

**Family matters: migration and childbearing decisions of ‘new’ Poles in the UK.**

The EU Enlargement of 2004 entailed an intensive large-scale migration wave from Eastern European countries to the UK, and in particular from Poland. In consequence, the Polish community has become the single largest foreign national group resident in the UK (Pollard *et al.* 2008) with a population of over 500,000 (ONS 2011). Although the initial picture of a typical Polish migrant to the UK, created on the basis of WRS data (Home Office 2009), was that of a young, single male without dependants, a gradual shift towards family migration has by now become visible. There has been a substantial increase in the numbers of Polish children entering schools across Britain in the recent years (Department for Children Schools and Families 2007) and the UK is currently experiencing a true ‘Polish baby boom’. In 2010, 19,762 Polish children were born in England and Wales, which constitutes the highest number of births to mothers from outside the UK. Therefore, while Polish migration to the UK was initially seen mainly as a transient phenomenon (Garapich 2011), we are clearly dealing with processes of family settlement and family formation. Why is this so? What is the overall role of the family in the migration process? Are the Polish families in the UK there to stay? These are the questions we would like to discuss.

Our analysis is based on the results of a large-scale qualitative study entitled ‘*International migration and its impact on family and household formation among Polish migrants living in England and Scotland*’ (a three-year ESRC-funded project). The study involved in-depth interviews with 83 Polish migrants living in four different locations across the UK: two urban (Southampton in Southern England and Glasgow in Scotland) and two rural (Dorset in Southern England and Perthshire/Angus in Scotland). The overall aim of the study was to explore how moving internationally impacts on family life and on the other hand how family issues influence migration decisions. We were also specifically interested in the role of place of residence in the UK on the experiences, opportunity structures and everyday lives of Polish migrants, hence the England-Scotland and urban-rural comparison angle.

While single persons generally make their decisions independently, we have found that in the case of couples, especially those with children, family issues play a crucial role in the process of migration and settlement in the UK. Firstly, since EU accession there has been a growing trend towards family re-unification in the UK, especially among Polish migrants living in urban areas (towns and cities) who have left young children behind. As for the process of migrating, it is typically still the father who arrives in the UK initially (though an increasing number of mothers also take on this role), often with a view to temporary economic migration of no more than 12 months. However, it is often the case that the father’s stay is prolonged and a growing number of couples with children decide to re-locate the household to the UK under the circumstances. The key reason is that ‘doing family’ at a distance is seen as impossible in the long run. Moreover, there is the perception that accessibility of employment, the relatively higher wage level and the safety net provided by the welfare system make life

in the UK easier than in Poland, and hence Britain is a better place to make a living. These are also the basic reasons underpinning the decision to have children in the UK. Polish people have a much greater feeling of security there than in Poland where the unemployment level is high (around 12% currently) (GUS 2011), earnings are low, and the social security system is very poorly developed.

Secondly, there is a growing number of Polish families who make the decision to stay in the UK long-term prior to the actual move. These families are hence determined to make a living for themselves in their new country from the very beginning of stay. Typically, providing their children with a better future is the main motive behind migration. The UK is seen as a country which provides better opportunities in terms of employment and education, and where it is easier to raise children thanks to state support (child benefit payments, free medication for children up to the age of 16, etc.). Such families usually have close networks which are already established in the UK and provide information and practical support during the migration process and after arrival.

Thirdly, it can be observed that it is not only parents of young children that 'put into motion' other family members. We have also come across instances of parents in their late 40s or 50s who have triggered the migration of their adult children who typically arrive to the UK at the stage of family formation or already with young children. On the other hand, it is also sometimes the case that adult children 'bring over' their parents, often in relation to issues of care, for example providing care for the (elderly) parents or the parents providing care for their grandchildren. However, employment is also a frequent reason behind migration of Poles in mid-life since the 45+ age group is especially prone to long-term unemployment in the Polish labour market. Therefore, in terms of the migration and settlement process, family comes into play in all sorts of complex ways.

As stated previously, Polish migrants see life as 'easier' in the UK. Many of the Polish families arriving in the UK would struggle to make ends meet in Poland. They would thus have the feeling of being 'abandoned' by the Polish state and forced to rely on their own resources and/or the help of their family/friendship networks. This stands in stark contrast to the UK where *'the state will not let you die'*. Polish families greatly value the help they receive from the state in Britain. This ranges from Child Benefit payments (to which all workers with children are entitled), through tax credits, to entitlement to social housing (the latter being widely available to families living in Scotland but less so in England). Also, the availability of employment is very much appreciated. Since Poles fill in predominantly low-skilled and low-paid positions in the British labour market (Drinkwater *et al.* 2006, Home Office 2009), within which there is an overall high demand for workers, employment opportunities are available to them even in times of economic crisis. Although their earnings are relatively low compared to the native population (Pollard *et al.* 2008), Polish migrants are able to make a living on these resources (while in Poland this was difficult). All these factors encourage further stay and permanent settlement, especially as there are many barriers to return: the difficult labour market situation in Poland (high unemployment level, low earnings), frequent lack of own housing, scarce state support. Also, significantly, parents

whose children have spent a few years within the British education system find that the differences in requirements and how learning is organised within the British and Polish system form a serious obstacle to return.

Concluding, many of the Polish families that have established themselves in the UK – i.e. have achieved employment and housing stability and have children in education there – make the decision to stay ‘for good’ or at least until they retire. Those who desperately miss their families and friends back home and/or have not adjusted to life in Britain that well are, in turn, more tentative in their decisions. Nevertheless, considering the relative ‘easiness’ of life in the UK on the one hand, and the significant barriers to return on the other, we may expect that the recent migration wave of Polish families to the UK is there to stay.

## References

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