

DEALING WITH RELOCATION:
PROBLEMATIC INTEGRATION
OF EAST EUROPEAN MOTHERS
WITH PRESCHOOLERS IN POLAND

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Abstract: This research examines the agency and integration of skilled Eastern European migrant mothers with preschool children living in Poland, who relocated through family migration channels accompanying IT professionals. Drawing on 15 semi-structured interviews with women from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, the study investigates how these mothers navigate structural, cultural, and institutional constraints while reconstructing their professional and social identities in the host society. The analytical framework integrates Anthony Giddens's structuration theory—particularly the concepts of the duality of structure, routine, and reflexive monitoring of action—with Hannah Arendt's notion of agency, Andrea Thuma's four-dimensional model of subject visibility, and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and capital.

The findings reveal that migrant mothers construct alternative spaces of empowerment within online and offline migrant communities, where their pre-migration cultural and professional capital is revalorized and transformed into social and symbolic capital. These informal networks provide social support and partially compensate for the lack of institutional integration measures in Poland. However, Poland's current migration policy is not geared toward the integration of migrant mothers, and for the mothers themselves, integration is not a priority. Additionally, they feel that Polish society is not ready for integration as a two-way process. Therefore, the potential of habitus is not fully utilized to foster the creation of a multicultural society.



In turn, habitus determines practical activities that, in the absence of effective integration, continue to stem from dispositions formed before relocation. This perpetuation of pre-existing social patterns may contribute to growing interethnic tensions between Poles and Eastern European migrants. The study concludes that recognizing and mobilizing the agency and resources of skilled migrant mothers is essential not only for their empowerment but also for fostering social cohesion in contemporary Poland.

Keywords: migrant mothers, integration, relocation, Eastern Europe, Poland

Introduction

Family migration remains one of the main forms of long-term mobility within OECD countries, accounting for 43% of new permanent inflows in 2023 (OECD 2024). Among these, accompanying spouses of highly qualified professionals, particularly skilled women, remain largely invisible in both research and policy (EMN INFORM 2022; Łodziński & Szonert 2023; Kofman 2000; Riaño 2012). Poland has become a key relocation destination for Eastern European IT specialists due to its EU membership, geographical proximity, and cultural familiarity (Dolińska 2019; Petrakova 2022). Programs such as “Business Harbour” designed to attract IT experts (gov.pl. 2024; Petrakova 2022), along with political repression in Belarus since 2020 and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Korobkov 2022), have spurred migration flows (Alachnovič 2023; Petrakova 2022). As of 2021, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians were among the largest immigrant groups from post-Soviet countries in Poland (Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców 2021).

Many of these migrants are highly educated women whose professional potential remains underrecognized (Kaźmierska et al. 2013; Kofman & Raghuram 2006; Piekut 2013). Their status as “family migrants” obscures their qualifications and sidelines their career aspirations. Prior research has often portrayed migrant mothers as dependent or economically inactive (Schmidt & Jaworsky 2022), reinforcing gendered and structural invisibility (Kofman 2000). Yet, accompanying women are not necessarily passive; they actively reconstruct professional and social identities within new social and institutional contexts.

The research focuses on one group: skilled mothers with preschool children from Eastern European countries (Belarus, Russia, Ukraine) in Poland, who moved there as family members of IT professionals and, by virtue of their status of residence or the status of residence of their husbands, have the right to work in Poland. Speaking of skilled mothers, we will mean mothers who have higher education and relevant

work experience. This study raises the issue of agency and integration of skilled Eastern European migrant mothers in Poland and how the intersection of these two factors can affect social change in Poland. Agency here refers to the capacity to act independently, make choices and transform one's circumstances. We apply Hannah Arendt's notion of agency in the public sphere and Andrea Thuma's interpretation of its four dimensions: the subject's visibility, the capacity to interact and communicate, freedom and the worldly attachment of actions (Thuma 2011). Combined with Bourdieu's theory of habitus and capital, this framework allows us to explore how pre-migration resources such as education, professional experience and cultural dispositions interact with the new constraints and opportunities these mothers encounter in Poland.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study combines an analytical framework drawn from the works of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Hannah Arendt, and Andrea Thuma. Together, their concepts allow for an exploration of the complex interplay between individual agency, structural constraints, and social change in the context of migration and motherhood, employing a qualitative, interpretive methodological approach.

Anthony Giddens's structuration theory (Giddens 2005) provides a macro-sociological foundation for understanding the duality of structure, where social structures serve as both the medium and the outcome of human practices. From this perspective, migrant mothers are viewed as knowledgeable and reflexive actors capable of reproducing and transforming the very social systems that constrain them. Key concepts, such as routine and reflexive monitoring of action, are essential for explaining how daily practices of care, work, and adaptation are organized and reinterpreted after relocation. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu 2007) enriches this understanding by illustrating how migrants' pre-migration dispositions and accumulated cultural, social, and symbolic capital shape their adaptation strategies in the host country. Habitus, as a system of durable dispositions, elucidates how migrants reproduce familiar behavioral patterns while also highlighting how, under certain conditions, they may activate the creative potential of habitus to adjust to new social fields.

While Giddens and Bourdieu emphasize the interplay of structure and practice, Hannah Arendt introduces an ethical and political dimension to the understanding of human action. For Arendt,

agency is inseparable from freedom and responsibility within the public sphere. She defines it through two essential aspects: “freedom from necessity and from external pressures” and “care for the world,” which signifies an active interest in the shared world we inhabit with others (Thuma 2011). Arendt’s vision thus connects agency not only to individual autonomy but also to participation in the common world—a particularly relevant consideration for understanding migrant women’s engagement in host societies.

Andrea Thuma expands on Arendt’s concept by distinguishing four interrelated dimensions of agency: the subject’s visibility (the capacity to appear and express identity in public), the capacity to interact and communicate (the ability to communicate and build relationships), freedom (the initiative to act or refrain from action), and the worldly attachment of actions (active engagement motivated by a genuine concern for the world and an awareness of the responsibility to care for and consciously shape one’s social environment) (Thuma 2011: 4). These dimensions are particularly relevant for understanding the challenges faced by migrant mothers as they seek agency and for examining how each migrant mother’s agency is both enacted and constrained within the Polish socio-cultural context. Through these practices, migrant mothers negotiate their positions between structural limitations and personal aspirations.

Methodologically, the study follows a qualitative interpretivist paradigm, focusing on the subjective experiences of migrant mothers and their strategies for adaptation and integration in Poland. The main empirical material is based on 15 semi-structured interviews with migrant mothers from Eastern Europe who relocated to Poland with preschool children between 2020 and 2023. The sample included mothers from Ukraine (3), Russia (4), and Belarus (8); however, it does not claim to be representative. The research employs targeted and snowball sampling (Saldaña 2021) to recruit participants who share key social characteristics: higher education, a professional background, and a family migration context linked to the IT sector. Interviews were conducted in the respondents’ first language to ensure comfort and authenticity of expression.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by theoretical categories derived from four authors. Each interview was interpreted through the lens of the four dimensions of agency (Thuma 2011), the dynamics of habitus and capital transformation (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu 2007), and the structuration of daily practices (Giddens 2005; Joas & Knöbl 2009). The analytical process also involved triangulation (De Souza 2015) with statistical and policy data on migration and integration in Poland to contextualize interview findings and strengthen

validity. Participant observation and field notes complemented the interviews, providing insights into non-verbal practices and the material dimensions of everyday life. Through this integrated theoretical and methodological framework, the study positions skilled migrant mothers not merely as subjects of migration policy but as agents whose practices illuminate the intersections of structure, gender, and mobility. This approach facilitates a coherent transition from theory to empirical analysis, ensuring internal consistency among conceptual assumptions, methods, and findings.

This study is grounded in standpoint theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is situated and shaped by the researcher's social position. My interest in this topic is closely linked to my own experiences as a Belarusian professional and mother of a preschooler who relocated to Poland eight years ago amid political and economic instability. Although I was born in Russia, I spent most of my life in Belarus and had previously experienced migration during my studies in Lithuania, which facilitated my adaptation to life in Poland. These experiences provided me with an insider perspective that fostered trust with participants and heightened my sensitivity to the nuances of migrant motherhood and integration.

Agency of skilled migrant mothers with preschoolers in Poland

Migration research has significantly enhanced our understanding of this phenomenon. Post-2020 relocation patterns have been transformed globally by Covid-19 and, in East-Central Europe, by the Belarusian protests following the 2020 elections and the ongoing war in Ukraine. This section explores some gendered aspects of the lives of relatively recent skilled migrants in Poland. It relates to two main themes: barriers, on one hand, and support, on the other, in the pursuit of agency for Eastern European skilled migrant mothers with preschoolers in Poland. The focus is on factors that affect these mothers' social integration into Polish society.

My reasoning stems from the idea that migrant mothers, as social actors, have the potential to become agents capable of transforming their social reality. This transformation can be better understood by analyzing the conditions under which agency can be exercised and the factors that may influence it. It is important to acknowledge that in order to become effective actors, migrant mothers must undergo a period of adaptation in the host country. Giddens and Bourdieu emphasize that actors are individuals who act consciously and "have

an extensive set of knowledge about the conditions and consequences of what they do in their daily lives” (Giddens 2005: 384). As previously mentioned, following Andrea Thuma’s approach, agency unfolds through four key dimensions: the subject’s visibility, the capacity to interact and communicate, freedom, and the worldly attachment of actions (Thuma 2011). These aspects are particularly relevant for understanding how migrant mothers navigate and position themselves within the public sphere in Poland.

Individuals occupy specific positions in social space, and those in adjacent positions—sharing similar experiences, values, and lifestyles—tend to form communities of practice that reinforce shared norms through daily interactions (Giddens 2005; Joas & Knöbl 2009: 550). This logic of proximity explains how and why social groups emerge and acquire meaning. In digital and migrant contexts, online communities reproduce these patterns through shared habitus and mutual recognition. As Thuma notes, public space is “artificial,” created by the human “web of relations” that emerges from continuous new beginnings. Visibility within it depends on one’s ability to occupy a recognizable social position and maintain relationships with others who share a similar social trajectory (Thuma 2011).

In this study, all the mothers interviewed migrated to Poland with their families. The main reason for their migration was the relocation opportunities offered to their husbands, who worked in the IT industry. Consequently, many of these women arrived in Poland “unprepared,” either because the move was abrupt and they did not have time to prepare or because they did not understand what was necessary or possible. None of the informants I interviewed spoke Polish well enough to express themselves and be visible in the Polish-speaking public space. Most of them lacked entry points into the Polish community, such as work, study at a Polish educational institution, participation in public organizations, or Polish friends. As a result, their initial social space was limited to others occupying adjacent positions—other women who shared similar migration experiences, linguistic backgrounds, and family responsibilities. This proximity in the social structure naturally led to the formation of tightly knit online communities. Thus, for each of them, the primary contact upon their arrival in Poland was the online community of migrant mothers from Eastern European countries.

At the very beginning, when I arrived (...) I tried very actively to fit in, so to speak, into the environment. I joined various Facebook groups to find people with whom I could spend time because during the day

everyone works, and I was with a child, and I wanted to communicate with someone. Initially, these were Russian-Ukrainian-speaking groups, where many mothers faced the same issue: when people move, they need to find someone to talk to.

Marta, photographer

In Poland, numerous closed Facebook groups catering to migrant mothers exist in every major city. These groups are characterized by communication in languages that are mutually intelligible to the members, such as Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian, due to their lexical similarities. Some mothers become aware of these groups even before relocating to Poland through online searches, while others learn about them through chance encounters with other migrant mothers, such as at playgrounds. Thus, what begins as a search for companionship within adjacent social positions gradually transforms into the consolidation of a distinct social group—a digital enclave reproducing the social proximity of its members. These online communities, as described in Bourdieu's model of social space, become arenas where habitus is collectively reinforced.

The primary objective of these groups is to foster a supportive community—a circle of people who understand and share the experience of relocating with children. By joining an online community of individuals who share similar interests, experiences, or backgrounds, a person may find a sense of familiarity and belonging that helps reinforce their existing habitus. This can provide comfort and support, as well as opportunities for social interaction and the exchange of ideas and information.

When something happens, you basically don't know where to run. For example, if something happens to the child, where do you take him, to which hospital, where to go in an emergency? Questions about documents arise, such as how to register a child in kindergarten. For someone who has just arrived and has no idea how the education system works in another country, what do you do? The girls helped; they wrote about which kindergartens or nurseries exist in Poland, and that to register, you need to go to a particular site. Help was invaluable at first, especially when you needed to see a doctor, and one of the girls would offer to go with you to translate the process of communicating with the doctor. The girls also helped by watching the child while you went to the doctor. It's just basic support, just to talk, because sometimes you want a living person next to you with whom you can discuss your concerns.

Ksenia, a student

This mutual support exemplifies the social practices that emerge when individuals with similar dispositions occupy adjacent positions. The everyday exchanges among migrant mothers—ranging from practical advice to emotional reassurance—reflect the reproduction of their collective social position within the host society. From Ksenia’s story, we can conclude that gaining visibility in a migrant mothers’ group can be as simple as making a post offering help, proposing an initiative, or sharing useful information relevant to the group. To become visible, it is essential to be socially active, which involves maintaining communication through regular posts or possessing a skill that the group values, such as a rare profession needed by the immigrant community. This illustrates how social capital is generated through micro-interactions within a bounded field. In this context, visibility functions as symbolic capital: those who contribute knowledge or assistance gain recognition and status within the group, which can then be exchanged for other forms of capital.

A notable example is Margarita, who worked as a teacher for children with special needs before her maternity leave. She is the director of the Association of Immigrant Families with Disabilities. Her qualifications were in high demand among immigrant families with disabled children. Additionally, Poland was her second migration experience; her first was relocating to Ukraine with her husband, which provided her with adaptive experience. Margarita’s long-standing commitment to supporting families, combined with her direct experiences of migration, led her to create this organization with other mothers who understood the difficulties of raising children with disabilities in a new country. The initiative quickly grew into a robust association focused on advocacy and support for immigrant families dealing with disabilities. In this way, the group’s interaction extends beyond digital platforms, as members organize real-world meetings, collaborative projects, and shared events. These activities foster the development of friendship circles, interest clubs, and grassroots organizations, resulting in migrant mothers becoming more connected to each other than to the broader host community in Poland.

By fostering a sense of social connection, online communities help skilled migrant women feel less isolated and more confident, ultimately enhancing their ability to fully participate in and contribute to their new communities. Before her first maternity leave, Arina worked as an architect in Russia. During her leave, she focused on studying various maternal practices and took courses on attachment theory at the Neufeld Institute. When she became pregnant with her second child, she and her husband moved to the United States for his job, later relocating to Poland, where they had a third child. In Poland, Arina

began conducting free online and offline meetings for Eastern European migrant mothers on attachment theory, using social networks to inform prospective mothers about these gatherings. Eventually, she completed professional doula training and expanded the topics of her meetings to include the obstetrics system in Poland.

The dense Russian-speaking community provided me with more opportunities than I would have had in Russia. Unexpectedly, I found myself in demand in a new role. I can and want to do this, and I actually shifted my focus from architecture to retraining. Now, after nearly two and a half years, many people already reach out to me—acquaintances, friends, and colleagues of those I've worked with. I've established a reputation, and I focus on processing the requests that come to me rather than promoting my services.

Arina, the doula

Arina's trajectory illustrates how symbolic and cultural capital, initially rooted in her professional background, can be reconverted within the migrant community, acquiring new value and reinforcing her position in the group (Kindler & Wójcikowska-Baniak 2019). This dynamic exemplifies the structural principle previously stated: proximity in social space fosters both solidarity and differentiation, as individuals compete for recognition and influence within their shared field.

Thus, the online community of migrant mothers not only teaches newcomers the behavioral norms in their new environment but also provides a platform for realizing their cultural capital. In this context, the cultural capital of migrant mothers encompasses their language skills, maternal experiences, relocation challenges, and education or work experience in fields where the group has unmet needs. By achieving visibility within the migrant social networks, cultural capital can be exchanged for social capital, resulting in valuable connections that can ultimately lead to economic gain. Therefore, social networks serve not only as a means of support for migrant mothers but also as a tool for social advancement (Kindler & Wójcikowska-Baniak 2019).

Interaction and communication within migrant networks

As we can see from the stories of migrant mothers, “tightly linked to visibility is the capacity to interact and communicate” (Thuma 2011). The community of Eastern European migrants has grown to a record high in recent years due to the war in Ukraine and the political crisis in Belarus (Łodziński & Szonert 2023). Several factors have contributed

to a significant decrease in the need for learning Polish. The communication needs of migrants are often met through diaspora communities. They tend to establish businesses that cater to the demands of their enclaves and migrant markets (Homel 2022), frequently hiring fellow migrants from their own communities. Furthermore, proficiency in English is often required for employment in many international companies, while knowledge of Polish is frequently not mandatory. Most bureaucratic issues can be resolved by hiring a translator, which reduces the necessity for Polish language skills.

Theoretically, you can live absolutely without language – there is a very large community of Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians. Everyone communicates in Russian or Ukrainian. I followed the group “Moms in Krakow”¹, which, in my opinion, already has eight thousand mothers². It’s like everyone has children... Krakow is a very small city; in 40 minutes, you’re already on the other side of the city.

Alla, the florist

However, the military conflict in Ukraine that began in February 2022 has changed the dynamics within the Eastern European migrant community. It has caused communication problems not only among Russian and Ukrainian migrants but also between Russian-speaking Ukrainians and Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians. As a result, many mothers feel unsafe communicating in familiar online and offline public spaces. Margarita, the director of the Association of Immigrant Families with Disabilities, states: “In general, I haven’t followed this group for the last year and a half³, it seems to me that I have been expelled for inactivity. There are some discussions under the posts, but it has become completely uninteresting and not very safe”.

Due to the war, using the Russian language for communication poses risks not only to the physical safety of adults but also to children. Speaking Russian is often viewed as a symbol of support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leading to discrimination, harassment, or even violence. Alla, the florist, recounts: “There was a case where a girl from Western Ukraine, a native Ukrainian speaker, mentioned that at the playground, a boy from Kharkov was beaten by other

1 Alla is referring to the social group “Moms in the Park - Krakow” on Facebook.

2 As of 8.05.2023 at Facebook community “Moms in the Park - Krakow” consisted of 2689 Participating. [accessed 2023-05-08] Available from Internet: <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1633926246850611>>.

3 Margarita talks about a social group for Eastern European migrant mothers on Facebook.

children who said, 'Since you don't speak Ukrainian, you should speak Russian; you're a fascist.' She supported this, saying that the child should learn to speak Ukrainian". This situation creates significant barriers for those who speak Russian as their first language or those with limited knowledge of Ukrainian or Polish, making it difficult for them to communicate with others or access basic services.

The challenge is compounded by the fact that many Eastern European migrants underestimate the effort required to learn Polish in order to communicate effectively with the local community. Sonya, the community center coordinator at UNHCR, explains: "I listened to people say that Polish is very easy. It turned out that this is not true; it is not easy at all. You can begin to understand it somehow, but to speak, read, and write... it needs to be taught. It's just 'the same language, but a little different,' as I was told. No, it turns out it needs to be taught very diligently".

For migrant mothers, finding time to study Polish is also difficult, as most caregiving responsibilities fall on them while their children are still small.

About six months after we arrived, I attended an A1 Polish course for one semester. That was my initial knowledge of the language. However, I couldn't continue to the second semester because my daughter was often sick. I could only attend evening classes for one semester, and after a long break, I returned to Polish when I had to prepare for the exam, learning independently at home. (...) I still lack words and semantic constructions to express my thoughts thoroughly. Often, I feel like a dog-I understand almost everything, but I can say much less, and writing is even harder.

Ksenia, a student

Many migrant mothers report that stress exacerbates their difficulties in learning Polish and negatively affects their memory. This may be due to the physiological effects of stress on the brain, such as the production of cortisol, a hormone that disrupts memory consolidation and retrieval (Jiang 2019). Alla, the florist, notes: "It's very hard for me to remember words. I have some vocabulary, and I write one word on my hand and another on the refrigerator... I think it's all due to nerves since we had to move unexpectedly; this was not planned". Learning Polish is undoubtedly important for migrant mothers relocating to Poland, but it is not the only challenge they face in integrating into the Polish community. Even if they become proficient in Polish, cultural barriers may still hinder their communication and interactions with locals. Marta, a photographer, explains: "Among my classmates,

despite our good relations, I sometimes feel out of place. I can't fully understand their jokes, and they may not fully understand mine. When this happens regularly, you start to wonder, 'What's wrong?'"

The attitude toward religion and its role in everyday life contributes to the emergence of a cultural barrier. The majority of Polish society adheres to Catholicism, which significantly influences cultural traditions and public life. Several interviewed migrant mothers express difficulty accepting the impact of this mainstream religion on their daily lives.

One of the main difficulties for me is religion. It's just a pain. I'm frustrated by these monstrous holidays when you can't even buy an egg. You can buy vodka, but not an egg. With three children, I feel very unsafe. I've had instances where my children fell ill during the holidays, and despite waiting for six hours in the emergency room, nothing could be done. It's like you just lie there and die in the queue. (...) Religion permeates everything, and this is one of its manifestations. There's religion in schools, and there are many manifestations: paternalism and misogyny in society—all of these are noticeable and present. This could push me to consider another migration.

Arina, the doula

Effective communication is crucial for the successful integration of migrant mothers into the host community, enabling them to express themselves and assert their agency. As Andrea Thuma points out, "agency is especially vulnerable to external limitations" (Thuma 2011: 4). Migrant mothers who lack adequate language skills and cannot communicate effectively in public spaces may encounter significant obstacles in exercising their agency and fully participating in society. Additionally, the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine has created challenges for communication between Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking migrants in Poland. This communication barrier exacerbates the difficulties already faced by these migrant groups, and the resulting societal tensions may lead to inter-ethnic conflicts.

Freedom as capacity for action

Andrea Thuma's concept of freedom emphasizes the agent's initiative, asserting that the essence of freedom lies in the individual's ability to initiate action. Thuma argues that an agent's freedom depends on their capacity to transform their situation and make decisions (Thuma 2011: 4). This perspective highlights not only the availability

of external opportunities but also the internal readiness to act upon them. Thus, Thuma's framework directs attention to both structural constraints and subjective capacities. In this sense, freedom is not merely the absence of coercion but the presence of meaningful possibilities that can be enacted through personal initiative. In this section, we examine how this understanding of freedom applies to the lived experiences of migrant mothers, analyzing the decision-making process and the availability of options among those who participated in our interviews. Freedom will be considered across the key domains that mothers themselves identified when discussing their sense of autonomy: routine, family, and the labor market. The focus is to determine which social, economic, and cultural factors either enable or restrict their ability to exercise agency and make autonomous choices in various aspects of their lives.

Anthony Giddens argues that public order emerges not from spontaneous evolution but from the structured and intentional actions of social actors (Giddens 2005). In his structuration theory, human behavior is viewed as a continuous flow rather than isolated acts, where intention often develops during the process of acting (Joas & Knöbl 2009: 417). Within this framework, individuals continuously monitor and reinterpret their practices through what Giddens calls the reflexive monitoring of action, which "involves controlling not only one's own behavior but also the actions of others" (Giddens 2005: 42). Social structures consist of "rules and resources" that individuals draw upon in their everyday lives (Fours 2002: 421).

Routines play a central role in maintaining ontological security by structuring daily activities, reducing uncertainty, and creating a sense of control. When these routines are disrupted, an individual's basic trust in the social world may be shaken, leading to anxiety and disorientation (Joas & Knöbl 2009: 420). This was evident in the experiences of migrant mothers in the study, who faced unexpected relocation to Poland and were compelled to abandon familiar life patterns. The breakdown of established routines required them to rebuild daily practices and adapt reflectively to a new social environment. Alesia, an associate manager, recalled: "I really love our apartment. And I miss it a lot... There was a lot of anxiety, of course, because we moved with just five suitcases. I really wanted to take as many things as possible from Minsk. But it turned out that I couldn't. I just gave away all my things—some to acquaintances, some to family, and some just somewhere else. And it was an additional worry. It was very stressful, because I had thoughts like, what if something goes wrong?"

Relocation was often rushed, as employers in the IT sector provided visa support for both employees and their families, significantly

shortening the preparation period. Sonya, a community center coordinator at UNHCR, shared: “We basically just packed our bags and left. Honestly, I didn’t really know where Poland was located. I looked it up on Wikipedia and saw that it was in Poland and one of the most beautiful cities, but then I got lazy and closed it”. In the first months after relocation, mothers had to reconstruct their daily lives within a new and unfamiliar set of rules: finding housing, preschools, and doctors while rebuilding everyday routines. As Ksenia, a student, explained: “At first, it was difficult in terms of arranging an ordinary life. In Russia, we already had our own pediatrician, gynecologist, doctors, hairdressers, and a massage therapist—some spheres of ordinary everyday life depend on other specialists. And at first, it was very difficult”.

Thus, relocation disrupted not only external social structures but also internalized behavior schemes. To function successfully, migrants must learn and internalize the rules governing the host society. This process takes time and often deepens anxiety, affecting their capacity to interpret new circumstances adequately. Pierre Bourdieu notes that “since the individual worldview is based on the desire to conform to the social position occupied, even the most disadvantaged subjects try to perceive the established order as natural” (Bourdieu 2007). Hence, for migrant mothers, becoming aware of their social situation in the host country is a necessary step toward integration. Following Bourdieu’s reasoning, those actors who, through their actions aimed at adaptation, become included in and reproduce the social structure become agents (Bourdieu 2007).

Family responsibilities and intensive motherhood

In the interviews, most mothers discussed how, since their husbands were the main breadwinners after relocating their families, most household chores, as well as childcare for infants and toddlers, fell to them during their children’s adjustment to the new country. Arina, the doula, stated: “Management of everything is on me: children’s medicine, food, household chores, cleaning, planning for nannies, arranging help if needed, planning vacations and travel, if any. (...) I have a husband who brings home the bacon, and I do everything else”. Furthermore, since the family’s legal residency often depends on the husband’s employment, any work or social activities undertaken by the mothers are typically viewed as secondary. Daria, currently unemployed, shared: “I don’t work. My daughter hasn’t fully adapted to preschool yet. It’s a work in progress. But I’m preparing... I’m slowly building a portfolio and applying for jobs”.

The choice of the interviewed mothers to practice intensive motherhood significantly impacts their freedom and decision-making abilities. Intensive motherhood posits that a mother's primary responsibility is to foster her child's development and well-being (Hays 1996). Marta, a photographer, expressed: "I believe that a mother should... I don't know... cook well. She should also enjoy spending time with the child and provide opportunities for them. I would say that I am quite an 'assertive' mother in this regard. Although I understand intellectually that I shouldn't overthink it, my perfectionism sometimes gets in the way. I feel pressured to excel in everything, including motherhood". This often leads to sacrificing personal aspirations and goals to prioritize the child's needs.

We initially had a cognitive error, influenced by the paternalistic and patriarchal society I grew up in, which assumed that maternity leave meant the mother was solely responsible for raising the child. I spent many years in intensive motherhood, actively involved with my children, which brought me both fulfillment and, to some extent, depression. A psychiatrist confirmed this. While medication didn't help, non-drug approaches did. I found a job, began to work, and regained my footing.

Arina, the doula

In the countries where the interviewed mothers originated, it is customary for children to be under parental care until the age of three, with preschool education typically starting afterward. As a result, many mothers from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine choose to take maternity leave until their child turns three, often citing the psychological needs of the child. Ulyana, currently unemployed, said: "In Ukraine, it's normal for a woman to stay with a child until they are three. Staying until six is also accepted; it's seen as investing six years of her life to ensure the child grows up mentally healthy, without going through difficult adaptations".

Although many interviewed mothers aimed to extend their maternity leave, the absence of close relatives in Poland created a significant psychological burden, compounding the stress of relocation and personal adaptation. Consequently, they decided to enroll their children in preschool and return to the job market. Anastasia, a Lead Business Analyst, remarked: "I felt I couldn't handle the psychological pressure anymore. That kind nanny at preschool, who doesn't even speak Russian, might actually be better for my child despite the stress".

However, since the interviewed mothers feel compelled to dedicate all their time to their children when they are not in daycare, they

seek flexible work schedules whenever possible. Nonetheless, situations arise when daycare hours do not align with their work schedules or when children fall ill. In such cases, many mothers, lacking relatives or close friends in their new country, must hire a nanny. This significantly reduces the family's income, but most mothers are willing to make this sacrifice to gain work experience, maintain their qualifications, and secure a stable position in the workplace. Meanwhile, husbands have had to either agree to pay for services that mothers previously provided (such as childcare, cleaning, and cooking) or rethink their division of responsibilities within the family. This economic factor can contribute to the emergence of involved fatherhood in such families, where fathers strive to participate equally in both parenting and childcare. Victoria, a Senior Software Engineer, explained: "For me, we are equal. If I don't do it, he does. For instance, in the mornings, we take turns. If I wake up with the children today, then under normal circumstances, assuming everything stays in place and no one gets sick, my husband will wake up with them tomorrow. To me, that's fair".

The ability for fathers to work from home during the Covid-19 pandemic has played a supportive role in fostering involved fatherhood among the families of the interviewed mothers. Additionally, a law passed by the Polish government in January 2023 continued the trend that began during the pandemic. According to this law, employers cannot refuse requests for remote work from employees who are parents of children under the age of 8, provided the nature of their work allows for it (Mamotoja.pl. 2022). This flexibility benefits families where both partners strive to maintain a collaborative relationship. Tamara, currently unemployed, stated, "As a rule, we have a nuclear family in the classical sense; we are all here in front of each other. My husband often works from home, so we don't experience long periods of separation. We feed off this contact and intimacy. We've learned to juggle our time and try to give the children attention whenever we can".

Remote work is especially valuable during children's illnesses, as it allows parents to share childcare responsibilities throughout the day without requiring one parent to take sick leave.

For example, when the little one fell ill, we sat down to discuss the situation. We decided that, for the next week, he would stay home while we treated him. We coordinated our schedules: on some days, my husband worked from home while looking after the child, and I attended my practical classes. On other days, I had lectures and would copy notes from classmates while staying home with the child.

We try to share responsibilities, and having my husband work from home is incredibly helpful in this regard.

Ksenia, a student

The mothers interviewed chose to practice intensive motherhood, prioritizing their children's needs over their personal aspirations and goals. This choice, combined with the lack of close relatives in their new country, significantly limits their agency and options. The economic circumstances and legal regulations of the host country often dictate the division of household and caregiving responsibilities, which typically fall to the mother. However, the absence of support from relatives and close friends often necessitates external childcare services or a redistribution of responsibilities, leading to greater involvement from fathers. This illustrates how gender roles in migrant families evolve in response to the practical challenges they encounter in a new country.

Labor market participation

In the absence of work opportunities, many surveyed mothers feel vulnerable, unprotected, and helpless. Darya worked as a UX Designer for about four years before going on maternity leave and engaged in eco-activism in her hometown during her leave. When her child turned three, she planned to return to the IT industry but had to postpone due to relocation. To regain their confidence, many mothers who are currently unemployed are actively seeking suitable job openings or retraining for new professions. Ksenia, a student, expressed, "Psychologically, it affects me that I am largely dependent on my husband. Although he does not infringe on my freedom, it feels significant to me that I would like to be a bit more independent and realized outside of family and motherhood".

Since most of the surveyed mothers' husbands hold Blue Cards, the mothers have access to the job market, eliminating the need for them to obtain work permits in Poland when they decide to re-enter the workforce. Margarita, the director of the Association of Immigrant Families with Disabilities, mentioned, "I recognize that my situation is somewhat privileged because I work under specific conditions. I am Russian, and there was a law that could limit our employment. However, since my husband has a Blue Card and we qualify under a regulation for rare professions, I faced no difficulties in finding a job".

All of the interviewed mothers' husbands are highly qualified and well-paid IT specialists, allowing these mothers to be selective about

job offers. They can choose where they want to work and retrain if desired. Ksenia worked as a software tester for over eight years before maternity leave. When her daughter turned two, her husband received a job offer in Poland. She gave birth to her second child there. After seven years of caring for her children and home, it was challenging for her to return to IT, as the industry had advanced significantly, prompting her to pursue her dream of becoming an interior designer. “Psychologically, it impacts me that I am largely dependent on my husband. Despite him not infringing on my independence, I still desire to be a bit more independent and realized outside of family and motherhood,” Ksenia shared.

De-skilling is a common issue faced by mothers with young children. However, in the context of migration, where the stress of relocation, adaptation to new living conditions, and learning new societal norms are added, this problem becomes particularly acute. Alla, a former web designer, found it difficult to bridge the gaps in her skills due to a long maternity leave and forced relocation. Consequently, she decided to pursue her long-standing dream of becoming a florist. Alla, the florist, said, “For example, I created the first designs for BlackBerry when there were no user guides for Android or iOS. Now, I look at job vacancies and see that knowledge of programs like Photoshop, Illustrator, and 3D Max is assumed rather than explicitly stated in the requirements. There are also new programs I am completely unfamiliar with. The IT field is evolving rapidly”.

The highly qualified status of the husbands of the interviewed migrant mothers significantly impacts their freedom of choice regarding work. Since the husbands are well-paid IT specialists, the mothers are not compelled to accept any job that comes their way; they can afford to be selective about job opportunities. This enables them to take their time in choosing work that aligns with their interests and passions or to retrain in a different field if they wish to pursue a new career path. Having the ability to choose where and what type of work they want to do gives these mothers a sense of freedom and agency in their lives. It allows them to pursue their dreams and ambitions, which may have been put on hold due to motherhood or other factors, fostering a greater sense of independence. This freedom of choice is crucial for their self-esteem and confidence, enabling them to realize their full potential as both mothers and professionals.

However, the extent of freedom in work choices enjoyed by these migrant mothers is closely tied to their spouses' employment status, rendering it a fragile situation.

Worldly attachment of actions: contributing to the community

In the context of skilled migrant mothers in Poland, the concept of the worldly attachment of actions and its impact on freedom of action becomes particularly significant. Hannah Arendt's understanding of action and freedom emphasizes the transformative power of actions that have real-world consequences, disrupt established patterns, and maintain a strong connection to the world (Thuma 2011: 5). For skilled migrant mothers, this means that their actions can profoundly influence their surroundings, challenge existing norms, and contribute to social change within the host community.

The active involvement of migrant mothers in transformative processes is driven by their genuine interest in the world, as they recognize the importance of caring for and actively shaping their environment. When asked why she chooses to work, Margarita, the director of the Association of Immigrant Families with Disabilities, explained that she finds her work deeply engaging and meaningful. Even when her children were very young, she felt it was important to stay active and contribute to the community. She volunteered regularly at a nursing home in Kyiv, sometimes bringing her children along, and developed educational programs for elderly residents as well as counseling services for families. For Margarita, staying involved has always been important and personally fulfilling. Together with other migrant mothers, she founded the Association of Immigrant Families with Disabilities and shared her motivation for being actively involved. Currently, their association provides support to 180 families from Ukraine, which they strive to assist systematically. They not only help with food and essential items for daily life but also support adaptation and legalization in Poland. They conduct training courses for East European migrant mothers aimed at helping them enter the job market.

When analyzing skilled migrant mothers' agency in Poland, Bourdieu's framework illuminates how their available forms of capital shape the degree of their freedom of action described by Arendt. Different forms of capital-cultural (education, professional skills), social (networks of support), and symbolic (social recognition)-become key resources through which migrant mothers navigate the new field of Polish society. For instance, cultural capital acquired outside Poland, such as higher education or professional experience, often requires transformation to gain recognition and convertibility into economic capital in the host country. Social capital, built through mutual aid networks or community organizations, compensates for institutional barriers and enables agency despite structural limitations.

Using their skills, knowledge, and experience, migrant mothers strive to alleviate the adaptation period for fellow mothers who also undergo the stress of relocating to a new country. Through various online platforms catering to migrant mothers, the interviewed women actively engage in social activities, providing valuable information about life in Poland and responding to inquiries from newcomers. Additionally, some migrant mothers have established interest-based clubs, such as philosophical, book, and board game clubs. These initiatives foster a sense of solidarity and sisterhood among migrant women, contributing to a smoother process of adaptation and integration. Such practices illustrate how, within Bourdieu's terms, social capital not only provides access to resources but also reinforces symbolic recognition, creating new microfields of interaction where migrant women can redefine their status and sense of belonging.

The sense of belonging to a community of like-minded women empowers migrant mothers, driving their willingness to invest time and effort in aiding fellow migrants in Poland without expecting any remuneration, as they recognize the significance of these acts. However, it's essential to recognize that skilled migrant mothers in Poland face unique challenges that impact their freedom of action and their connection to the world. Language barriers, cultural differences, recognition of qualifications, and access to professional networks can hinder their ability to fully participate and exercise their freedom. These limitations highlights the limits of capital conversion in practice: linguistic competence, as a form of embodied cultural capital, becomes a crucial factor determining access to economic and symbolic capital in the host society. The partial inconvertibility of capitals acquired abroad restricts agency and reinforces dependence on migrant networks rather than facilitating broader social integration.

Consequently, most surveyed mothers were not prepared to assert their agency in Polish public spaces and preferred to remain within the migrant community for the time being. Therefore, it's crucial to establish comprehensive support systems, including language assistance, skill and qualification recognition, and opportunities for social and professional integration, so that skilled migrant mothers can exercise their freedom of action and make significant contributions to the Polish community. Recognizing and evaluating the interests and skills of migrant mothers can empower them to actively participate in shaping their own lives and the lives of the Eastern European migrant community to which they belong, while also contributing to a more diverse, inclusive, and dynamic society in Poland. In this context, the accumulation and transformation of various forms of capital become not only individual strategies of adaptation but

also collective mechanisms of social change, through which migrant mothers reconfigure the symbolic and cultural boundaries of the Polish social landscape.

A lack of effective integration measures risks underutilizing the social, cultural, and professional resources of migrant mothers, resulting in a loss of valuable human capital for the host society. The persistence of structural barriers may reinforce stereotypes that portray migrant women as passive or dependent, deepening their marginalization within both the labor market and the public sphere. Such dynamics not only constrain individual agency but also weaken the broader social cohesion of the host community.

Integration of skilled migrant mothers with preschoolers in Poland

The question of what guides agents in choosing their modes of action remains central to understanding processes of social integration. According to Pierre Bourdieu, an agent's practices are structured by habitus—a system of dispositions internalized through socialization that orients behavior, perception, and action (Joas & Knöbl 2009: 550). These durable dispositions reproduce inherited behavioral patterns, shaping what Bourdieu calls a “lifestyle” typical for particular groups (Bourdieu 2007: 71). While habitus tends to resist change, Bourdieu also attributes to it a “creative” capacity that can be achieved through self-reflection, awareness, and recognition of the laws structuring society (Bourdieu 1986). This transformative potential becomes particularly relevant in the context of migration and integration, where individuals must adapt their previously internalized dispositions to new cultural and social fields.

Most researchers emphasize that successful integration depends not only on migrants' agency but also on the openness and structure of the host community (Phillimore 2012; Waters & Pineau 2015). In Poland, however, as our empirical data show, the integration of qualified migrant mothers remains outside the state's priority agenda. The conditions of reception within the host community directly affect whether the creative potential of migrants' habitus can be realized or suppressed. Migrant women arrive equipped with particular dispositions that shape their adaptation strategies and influence how they perceive the host society's social field. As Bourdieu notes, “the sense of one's place and the similarity of habitus, expressed through likes or dislikes, underlie all forms of interaction: friendships, loves, conjugal ties, associations, etc.” (Bourdieu 2007: 71).

Interviews with migrant mothers reveal that many Poles support migrants' assimilation only insofar as newcomers are willing to dissolve completely into Polish culture. Margarita, the director of the Association of Immigrant Families with Disabilities, stated, "I apologized several times for my Polish, and I was told: 'Thank you very much that you basically speak Polish, for example, and not English.'" Linguistic adaptation thus functions as a marker of symbolic belonging, yet the expectation of full assimilation creates pressure that limits intercultural dialogue. This expectation extends to children as well. Alesia, an associate manager, described how all three of her children attended the same small daycare center, but her youngest daughter refused to speak Polish and avoided group activities. The daycare staff frequently called Alesia to complain and attempted to intervene. The situation became particularly stressful when Alesia learned that a teacher had yelled at a child who wouldn't speak Polish, telling them to speak the language or leave the country, which she suspected was directed at her daughter. Such episodes demonstrate how differences in linguistic and cultural habitus can produce symbolic violence within everyday institutional settings.

According to many respondents, the war in Ukraine and the subsequent influx of refugees have intensified tensions between Poles and Eastern European migrants. Ulyana, currently unemployed, observed that "before, it seems to me, they were more loyal. Now, in view of the fact that many foreigners have arrived, it seems to me that the Poles are already like, 'Come on, will you learn the language?'" This shift manifests in a rise of exclusionary practices: employers refusing to hire "non-native speakers" and landlords imposing impossible rental conditions. Alla, a florist, described how "many of my acquaintances left for Ukraine because they simply could not rent apartments, even with money." These structural barriers reinforce dispositions of distrust and exclusion, constraining the creative transformation of habitus.

Although this study focuses on migrant perspectives, it aligns with research emphasizing integration as a two-way process (Klarenbeek 2019). Host communities cannot serve as the sole standard by which integration is measured; they too must adapt to the presence of new cultures (Carens 2005). As Klarenbeek notes, "More integration does not necessarily equal more harmony, since changing power relations cause social friction. Insiders may feel threatened by a decrease in objective difference and, in response, put extra emphasis on what distinguishes them from 'the Other'" (Klarenbeek 2019).

This dynamic is reflected in Polish workplaces and schools. Alla recalled that her Polish colleagues were "very indignant" when Polish

children began speaking with “Russian endings,” viewing it as a contamination of their language. Despite migrant mothers’ efforts to learn Polish and participate in local life, they frequently encountered a wall of non-acceptance. As Ulyana noted, “It was not possible to find Polish friends to their liking.” Even when employed or studying together, “the Ukrainians stick with the Ukrainians, the Poles with the Poles,” as Alla described. Due to their double workload—caring for children and seeking employment—many mothers lacked the time and energy to cultivate relationships with Poles. Sonya, a community center coordinator at UNHCR, admitted, “I can’t say that my integration into Polish society is successful... I have a social circle that I like; it consists mainly of migrant women.”

As Bourdieu argues, habitus becomes the identity of a group’s members, creating similarity in ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (Bourdieu 2007: 71). This explains why migrants often remain within their diasporas, preserving familiar lifestyles. The same mechanisms that once ensured solidarity in the country of origin now hinder cross-group integration in the host society. Most respondents, therefore, maintain communication with Poles at a formal level while building their social circles around those who share language, values, and motherhood experiences.

Without a reflective transformation of habitus on both sides, social practices will continue to reproduce inherited dispositions rather than foster creative adaptation. Consequently, integration remains one-sided: migrant mothers demonstrate adaptive strategies, while the host society largely preserves its symbolic boundaries. Habitus thus serves as both an analytical and explanatory tool, showing how patterns once functional in one social field can become constraints in another. The “creative” potential of habitus can only unfold under conditions of mutual openness, where migrants and hosts alike recognize their shared role in shaping a new social field.

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that skilled Eastern European migrant mothers in Poland occupy a paradoxical position at the intersection of privilege and marginalization. On one hand, they arrive with significant educational and professional capital, often supported by the economic stability of their IT-specialist husbands. On the other hand, the structural, linguistic, and cultural barriers of the host society, combined with the gendered expectations of intensive motherhood, severely constrain their agency and visibility in the public sphere.

Drawing on Arendt's and Thuma's dimensions of agency-subject visibility, the capacity to interact and communicate, freedom, and the worldly attachment of actions—the research shows that these women do not remain passive dependents. Instead, they actively reconstruct their identities within new social spaces, particularly in migrant online and offline communities. Within these settings, their cultural and social capital is revalorized and mobilized in exchange for recognition, emotional support, and, in some cases, professional reinvention—a process that, following Bourdieu, highlights how the value of capital depends on its recognition within a specific social field. These networks become informal mechanisms of integration and empowerment, compensating for the institutional vacuum in Polish migration policy.

However, this integration largely unfolds within the boundaries of the migrant community rather than within the host society itself. Limited proficiency in Polish, cultural distance, and the absence of systematic integration measures prevent migrant mothers from converting their accumulated capitals into full participation in public and economic life. Their agency thus operates in a parallel social field—productive, supportive, yet enclosed.

The findings also highlight that migration can transform family structures and gender contracts. New structural conditions, such as the rise of remote work and the financial independence of both partners, have created opportunities for renegotiating traditional domestic roles. Many skilled migrant mothers leverage these conditions to assert greater agency at home, fostering more egalitarian arrangements and encouraging more involved fatherhood. This trend reflects a Giddensian duality of structure within the private sphere: changes in the broader economic and social structure enable new practices, and those deliberate practices, in turn, begin to reshape established gender norms. However, these shifts remain fragile and contingent on specific economic circumstances.

Ultimately, the study argues that recognizing and supporting the agency of skilled migrant mothers is essential for both individual empowerment and collective social cohesion. Institutional acknowledgment of their resources—linguistic, professional, and cultural—could unlock the transformative capacity of their habitus, allowing integration to become a two-way process rather than a one-sided expectation. This echoes Giddens's view that social structures must adapt alongside agentive change. This shift also resonates with Arendt's notion of taking responsibility for our shared world: by empowering migrant mothers to act as visible, contributing public actors, Polish society would invite them to help shape a common future. Without these changes, the potential contributions of these women will remain

underutilized, and the broader vision of a truly multicultural society will continue to elude realization.

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