenges in obtaining visas, the closure of borders and quarantine measures, and loss of access to social protection schemes for many migrants, there was a noticeable decrease in the numbers of foreign-born nationals in Poland. On 15 March 2020, the border with Ukraine was restricted by Poland. Soon after, Ukraine also stopped bus and train travel to Poland. President Zelenskyy's statement that borders would be closed from 28 March 2020 (though three crossings would continue to function) caused a wave of mass returns to Ukraine (Ukrinform, 2020). During the next 10 days, more than 100,000 Ukrainians crossed the border, which constituted 12% of all Ukrainians residing in Poland (Kośka, 2020). Later, border crossings decreased by 53% in early 2020 (Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Cope et al., 2021). Nevertheless, a considerable number of Ukrainians decided to remain in Poland and were significantly impacted by loss of employment, especially in construction and service provision sectors (Ministerstwo Rozwoju, Pracy i Technologii, 2021, pp.10-11).

Though migrants with residence rights have unrestricted access to the labour market, they often face barriers in finding jobs, mainly due to their language skills. While migrants are included

in the labour market, they lack further integration support and there are no systems of recording their acquisition of work and language skills or systematic recognition of their qualifications. This has led to a situation where many highly qualified migrants work in low paid jobs, below their qualification levels (Chłóń-Domińczak and Pater, 2022). The COVID-19 related measures imposed by both Ukrainian and Polish states have left Ukrainian migrants in a vulnerable situation, where those who went to Ukraine could not return to Poland, and those who stayed in Poland were often faced with unemployment (Koshulko and Dzholos, 2021).

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Poland adopted the *Act on Support to citizens of Ukraine in connection with the military conflict on the territory of Ukraine* (12 March 2022) (Office for Foreigners, 2022). This Act established a legal route for Ukrainian citizens fleeing the war to live and work in Poland. Those who left Ukraine as a result of the Russian war were able to legally live and work in Poland for 18 months. After this period, individuals could be granted a 3 years one-off temporary residence permit. Ukrainian refugees have thus received special status since the war in Ukraine, with full access to services such as health and education and employment rights just like Polish citizens.

COVID-19 and rising inequalities in Poland

The unequal position of migrant women in the labour market in Poland has been researched before COVID-19, especially in the informal care sector, the sex industry and agriculture. Studies have also documented the socio-cultural aspects of maintaining family relationships transnationally, continuing care duties and managing power relations (Kindler and Napierała, 2020; Slany, 2008; 2010, Lutz and Palenga-Möllenberg, 2012; Perek-Białas and Slany 2015; Slany and Ślusarczyk, 2015). The vulnerabilities facing migrant women in the labour market in Poland and society overall has only deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the start of the pandemic, similarly to other European countries, Poland implemented regulations on the closure of public services, mandatory testing and quarantine, vaccinations, social distancing and restrictions to border crossings. All these restrictive measures became a great burden for migrants, causing high levels of stress (Górny et al., 2021). Throughout the pandemic, the decrease in work availability and migrants' working hours led to significant income losses for many migrants and became the main pressing issue for many (Зимнін, 2021). Though the COVID-19 vaccination campaign started in December 2020, most migrants were able to get their first vaccine only in the fourth wave of vaccination months later. Moreover, only those migrants who had a legal status, namely a temporary or permanent residence permit, or a visa, could get vaccinated, leaving undocumented migrants out of the list of eligible candidates for vaccination (Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants in Poland faced increasing vulnerabilities in comparison to Polish nationals. A study carried out in 2020 showed that 39% of migrant workers had to find a new job, with 32% being forced to find new housing (EWL, 2021). This shows the sudden impact on migrants' work and living conditions, due to the lack of regulations in relation to migrants' employment and entitlements to social support. Isolation and loss of support networks left many migrants in despair, which was exacerbated by the fear of their inability to reunite with family members abroad. The separation from family members was the main concern for 36% of migrants in another study carried out during COVID-19, and one of the key factors that convinced many to return to their homeland (Зимнін, 2021).

The pandemic has shone a new light on existing inequalities facing migrant workers. The Polish government adopted a so-called *Anti-Crisis Shield* legislation on 31st March 2020, allowing the extension of temporary and seasonal work permits to the last date of the month when the ending of the pandemic emergency would be announced. Thus, foreign nationals on visas could extend their stay without having to renew their

permits. Nonetheless, the situation of those whose travel was based on visa-free movement was unclear. New visa applicants were faced with time-consuming bureaucratic procedures, as they were required to produce a long list of documents. The validity of foreign nationals' residence cards, temporary certificates and so-called "tolerated stay permit documents" was also extended, similarly to work permits (Office for Foreigners, n.d.). This played an important role in foreign nationals' decisions to remain in Poland, as 23% of respondents mentioned in a national survey (EWL, 2021).

After half a year, the pandemic ceased to impact migration. Between September 2020 and May 2021, the number of first-time arrivals increased by approximately 15%. The main drivers were the availability of jobs and the salaries on offer, which were higher than in migrants' countries of origin, as well as the political and economic instability facing other countries. According to findings from a national survey of new arrivals, about 14% of those surveyed had lost their job during pandemic in their countries (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine) and thus decided to seek new employment opportunities in Poland (EWL, 2021).

COVID-19 and migrant women in Poland

Migrant women have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland, as coordinated support from the state was limited. The situation of working migrant women got immediately worse as many lost jobs and the time taken to obtain new residence permits was extended due to lockdowns and closure of visa services. Employment sectors popular among women migrants such as services, retail and care sectors were heavily affected by lockdowns and a reduction in work hours, with migrant women being deprived of their rights to social welfare, facing restricted access to family and financial struggles (Cope et al., 2021). While 12% of all women in Poland lost their employment during the pandemic, and additional 10% worried they would lose employment in the immediate future (Krzaska, 2020).

While official data indicated only a minimal increase in unemployment, from 5% in 2019 to 6.2% in September 2020, this data does not account for workers in the informal economy. Delays and complicated procedures in securing work permits have pushed thousands of migrant women in Poland into the informal economy. The informal sector lacks union representation and leaves women increasingly vulnerable to exploitation (Cope et al., 2021). The 2011 Domestic Workers' Convention from the International Labour Organisation has not been ratified by Poland and the Domestic Workers Federation has no representation in Poland. This means that the rights of migrant women working as domestic workers or forced into irregular or undocumented work in Poland remain precarious.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions to border crossings led to family separation and limited visits, especially for those whose residence rights were unclear or restricted. Migrant women were faced with longer working hours, and occasionally lower pay, while having to also deal with the home education of their children and care duties, putting them at risk of stress and burnout. At the same time, counselling was not available due to the restrictions to service provision. Medical care was only available to those with formal employment. This means that migrant women working informally or becoming unemployed were unable to access state healthcare if they needed it and could only use private health services, which are not affordable for many. Considering Ukrainian migrants, while only about a third currently pay social insurance contributions, only 35% of these contributions are made by women (ZUS, 2020), showing the significant proportion of women with no access to state healthcare. This also means that many women may be working informally after losing their formal employment or not working, thus being more vulnerable, including through the loss of their access to state-funded medical services.

For migrant women studying in Poland, registration at higher educational institutions requires proof of residence address, which is not always provided by landlords. The move to online education posed a double challenge for

this group, due to learning moving online, but also their parenting duties. Online education posed several challenges in terms of parenting and home schooling for women more than men, and for those working long hours in sectors such as care or retail. This was especially challenging for single mothers, who often had to choose between work or childcare. Additional challenges included the language difficulties facing migrant women due to the closure of language classes and reduced access to key services, as these moved to online provision or closed. For women migrants with low level of Polish language skills, understanding official correspondence from state institutions without much support presented an additional challenge (Cope et al, 2021).

Another significant issue was an increase in domestic violence experienced by migrant women during COVID-19. Lockdowns, the worsening of the economic situation and lack of support networks have made migrant women more vulnerable to their live-in abusers. An additional barrier was the lack of access to support hotlines for migrant women. Out of the three NGOs providing support for victims of violence, only one offered support in Ukrainian, while the rest offered support in Russian (Cope et al., 2021). There was also a lack of comprehensive materials on pandemic-related support issued in minority languages. Migrant women also need to show their residence permit in order to access women's shelters, which clearly discriminates against the most vulnerable and undocumented. From a legislative perspective, the residence status has created a dependency on their violent partners for migrant women living with domestic violence, especially in the case of those on family residence permits.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic has stressed the importance of many low-paid professions in which migrant women are employed, the immigration system in Poland did not provide any gender-sensitive support measures. Facing the double discrimination of being a migrant and a woman in Poland, thousands of migrant women remain invisible in official statistics, often due to a flourishing undocumented economy. While their work has proved essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant women have been clearly

made more vulnerable by the lack of state-led interventions and targeted welfare measures.

Conclusion

This country briefing has provided an overview of migration trends in Poland and a critical evaluation of the reported effects of COVID-19 pandemic on migrants in Poland and migrant women in particular. Existing inequalities among migrant women and children were exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions and migrant women employed informally were among those who were the worst affected by the pandemic. Poland is currently facing numerous challenges, including a demographic crisis, an outflow of young people who want to access better opportunities for work and study abroad, a shortage of affordable housing, low wages and acute political tensions. With some signs of growing economic prosperity before 2020, Poland was struck by the economic and health impacts of COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to the closure of some sectors of the economy and later with the biggest migrant crisis since the Second World War, caused by the war in Ukraine. These multiple crises have led to increased complexity in terms of adequate migration policies for coherent integration of diverse migrant groups, but also a more urgent need for clearer legislative measures and changes to service provision for migrants.

The GEN-MIGRA Project is jointly funded under the Trans-Atlantic Platform for Social Sciences and Humanities (T-AP). Bringing together researchers and practitioners from four countries- Brazil, Germany, Poland and United Kingdom- it researches the impact of the pandemic on migrant women and their families. Find out more at: www.genmigra.org

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