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The construction of gender in the migration space: Polish women in the UK

Zusammenfassung

Geschlechterkonstruktion und Migration: Polnische Frauen in Großbritannien

Der Beitrag betrachtet die Geschlechterkonstruktionen polnischer Frauen, die nach der EU-Erweiterung 2004 nach Großbritannien ausgewandert sind. Dazu wertet er Interviews aus, die mit 30 Polinnen an verschiedenen Orten innerhalb des Vereinigten Königreichs geführt wurden. Mit meiner Arbeit möchte ich zum einen diskutieren, ob Migration das Potenzial in sich birgt, einen Wandel in der Geschlechterkonstruktion anzustoßen, und zum anderen nach konkreten Veränderungen fragen, die sich im Zuge dessen in den Auffassungen der Frauen in Bezug auf Geschlecht feststellen lassen. Darüber hinaus soll aufgezeigt werden, dass der Zusammenhang zwischen Migration und der Konstruktion von Geschlechterrollen und Geschlechtsidentitäten stets vor dem Hintergrund von Staat, religiöser Institutionen und der Frauenbewegung zu betrachten ist – sowohl innerhalb des Ziel- als auch des Ursprungslandes. Dabei ist das Themenfeld der Geschlechterkonstruktion, speziell im Fall von Polen, – so die These dieses Beitrags – keineswegs als starr und feststehend anzusehen, sondern als ein dynamischer Prozess, der sich fortwährend verändert.

Schlüsselwörter
Geschlecht, Frauen, Migration, Polen, Großbritannien

Summary

This article focuses on the construction of gender by Polish women who migrated to the United Kingdom after the 2004 enlargement of the European Union. It draws on interviews carried out with 30 Polish women in various locations in the UK. In the article I suggest that migration may create a potential for change in gender construction and look at whether and, if so, what changes took place in Polish women's views on gender. I also argue that constructions around gender in the migration space need to be considered in the light of wider gender structural contexts co-constructed by the state, religious institutions and women's movements in both the country of migration and the country of origin. Moreover, I propose that gender contexts, in this case specifically in Poland, cannot be seen as static, but rather as dynamic and constantly changing.

Keywords
gender, women, migration, Poland, United Kingdom

1 Introduction

This article focuses on the construction of gender by Polish women who migrated to the United Kingdom (UK) after the 2004 enlargement of the European Union (EU). Generally, this area has not received attention amongst migration researchers focusing on the recent migration of Poles to the UK with the exception of work by Siara (2009, 2011) focusing on negotiating gender in cyberspace by Polish women and men in the UK. More-

over, some research relating to Polish migrant women has been carried out in other countries, including work edited by Metz-Göckel et al. (2008) and Slany (2008).This article looks at how Polish women construct and reconstruct gender in the migration space and how such reconstructions may subsequently influence gender dynamics in Poland. In the British context the approach to gender appears to be more liberal than in the Polish context even though changes have been taking place with regard to gender in Poland. Whilst more liberal and gender-egalitarian models have developed in Poland due to the exposure to gender equality discourses, there have also been attempts by the Catholic Church's representatives and right-wing politicians to re-traditionalise gender arrangements. As a result, the two countries differ with regard to gender-related policy-making. Therefore, looking at the construction and reconstruction of gender in this migration context seems to be crucial and necessary, especially with many Poles having migrated to the UK since the 2004 enlargement of the EU. According to statistics held by the British Government, at least over 680 000 Poles have arrived to the UK since 2004 (Home Office 2009).

This article focuses on how women see gender relations and women's position in Poland and the UK and what comparisons they make between gender contexts in the two countries. The article also concentrates on Polish women's perception of gender roles and gender expectations. It discusses the potential that migration to the UK provided for changing the construction of gender as Polish women gained an opportunity to observe and experience a more liberal gender environment. I consider gender as socially and culturally constructed (Jackson/Scott 2010) and I use a feminist perspective, because it is committed to assuring greater gender equality. Moreover, I also see migration as a gendered phenomenon, as gender is both reconstructed and reproduced within the transnational spaces (McIlwaine et al. 2006). In this article I argue that constructions around gender in the migration space need to be considered in the light of wider gender structural contexts co-constructed by the state, religious institutions and the women's movements in both the country of migration and the country of origin. Moreover, I suggest that gender contexts cannot be seen as static, but rather as dynamic and constantly changing. Furthermore, I propose that migration may create a potential for change in gender construction and look at whether and, if so, what changes took place in Polish women's views on gender. In terms of its structure, the article first outlines the gender structural contexts in both Poland and the UK. This is followed by information about my methodology and research participants. The subsequent sections set out and discuss Polish women's views on gender, including gender contexts, gender expectations and changes around gender in the migration space. The next section provides some contextual information about gender structural contexts in Poland and the UK, including the state level, the approach of religious institutions and women's movements.

2 Setting the scene: gender structural contexts in Poland and the UK

2.1 The state level

The process of gender construction in Poland has been very complex. Through its commitment to emancipation, the communist state introduced gender equality and prohi-

bited discrimination on gender grounds (Walczewska 2006). However, although the communist state considered itself to be committed to equality and emancipation, the understanding of gender and gender roles in private life did not change and remained rather traditional during communist times even though many women entered the labour market (Heinen/Wator 2006). The transition to democracy and a neoliberal market economy started at the beginning of the 1990s and brought about great social and economic changes, which had a negative influence on women's situation in particular (Regulska/Grabowska 2008). Gender equality-related issues were not at the top of the governments' agenda at the time (Coyle 2003) and a process of re-traditionalisation started (Pascall/Kwak 2005). This process was promoted by right-wing politicians and representatives of the Catholic Church (Graff 2008). Accordingly, women were encouraged to become homemakers and focus on family life rather than on the employment outside of the home (Hryciuk 2005). However, the transition process also influenced the gender context in other ways, as there were opportunities to observe more liberal gender models coming from the West. These models began to compete with traditional understandings of gender (Marody/Giza-Poleszczuk 2000). They focused on women as individuals and underlined their need for self-fulfilment. Moreover, even though Poland became a member of the EU in 2004, successive governments continued to promote conservative gender discourses despite the pressure exerted by the EU to change (Regulska/Grabowska 2008). However, in spite of such a conservative approach, gender expectations have been undergoing change in Poland and fewer and fewer Poles have regarded a woman's role solely as that of mother and homemaker (Budrowska 2005; Titkow 2007).

The state context as regards gender appears to be different in the UK. The traditional gender model has gradually eroded since the end of World War Two (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2000) as the women's rate of employment has steadily grown (Charles 2002). Moreover, from the 1970s UK governments gradually developed policies that led to greater gender equality. According to Walby (2003), the UK's accession to the EU in 1973 played an important role in redefining the understanding of gender. The EU created policies aimed at increasing women's participation in the labour market, but also at making it easier for women to balance work and family life (Saxonberg/Szelewa 2007). It was especially the Labour Government formed in 1997 that subsequently initiated pro-women reforms. However, although the proposed changes were aimed at increasing women's participation in the labour market (Pascall/Kwak 2005), according to Lewis and Campbell (2007), this government's general stance on gender issues could be regarded as neutral, as it did not prioritise gender equality. In terms of gender expectations, in the view of Perrons et al. (2007), nowadays women who are mothers are expected to work outside of the home in paid employment.

2.2 Religious institutions

Catholicism is the main religion in Poland and the influence of the Catholic Church has been very visible in the area of gender since 1989 (Heinen/Wator 2006). Its activities can be seen as opposing women's emancipation, because gender roles promoted by the Catholic Church's teachings are perceived as "distant from the feminist ideas of gender equality" (Dabrowska 2005: 3). The Church's representatives perceive a woman's role

as primarily that of a mother and do not approve of women's employment outside of the home (Hryciuk 2005). In the UK, on the other hand, due to the process of secularisation, the main religious institution – the Anglican Church – has a limited impact on people's life choices or gender-related politics (McDowell et al. 2008). According to Scott (2006), secularisation challenged traditional gender ideology and influenced changes that took place with regard to gender and, as a result, led to greater gender equality (Charles 2002).

2.3 Women's movements

The women's emancipation movement in Poland goes back to the 19th century (Siemienska 2003), but at the time it was associated to a large extent with the national movement for the independence of Poland (Walczewska 2006). After World War Two women's organizations were dissolved by the communist state, which did not allow independent organizing (Siemienska 2003). However, the law on organisations was liberalised in the early 1990s (Bystydzienski 2001), after which the women's movement entered a new phase and became a new phenomenon on the political scene in Poland (Fuszara 2006; Walczewska 2006). Numerous women's organisations have been created over the years. However, as Bystydzienski (2001) claimed, they found it difficult to attract a large number of women. This was probably connected to negative perceptions and the ridiculing of feminism in Poland generally (Booth 2005). Despite having been belittled during communist times, feminism was seen as a communist idea after the collapse of communism (Dabrowska 2005). Furthermore, the women's movement in Poland was attacked by Catholic Church officials, as it challenged the Catholic Church's political efforts to promote traditional gender roles (Nowicka 1996). The women's movement in Poland grew in strength in the 1990s with support from many intellectuals and academics. However, as Dabrowska has argued, the women's movement has very limited impact on shaping public and private spheres of life in Poland (Dabrowska 2005).

The women's movement in the UK was also established in the late 19th century. However, it expanded substantially in the 1960s and 1970s when women's activities led to the formation of the *Women's Liberation Movement* (Melman 2000). This movement played a major role in changing the understanding of gender, as it started to question existing gender structures and the traditional view of gender (Booth 2005). The movement's representatives claimed that gender roles, rather than being natural, were socially ascribed and oppressing for women (Booth 2005). The movement's representatives actively worked over the years to expand women's opportunities and erode gender discrimination in all areas of life (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2000).

This brief comparison shows that the migration of Polish women appeared to take place between two quite different gender structural contexts. On the one hand, even though a more progressive approach to gender was introduced by the communist state in Poland after World War Two, the Polish gender context has been undergoing a process of gender re-traditionalisation since the beginning of the 1990s. This had a negative impact on women's situation, despite Poland's membership of the EU and its strict gender mainstreaming agenda. On the other hand, the Polish gender context at the same time appeared to be undergoing change whilst being influenced by more egalitarian gender models. Overall, the UK gender structural context seemed to be more liberal in com-

parison, since the changes initiated in the post-World War Two period have been more gradual and directed more at increasing gender inequality. Moreover, the position and the impact of religious institutions on gender are very different in the two countries: whilst it is evident in Poland, it is rather non-existent in the UK. Furthermore, although the women's movement was launched at a similar time in both countries, active organisation was suppressed by the communist state in Poland whilst it developed freely in the UK. This review of gender structural contexts in both the country of origin and the country of migration was intended to be helpful for contextualising and better understanding Polish women's constructions of gender in the migration context. The next section outlines methods and provides some information about research participants.

3 Methods and research participants

I applied a qualitative approach to this research as it provides an opportunity for people to describe the constructions of gender in their own words. I carried out in-depth interviews with 30 Polish women between 2009 and 2010 in three different cities in the UK: London, Edinburgh and Cardiff. All the interviews were carried out in Polish, enabling access to all Polish women, including those who did not speak English. Such an approach also reduced potential confusion resulting from translation. The great majority of women were between 21 and 35 years old. They came from various parts of Poland, including cities, towns and the country. The majority spoke very good or fairly good English. Well over half of the women had been educated at tertiary level, around a fifth at secondary level and very few had undertaken education at vocational level. Some were students on Bachelor's or Master's courses. Research participants had various occupations and many experienced de-skilling, i.e. despite being highly skilled they worked in positions requiring a lower level of skills. The following sections present and discuss participants' constructions of gender, including the construction of gender contexts, gender expectations and changes concerning gender in the migration space.

4 Construction of gender contexts

4.1 Conservatism, Catholicism, feminism and change in Poland

A variety of views on the contemporary gender context in Poland were expressed and some participants alleged that conservative attitudes to gender prevailed in Poland. One young woman, a student, for example, talked about a lack of gender equality and criticised the notion of women's submission to men: "They do what men say and if a woman wants to say something aloud, she is discriminated against". Generally, women who constructed the gender context in Poland as rather conservative and unequal were critical of such an approach. These women were either highly educated or students and came from various locations in Poland. Moreover, the role and the influence of the Catholic Church on the gender context in Poland were also discussed. This 24-year-old woman, also a student, alleged that the Church did not approve of gender equality:

"The Church would prefer to see a woman as tamed rather than the one who can also decide. […] Why […] they have two hands, they can think, why would they be less valuable than men? They started to use [their abilities] and the Church does not like it […] The Church does not like us trying to get out of its clutches, starting to think, following our own ideas."

This woman was not religious and was generally critical of the Church and its approach to gender. Overall, many participants saw the Catholic Church in Poland as promoting gender inequality that would like to relegate women to a submissive position.

However, some participants constructed a more dynamic view of the gender context in Poland and alleged that attitudes to gender were changing and becoming more egalitarian and that women have gained more freedom and equality with men. This highly educated woman suggested that there was a greater level of gender equality in Poland nowadays than there had been in the past: "This gender equality can be seen in contemporary times". Moreover, she argued that this has also been caused by a change in gender roles and women's greater participation in employment. In her own marriage gender roles were *shared* as both her and her husband were breadwinners and both cared for their young daughter. However, those who put forward similar arguments were highly educated and non-religious women from cities. Feminist influences on the gender context in Poland were also debated. This highly educated and religious woman, for example, claimed that the feminist approach to gender was taking root in Poland alongside women's active participation in employment. Moreover, she alleged that whilst more gender equal tendencies were prevalent in larger cities in Poland, more conservative attitudes to gender may prevail in smaller towns:

"There are feminist influences in Poland now [...] it is normal and connected to the world's and Poland's development. Many young women will not allow […] girls from large cities will not allow such conservative rules to be maintained. I hope so […]. I think that in contemporary times the expectations are not to stay at home. I think that it is completely normal now in Poland for a woman to have a career […]. I do not know what it is like in smaller towns, people may have more conservative attitudes."

This narrative shows that although a change in relation to gender may be well underway in Poland, the approaches to gender may differ across locations. Some women also said they had feminist views: "I have quite a feminist approach to the world and I would never allow a man to manage me" and alleged that women and men should have equal rights: "I think there should be total equality". The women who said that were young and highly educated, and they might have had an opportunity to encounter feminist views whilst studying at university. Interestingly, some women were also religious, which shows the potential for combining religious views with feminist ones.

These findings show that the conservative approach to gender may still persist to some extent in Poland. However, as Szarzynska-Lichton (2004) argued, a process of change is taking place in Poland as a result of which there are greater opportunities for women and they have the opportunity to choose how they want to live their own lives. The analysis of data also showed the prevalence of feminist views to some extent. According to a CBOS (2006) poll carried out in Poland, over three quarters of Poles were supportive of gender equality in public, family and working life. However, such views were more prevalent among women and the highly educated. The research presented here produced similar conclusions. Furthermore, the process of increasing gender equal-

ity is difficult when it is confronted by the Catholic Church's conservative stance on gender (Heinen/Portet 2009). However, although the Church still has a strong position in Poland, its impact on public opinion is weakening. Both my research findings and the available literature show that the process of gender liberalisation is well underway.

4.2 Gender equality, secularisation and the feminist fight in the UK

The gender context in the UK was also discussed by research participants. This highly educated woman in her early 30s from a large town, for example, suggested that there was equality between women and men in the UK: "They do not have such a strong division into female and male; they became equal" and she regarded this as positive. Such a state of affairs was connected to the process of secularisation and the limited impact of religious institutions on social life in the UK. This highly educated woman from the country alleged that greater gender equality in the UK was associated with a more secular environment:

"– Women and men in terms of the approach to family, home, sex are equal. Nobody stigmatises women here.
– What it is motivated by?
– Surely by the country's secularism. In Poland it is connected to a large degree to the country's enslavement to the Church. Do not confuse it with faith."

In her narrative this woman, despite her being religious, stressed the impact of religious institutions on the approach to gender and criticised the influence of the Catholic Church in Poland.

Women in the UK were seen as actively "*fighting for their rights*" and it was alleged that this fight has gone on for a long time, longer than in Poland. Some participants also claimed that women in the UK were more emancipated than women in Poland, they had more power and more self-confidence and this made their lives easier. This young woman from the country alleged that women in the UK appeared to be liberated and were able to have their say and make their decisions themselves:

"Women are [...] more liberated here. They not only have more rights but also more to say about rights. They are entitled to this, that […] women decide about many issues […] it is cool because women are not oppressed […]. I was oppressed by the Polish mentality. I thought it was my role to give in. But I learnt here that I am me and what I want has to be fulfilled."

She believed that the opposite applied in Poland. She said that in the UK she started to feel more empowered herself and she became more confident. Overall, gender arrangements in the UK were seen as egalitarian and women's stronger position was especially stressed by participants from outside of cities – they may have noticed the biggest differences between the two gender contexts. These women were either highly educated or students, the majority spoke very good English and socialised with British people, which provided them with an opportunity to get to know the British gender culture. On a comparative level, the UK gender context may probably be described as more liberal than the Polish one (Korzinska 2003). As Miluska (2004) proposed, in more liberal contexts traditional understandings of gender were reformulated, as they were seen as

privileging men and limiting women's freedom and choices. Although some feminists in the UK could dispute such a description of the UK gender context as gender egalitarian, the comparisons of gender contexts are relative and to those coming from more conservative contexts the UK gender context may appear more gender egalitarian.

This analysis shows that Poles appear to be migrating between two quite different gender contexts. They were often constructed as if they were at opposite ends of a gender continuum, with Poland seen as traditional and influenced by the Catholic rhetoric as well as changing, and the UK presented as gender egalitarian. However, the narratives analysed also showed that this migration is not just about a move from a more traditional to a more liberal context, but from a dynamic context undergoing gender changes to one that has already undergone many changes due to the women's movement actively working to improve women's situation.

5 Construction of gender expectations

5.1 Gender expectations in Poland: traditional and changing

The interviews also focused on the construction of gender expectations in Poland. Many participants referred to traditional expectations of women, namely that they are primarily supposed to fulfil the role of wife and mother. This woman in her mid-20s from a city, for example, alleged that women's lives were considered to be "worthless" if they did not fulfil such gender roles and she considered such expectations as "limiting" women's life options:

"A woman [...] has to get married and have children. As if she was not important herself. She has to have a husband and children and then she is fulfilled. But if she is single and childless, she leads a wasted life, as it is not fulfilled."

She referred to a negative label attached to unmarried single women in Poland – "*stara panna*" ("old maiden") – which she found offensive and hurtful and denoting an "unwanted woman". She alleged that the term used to describe unmarried and single men – "*kawaler*" ("bachelor") – did not have the same negative connotations. Although she was religious, she considered such expectations unjust and unfair towards women and she stressed that the expectations made of men were not so strictly enforced. She argued that such expectations did not account for other choices women may have made with regard to their lives. Generally, highly educated women from cities mostly mentioned and criticised expectations regarding being a wife and mother. When attempting to put this in a wider context, women in Poland have generally been expected to get married and such an expectation, according to which a woman can primarily fulfil herself through marriage (Korzinska 2003), is both cultural and religious. As a result, women who do not get married are assigned a negative label of a "maiden" (Walczewska 2006) – a woman not desired by any man. Additionally, there is also a strong cultural pressure of motherhood in Poland (Mandal 2004).

Many participants also said that women in Poland were expected to focus on looking after the family and becoming homemakers once they had children. Some highly educated

women from cities referred to the "Mother Pole" notion, according to which a woman was expected to focus on her family and home and not to work outside of the home, and that these women did not like such expectations. They saw them as traditional and conservative and as having negative consequences for women. This woman in her mid-20s said:

"If you have children, you become a homemaker. For many Poles [...] it is a natural way of doing things. [...] For me this is quite conservative. Women study but then they stay at home and men are the ones who bring in the money."

In her narrative she was critical of such expectations, even though she was religious. She stressed that women should have a choice with regard to gender roles. My analysis showed that alongside the pressure to get married and have children women are expected to be homemakers (Szarzynska-Lichton 2004). Such pressure on women to be mothers and homemakers is related to the historical perception (of a more nationalist nature) of Polish women's roles (Korzinska 2003). They cumulated in a myth of the "Mother Pole" created at the end of the 18th century when Poland lost its independence (Walczewska 2006). This myth led to the creation of an ideal woman and stressed traditional gender roles (Chybicka/Kossakowska 2008), a woman's ability to cope with all kinds of difficulties and sacrificing her needs and aspirations to her family and the nation (Marody/Giza-Poleszczuk 2000). Interestingly, this myth continues to be powerful and is still alive in a conservative discourse. Both the Catholic Church's representatives and some right-wing politicians regard it as a positive gender model (Korczynska 2008). However, this myth seems to be losing its importance among younger Poles, and especially younger women want to free themselves from such traditional expectations (Titkow 2007). The views discussed portray an interesting gender dynamic and show that despite the prevalence of hegemonic, conservative gender expectations, many participants were critical of them.

A number of women also debated the construction of gender roles in the Catholic Church's rhetoric and alleged that the Church's conservative approach to gender was not modern enough for contemporary times. This highly educated woman, for example, was critical of traditional gender expectations promoted by the Catholic Church, i.e. for a woman to be the sole child-carer and a homemaker:

"I do not like the Church trying to enforce a certain way of thinking and excluding anyone who does not act in the same way [...] so if you are not a Mother Pole and you do not spend twelve hours with your child […]."

This woman talked about the need to consider other gender-related lifestyle options. She was not religious and came from a large city in Poland. Mandal (2004) similarly alleged that the Catholic Church's view of gender roles was rather conservative and accordingly a woman's primary role was seen to be that of wife and mother. However, as my analysis showed, the Catholic Church's view of gender was criticised and rejected by mostly highly educated non-religious women who migrated from cities.

Furthermore, some participants suggested that the application of gender in everyday practices has been undergoing change and that generally many women in Poland who were in relationships and had children actively participated in breadwinning and this was also the case for many female participants. One highly educated religious woman from a large city referred to earning and alleged that in the past it was considered a

"male responsibility", but gender roles were becoming *blurred* and many women nowadays were in a position to be the sole earners for their families:

"I think that in the past there was an expectation that a man should provide money for the family and should be stronger. A woman […] should have children. But I think these are more stereotypes now. I think that everything is becoming blurred. Nowadays a woman can provide financially for the family as well."

She contested traditional gender arrangements and associated them with the past, as she was also sharing the breadwinning with her husband. Some participants (all highly educated women from large cities in Poland) also argued that women faced more expectations in Poland than men did. However, in the view of this 31-year-old woman, a combination of various expectations, including those of earning and homemaking, made of women could have disastrous consequences for them:

"A woman has to be able to cope, be very modern, has to be well educated, have a great job, be a good mother, wife and cope with all these things really well. There is not an option that she is not able to cope. She must be good at everything she does. It is like an ideal that everybody is trying to achieve but half of the women have a nervous breakdown because they are not able to combine all these things."

She referred to the ideal of a "superwoman" embracing many different roles at once and she was critical of it. Moreover, another highly educated woman in her early 30s from a large city talked about the ideals attached to traditional gender roles and argued that there was a "preference" on the labour market in Poland for women who did not have children and those who did have children were rejected by potential employers:

"Because my son was either in a nursery or a kindergarten, I was able to go to work, but how could I start working when everybody asked who I was and as soon as I said that I had a child, they wanted me less than five minutes earlier."

Her narrative is related to the difficulties she experienced when she was trying to find a job in Poland as a mother of a young child and it also refers to employers in Poland, who have often discriminated against mothers of young children.

My analysis showed that gender roles in Poland are undergoing a process of change (see also Arcimowicz 2008). Despite traditional expectations many women in Poland who have children are also active on the labour market. This is also caused by economic conditions, as one salary may not cover all the family's needs and therefore a woman often has to be involved in paid employment outside of the home (Dzwonkowska-Godula 2008). Additionally, many women are often expected to be able to combine both roles, i.e. to be responsible for the housework, childcare and also to work outside of the home (Chybicka/Kossakowska 2008). As a result, a new ideal of a *superwoman* has been created (Mandal 2004) – a woman who is able to combine roles related to her work and family life (Titkow 2007). According to Mandal (2004), women who attempt to fulfil such a combination of different roles often experience stress and both physical and emotional exhaustion, also because men do not take up the childcare and homemaking to the same extent. Moreover, it also shows that during the transition period especially those women who have children are experiencing gender discrimination on the labour market (Pascall/Kwak 2005).

5.2 Gender expectations in the UK: freedom and choice

Some participants also alleged that women had more choice with regard to gender roles in the UK than in Poland. This young woman, who was a student and came from a big city in Poland, compared gender arrangements in Poland and the UK and said that women in the UK had more freedom and opportunities to decide about their lives, whilst in Poland specific gender expectations were imposed on them:

"A woman should be a mother, a cook, a wife, a lover [...] and a laundress at the same time. Here women have fought and gained certain rights. They can choose such a life, but they are asked about their opinion. We are not and this is a difference. In Poland certain expectations are forced upon us, these are not even expectations, these are obligations. It is expected that they will happen, whilst here it is a matter of choice."

In this narrative gender arrangements were seen as if they were at opposite ends of the gender continuum – enforced in Poland and freely chosen in the UK. It was also alleged that women in the UK were not expected to fulfil clearly defined roles as would be the case in Poland. This highly educated woman from a city claimed that it allowed her to live the life she had chosen:

"To be sure, there is more freedom here. Women are not expected [...] there are no Polish expectations. I have an impression that I can breathe here, I can lead the life I want to and nobody expects anything from me. [...] I can get married or not, I can have a child or not, I can have a great career and I can spend my life [doing what I want]. When it comes to life choices, there is more freedom here. There is no social pressure, at least I did not encounter it."

She drew interesting comparisons between gender expectations in these two gender contexts and talked about the lack of social control and freedom of choice in the UK. Also other highly educated participants stressed the freedom, choice and liberal approach to gender expectations in the UK. According to Crompton (2006), traditional roles persisted in the UK up to the middle of the 20th century and women were expected mostly to focus on housework and childcare. However, since then more and more women have entered the labour market and this has led to major changes in gender roles.

The findings show that in terms of gender expectations in Poland, some participants talked about conservative expectations of women as those of motherhood, being a wife and homemaker. Such expectations made of women were criticised by many of these participants. Others talked about changing gender expectations. Some also alleged that there was more freedom of choice with regard to the roles women in the UK embraced in their lives, and they regard this as positive.

6 Impact of migration on gender construction: emancipation and liberation of women

Some participants alleged that Polish women who migrated to the UK liberated themselves from the conservative understandings of gender as they were influenced by gender dynamics prevailing in the UK. This young woman in her early 20s who came

from the countryside alleged that Polish women became emancipated in the UK and "women's power" had a positive impact on their lives:

"Polish women are more liberated in England than in Poland, more assertive they know what they want, because they have such opportunities. In Poland they are more held back by men. […] I think that women's power plays a great role here and I think that it has an immense impact on Polish women."

She alleged that migration to the UK had affected her own life positively as she had become more confident about the necessity of having her own needs fulfilled. Moreover, this highly educated woman in her mid-20s argued that women and men had the same rights in the UK and that this also affected Polish women, who became stronger and gained a more equal position in their families:

"Everybody has the same rights here. I think that British women are stronger and have more rights. There are many Polish women who are becoming more self-confident as a result. Even when looking at my friends, I can see that it is not necessary for the man to have a decisive voice at home as head of the family. No. We are becoming more self-confident. I think that's good. It is different than in Poland, where my female friends' [...] men are rather dominant."

She appreciated gender equality in the UK. She came from a small town in Poland, where allegedly more conservative attitudes to gender prevailed. She talked positively about the empowerment of Polish women in the UK and the effect these dynamic changes had in their relationships with men.

However, it was also alleged that those Polish women who decided to return to Poland would influence gender relations there. But this young woman, for example, said she felt more empowered in the UK and argued that was why she could not see herself going back to Poland:

"Women feel freer here and they feel they have more power. I can see how I feel here myself […]. I can be the same in Poland, but nobody will listen to me because I am a woman [...] that is why I say I will not be able to find my place in Poland."

In her case, returning to a more gender unequal context was not seen as a viable option. She came from the country, which is supposedly more conservative than other locations in Poland, and she did not consider moving back from a big city in the UK to the country in Poland as a positive life choice.

Women who talked about the positive impact of migration on Polish women were mostly highly educated or students and came from different parts of Poland. Interestingly, the majority of them were religious. These narratives confirm the argument put forward by Heinen and Portet (2009), who alleged that the migration of Poles to the countries characterised by more gender equality may influence their views and wider social change among Poles, specifically among Polish women. Participants alleged that Poles' views of gender seem to be changing and becoming more liberal and that Polish women are becoming emancipated as a consequence of their migrating to the UK. This shows that migration is creating the potential for change in gender dynamics among Polish women in the UK. It may also have a wider impact in the transnational context, as returning Poles may introduce and demand greater change with regard to gender in Poland.

7 Conclusions

This article looked at the constructions of gender among Polish women in the UK. No attention has yet been paid to such issues in the context of the migration of Poles to the UK following the 2004 enlargement of the EU, and this article attempted to fill this gap. My analysis showed that women were critical of a conservative approach to gender and gender expectations in Poland, which were perceived by them as traditional and not fit for contemporary times. At the same time, they said that they appreciated the choice and freedom with regard to gender roles in the UK. However, it was mostly highly educated, non-religious women from cities who expressed such views. Women also saw the impact of migration on Polish women in the UK in positive terms, such as achieving emancipation, greater self-confidence and power. Interestingly, those women who believed that migration to a new gender context had a positive influence on women and their lives and who expressed feminist views were religious. This indicates great possibilities for combining religious views with gender egalitarian views.

The UK context appeared to be more gender liberal and gender-equality driven to many participants. Although, on a comparative level, the UK gender context may seem to be more gender egalitarian than the Polish context, many feminist academics are critical of such a view. However, the perception of a new context is relative, and migrants may regard it as more liberal and gender equal, and such a perception may influence their views and lead to changes in their own constructions of gender. It appears, then, that migration may have the potential to introduce change around constructions of gender. However, it also needs to be stressed that these women migrated to a new gender context where the state approach to gender is different from the one in Poland. Moreover, in the UK context religious institutions have a minimal impact on gender-related policy-making, which is opposite to the situation in Poland. Furthermore, women's movement in the UK is strong and affected women's position positively and this is again in the opposition to the context left behind. Moreover, my analysis showed that the gender context should be regarded as dynamic and prone to change, especially in Poland. Furthermore, migration should be perceived in terms of creating a potential for positive change affecting women, as the observations made in a more gender-equal context led to their questioning more conservative and traditional views of gender (Mahler/Pessar 2006).

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Notes

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