



# Welfare as flourishing social reproduction: Polish and Ukrainian migrant workers in a market-participation society

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/gsp](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/gsp)**Ania Plomien** 

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

**Gregory Schwartz**

University of Bristol, UK

## Abstract

The historical link between labour and welfare is increasingly considered in the transnational register, largely because labour mobilities demand a rethinking of nation-based social protection systems. Transnational labour mobilities also illuminate other dimensions of boundary-crossing, including formality–informality, citizenship–non-citizenship and production–reproduction. These additional considerations call for going beyond the problem of transnational welfare access. We argue that the prism of social reproduction enables such a rethinking of the labour–welfare relationship. In this article, we conceptualise an expanded notion of welfare as flourishing social reproduction, in contradistinction to the principle of welfare deriving primarily from paid work and labour market participation. We apply this theorisation of welfare to our qualitative case study of the experiences and interests of Polish and Ukrainian migrant workers in Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom employed in care provision, food production and housing construction sectors. In the geopolitical setting of uneven and combined Europe, embodying high levels of differentiation together with advanced transnational social protection, we explore the role of differentiation of migrants in labour markets (along work, migration and citizenship axes) and the extent to which transnational mobility facilitates the improvement of social reproduction. While the low-waged labour of Polish and Ukrainian men and women working in care, food and housing furnishes their own and local workers' social reproduction needs, we find that

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## Corresponding author:

Ania Plomien, London School of Economics and Political Science, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: [a.plomien@lse.ac.uk](mailto:a.plomien@lse.ac.uk)

migrant workers' welfare as flourishing social reproduction remains wanting, even for those with already privileged access to the current 'gold-standard' transnational social protection offered by the EUs freedoms of movement framework. Welfare remains centred on individualised paid work logic, leaving a vast range of needs unmet and work and workers excluded, bearing implications for prevalent transnational social protection efforts.

### **Keywords**

Gender, labour, Poland, social reproduction, transnational mobility, Ukraine, welfare

### **Introduction**

In the aftermath of the Great Recession and austerity policies in Europe and North America, there was lively interest in the prospects of alternatives to neoliberal policies. In response to perceived social dislocations and political upheavals created by the global spread of market liberalisation, these sentiments were expressed through agendas of international and national actors. As if echoing Karl Polanyi's (2001 [1944]) 'double movement' thesis, the International Labour Organisation Decent Work Agenda, the G20 declaration of employment-creation as a 'priority objective', the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the EU Pillar of Social Rights and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Jobs Strategy were joined by local initiatives from Occupy Wall Street to the UK Women's Budget Group's 'Plan F', and from Spain's Podemos and Greece's Syriza 'alternative economies' to the student-sparked mass protests in Chile and wider Latin America's Buen Vivir-inspired movements. Pointing to a renewed impetus of society coming to defend itself against markets, these initiatives resonate with the proponents of global social regulation, redistribution and rights (Deacon, 2004). The question prompted by these aspirations is whether they rise to the challenge of aligning the quantity and quality of welfare necessary for a *flourishing social reproduction* with the social forces involved in the creation and distribution of value. This is all the more important given reactionary responses to crises of capitalism, such as Brexit, Trumpism and various forms of authoritarianism.

Historically, successful welfare projects emerged through the central role played by organised labour and the establishment of national institutions responding to and incorporating workers' interests tethered to social citizenship (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi, 1985). The state was fundamental, but its agency was assured by the relative successes of labour in its struggle with capital over the conditions of social reproduction. Assuming a political rather than a purely social role, labour has influenced the distribution of the total share of value produced in society. Yet, commodity relations, which determine the value of labour power (expressed in terms of the cost of commodities workers need to secure their own and their families' subsistence), excluded work that took place outside market exchange. Constituting part of the 'hegemonic bloc' (Gramsci, 1971) within the state, organised labour shaped the principle of welfare determination largely through paid work, and even then, only partially, as labour market segregation underpinned by

gender, race and citizenship hierarchies perpetuated undervaluation. Social reproduction that welfare states *should* facilitate, therefore, would entail a ‘total social organisation of labour’ (Glucksmann, 1995) extending across paid and unpaid work and formal and informal relations, capable of overcoming undervaluation on the basis of gender, race and citizenship status (Collins, 2000; Elson, 1998; Federici, 2012 [1975]; Glucksmann, 2005).

Instead, the neoliberalisation of the global economy has significantly curtailed the influence of labour over welfare. By elevating markets to the zenith of economic and social policy (Bonefeld, 2017; Hay, 2004; Jessop, 1993), workers have a reduced claim to a diminishing share of the larger total value produced, as unvalued and undervalued work proliferates through new forms, including transnationally, all diluting the traditional basis of the welfare state. This presents a triple challenge for the determination of welfare insofar as its principles assume nationally bounded and secure paid work. Transnational labour mobility has become a widespread response to this challenge, accompanied by calls for transnational social protection (Deacon, 2004; Kaasch, 2019). However, given the ascendancy of social policy-as-investment (Deeming and Smyth, 2018), the informal or privatised transnational transfer of resources perpetuating inequalities (Bocconi, 2017; Plomien and Schwartz, 2020) and the conflicting (citizenship vs human rights) approaches to migrants’ social rights (Köhler, 2016), the attainment of welfare inclusive of the expanded notion of work and workers is uncertain.

The twofold question warranted by these developments is of the extent to which transnational labour mobility can actually respond to people’s social reproduction needs and, concomitantly, how adequate is the transnational social protection framework proposed to improve welfare in a transnational world. We probe this by focusing on the experiences and interests of Polish and Ukrainian migrant workers in Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom, who cross formal–informal, citizen–non-citizen, production–reproduction boundaries, and whose low-waged labour furnishes their own and local workers’ social reproduction. We proceed with a theoretical exploration of the political constitution of the (gendered) welfare–labour relationship, followed by a discussion of the major forces prompting migration from Eastern Europe, namely, the re-establishment of capitalism, Europeanisation, and the shifting of the balance of power away from organised labour. We then interrogate whether transnational migrants’ differentiated experiences and interests as workers, as migrants and as citizens facilitate the improvement of social reproduction and constitute welfare as flourishing social reproduction. We find that migrants’ welfare is centred on individualised paid work logic, leaving a vast range of needs unmet and work and workers excluded, which has implications for transnational social protection efforts.

## **Theorising the social organisation of labour and welfare**

How is the labour–welfare link politically constituted? How does the struggle between the representatives of labour, capital and the state shape the extent to which markets determine the quantity and quality of welfare? How far do labour markets secure welfare? If we understand welfare as the utility that workers derive from the goods and services that they produce and require as the basis of their social reproduction, the

existence and extension of welfare as flourishing social reproduction contradicts the interests of capital and its need for expanded self-reproduction. The conflict between labour and capital over the corresponding distribution of the total value produced in society is a political process in which the state, as a point of conjunction between the contradictions of production relations and functions aimed at resolving them, expresses the outcome of the conflicting forces (Clarke, 1991; Holloway and Picciotto, 1977). This process is one of establishing a 'hegemonic bloc' as the basis of consent to a particular social arrangement between classes, through a nexus of ideas, institutions and relations (Gramsci, 1971).

While distinct paradigms embody different intellectual approaches to welfare and labour, a central thread of many has been the critique of markets. For Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]), self-regulating markets generate misery, the breakdown of social ties and environmental devastation – the opposite of flourishing. Society's resistance emerges in the form of a protectionist 'countermovement' which, through market regulation, re-embeds the economy to serve social needs and restore stability. The result, in which a self-regulating market ceases to exist 'even in principle' (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]: 259) is achieved with an assumed universal social interest (Burawoy, 2010), not necessarily centred on organised labour (Holmwood, 2000). Accordingly, working conditions are not resolved through the market, but 'other motives than those directly involved in money incomes', and neither states nor trade unions pre-determine this process but participate depending on the 'actual organization of the management of production' (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]: 259). In contrast, the politicisation of the relationship between labour, state and capital assumes centre-stage in the welfare state scholarship, deeming the role of workers' mobilisation, coalition-building and political parties paramount (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi, 1985). It is the 'capacity to act collectively' that mandates the redistributive politics of the state by making 'inroads into the power resources on the markets' (Korpi, 1985: 39). Labour markets and wages are deemed crucial sources of welfare, but are explicitly mediated by the state. Indeed, 'of the many social institutions that are likely to be directly shaped and ordered by the welfare state, working life, employment and the labour market are perhaps the most important' (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 141).

Despite centring the role of organised labour, the principles underpinning the welfare state have constructed citizenship in exclusionary ways, especially regarding gender, race and ethnicity, and postcolonial power relations. Feminist scholars have noted the limits of mainstream critiques of the market (Fraser, 1997; Lewis, 1992; Lister, 1997; McDowell, 1991; Orloff, 1993; Pateman, 1989), because citizen-workers' claim applied to waged-labourers in formal, full-time, lifelong employment, traditionally aligned with a masculine lifecourse. The unwaged care and housework underpinning the reproduction of waged labour and directly furnishing welfare, traditionally assigned to women, neither afforded market-based economic independence nor established a citizen-carer claim on the state commensurate with that of the citizen-worker. The privileging of earning over caring, and the concomitant gender hierarchy, means that while employment can provide women with welfare rights and benefits (Fraser, 2014; Orloff, 1993), it necessitates provision to reconcile care responsibilities with workforce participation, including by state support for care and by engaging men (Himmelweit and Plomien, 2014) versus private, market-based solutions. The development of family policies in high-income countries

since the 1960s notwithstanding (Daly and Ferragina, 2018), women's inclusion in employment has been partial (England, 2010). Rather than enabling more people to fit the unequal and exclusive category of worker, the concept of 'total social organisation of labour' (Glucksmann, 1995) connects unpaid work and employment, formal and informal, unrecognised or undervalued labour and labour undertaken in different socio-economic spaces or governed by different socio-cultural relations. Provisioning as a product of organisation of labour across and between domains recasts processes deemed 'economic' or understood to have value, expanding the breadth and depth of welfare and bringing policy into proximity with flourishing social reproduction.

However, the welfare state's historical role in shaping gender, class and race hierarchies (Collins, 2000; Glenn, 1992; Williams, 1995), entanglement with colonialism and imperialism (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018; Böröcz, 2001), and the incomplete transformation of the gender division of labour (England, 2010) had been challenged by global economic transformations. Specifically, the deterioration of labour market conditions and of public provision of welfare since the 1980s have compelled greater market-based participation, neglecting the contributions of social reproduction, depleting individuals, households and communities of their resources, and inflicting new (gendered) harms (Elson, 1998; Rai et al., 2014). Above all, they have redrawn the contours of the labour-welfare relationship, wherein mitigating depletion and attendant harms by recourse to markets has precipitated an international division of socially reproductive labour, recasting social citizenship not just through gender and class, but also through processes of migration and racialisation (Ferguson and McNally, 2015; Lutz, 2017; Parreñas, 2002; Plomien and Schwartz, 2020; Williams, 2012). It is the reconfiguration of the labour-welfare-mobility nexus, and the focus on the worker-citizen-migrant, that demands an analysis of migrant workers in their relationship to the expanded conceptualisation of work, workers and welfare.

While markets have posed a barrier to flourishing social reproduction in capitalism, Eastern European state-socialism represented a radical departure from market society. The centralisation of 'socially useful labour' as the source of all value and of workers' rights meant that the labour-welfare relationship was defined by the party-state in the name of the workers, just as all value produced was commonly held. Ontologically, thus, labour and welfare were not constituted by a relationship of interdependence and struggle, as in welfare capitalism, but formed an indivisible whole. Formally, citizens enjoyed equal political, economic and social rights based on guaranteed employment. Having a job provided a means by which the party-state maintained the workplace as the core institution of social integration and political control, as much as a projection of the social and political character of a 'workers' state' (Schwartz, 2003). The fact that the allocation of work and payment and access to social benefits – from housing, childcare and summer holidays to cultural activities and household goods – were distributed through workplaces, meant that seniority, status and hierarchy determined workers' social reproduction and thus the scope of welfare (Arnot, 1988; Clarke, 1993).

Outwardly, state-socialism appeared to surpass welfare capitalism in achieving distributive justice, but the socioeconomic processes specific to it gave rise to distinct forms of inequality. For example, increasing women's employment resided in patriarchal attitudes that did not break the gendered division of labour in paid and unpaid activities

(Ashwin, 2000; Hauser et al., 1993). Farmers were excluded from workplace-based benefits and were covered by an inferior insurance system (Halamska, 1988), while those deemed crucial to the planned economy or socialist ideology, such as mining or heavy industry, received the greater share of benefits (Arnot, 1988). The contradictions of state-socialism (Ticktin, 1992) meant that it failed to attain equality, admit a democratic voice and generate enough value to facilitate a flourishing social reproduction, making it vulnerable to instability that eventually led to anti-systemic mobilisations and demise in 1989–1991 (Ekiert and Kubik, 2001; Siegelbaum and Walkowitz, 1995). However, the rise of workers' power seeking the development of market freedoms as coterminous with political and cultural freedoms, occurred when the global political economy was experiencing neoliberal transformations at full speed, disempowering workers worldwide (Harvey, 2007).

## **Europeanisation and market-capitalism in Poland and Ukraine**

Poland and Ukraine integrated into the global economy in the context of trade liberalisation, multilateral governance and fiscal deregulation, defined by production efficiency, labour-market flexibility and welfare state reform. The spectre of market participation as a determinant of labour's rewards, and of market-making as the core of economic and social policy (Hay, 2004; Nguyen, Rydstrom and Mao, 2023), have promoted labour flexibility, competitiveness, innovation and 'the insertion of national economies into the global economy in the hope of securing some net benefit from internationalization' (Jessop, 1993: 14). With this transformation, workers in the East and West have claimed a diminishing share of the total value produced. European states have implemented policies aimed at creating willing, self-responsible 'entrepreneurs of labour power' in contrast to industrial-era workers with a claim to welfare support. Embedding in the workers economic-rational responsiveness to market signals to accept 'risk akin to an entrepreneur who sees opportunities when misfortune strikes . . . securing for the free economy that very entrepreneurial vitality that market and competition constantly draw upon and consume' (Bonefeld, 2017: 94). Such policies naturalise markets and market-behaviour, decentre labour and posit markets as a source of opportunities that economic policy should motivate.

The EU has facilitated the reproduction of uneven and combined European capitalism, requiring member and candidate countries to align their domestic policies with those agreed at the EU level. 'Europeanisation' has accompanied transformations of the domestic political economy to market capitalism, profoundly affecting people's lives. Poland and Ukraine have developed institutions and practices geared towards achieving greater labour market flexibility and competitiveness. This originally brought widespread unemployment, permanent job losses and job reallocations. Following Poland's 'shock therapy', unemployment rose to 10.2% in 1998 and 19.1% in 2004, including 39.6% youth unemployment (Mrozowicki et al., 2016; Plomien, 2009). Although unemployment has been declining since the mid-2000s to EU's lowest levels, the thrust of regulations towards labour market flexibility, including part-time, fixed-term and other 'non-standard' employment, 'activated' women, older and younger people, but in



low-waged and insecure work (Mrozowicki et al., 2016; Plomien, 2009; Zbyszewska, 2016). Ukraine has not achieved comparable levels of activation, despite labour market policy reforms attempted since 2007, with insecurity and informality affecting 35–40% of the workforce (Adamczyk, 2016; Muzychenko, 2018). Ukraine's inclusion in the global division of labour as a supplier of raw materials and agricultural products (Havrylyshyn, 2017) has brought industrial restructuring and service sector growth, with low paid, precarious jobs, poor working conditions and few benefits (Williams et al., 2011).

Trade unions have not prevented these transformations and have been side-lined in representing workers or influencing policy decisions to improve welfare (Gardawski et al., 2012; Volynets, 2015). Marketisation and social investment have characterised Poland's social provision until 2015. Social protection spending as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) is comparatively low, with income support to working-age population halved between 1990 and 2009 (Adema et al., 2014), sickness, healthcare and disability expenditure declined throughout the 2000s to 5.5%, and housing and social exclusion expenditure is virtually non-existent (Eurostat, 2022). In contrast, old age and survivors' provisions have been more generous and investment in childcare services and cash benefits to families (from 2016) have alleviated aspects of poverty, but have not attained socially inclusive welfare (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2020; Plomien, 2019). Public provisioning reforms in Ukraine have been complicated by political indeterminacy, the severe economic crisis of 2010–2013 and the conflict with Russia since 2014. The 2014 EU–Ukraine Association Agreement and the conditional macro-financial assistance from the EU, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, have triggered benchmarking of policies to EU standards and structural reforms, causing major social benefit cuts and public service reduction (Adamczyk, 2016; European Commission (EC), 2015), while focusing on improving markets and reducing 'regulatory burdens' (EC, 2020: 25, 2021). Despite real wage growth in 2016–2018, low pay combined with frequent wage delays or non-payment contributed to large segments of the population living below the subsistence level (World Food Programme (WFP), 2018). Consequently, standards of living continue to vary across Europe. Eastern European incomes remain about 35% below European average (Blanchet et al., 2019), with Poland's average GDP per capita of 33,000 and Ukraine's 13,000 falling well below the European average of about 37,000 international dollars (IMF, 2020).

The consequences of labour's diminished political role in Eastern Europe are twofold. On the one hand, welfare protections have declined, which has as much to do with the reduced trade union coverage and the rise of the service sector and flexible labour contracts, as with unions having to establish new political alignments to project workers interests. On the other hand, market processes have reached deeper into workers' lives, by exerting pressure on wages and job tenures, and by commodifying more areas of life, such as aspects of education or healthcare. Individuals and households resort to private solutions to manage these overlapping pressures, including through transnational labour migration – bolstering the international division of social reproduction. While wage, labour market, welfare and care 'gaps' faced by Polish and Ukrainian workers are similar to those elsewhere in Europe, uneven and combined Europeanisation presents unequal options for addressing them locally. The transnational differentiation of the value of

labour power permits the exploitation of that difference within the freedoms of movement framework. European integration has made Polish nationals the second largest working-age group of EU movers in 2019 (over 1.7 million or 14.5%), the largest of EU workers in the United Kingdom (646,000 or 24.6%) and in Germany (607,000 or 18.6%) (EC, 2021). Simultaneously, Ukrainians in Poland constitute the largest group of labour migrants, as Polish employers declare the employment of 1,055,226 Ukrainian workers (MRiPS, 2023), while in Germany and the United Kingdom, that number is lower, at 143,545 and 38,000 respectively (Federal Statistical Office (FSO), 2022; Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2022). Given this context, we ask three questions. To what extent does transnational labour mobility advance migrant workers ability to meet their social reproduction needs? How far does the differential positioning of Polish and Ukrainian workers within the EU's economic and social policy framework matter for their experiences of work-derived welfare? How does such differentiation inform transnational social protection initiatives to improve welfare?

## Methodology

This article draws on our research on social reproduction in contemporary Europe, employing a critical feminist political economy framework to analyse interconnected processes of transnational labour mobility from Ukraine to Poland and Germany and from Poland to the United Kingdom and Germany in care provision, food production, and housing construction sectors. We chose these countries based on their connection via large labour flows and their differential embeddedness in an integrated Europe. Their shared setting is underpinned by the logic of transnationalisation, facilitated by the political and economic agendas via membership in and association with the EU, placing Ukraine in a 'peripheral', Poland a 'semi-peripheral' and Germany and the pre-Brexit United Kingdom a 'core' position. Ukrainians working in Poland rely on a simplified visa procedure, expanded since its 2006 application in agriculture to other sectors, and on seasonal work permits aligning Polish and EU regulations. This controlled migration regime oriented to labour market needs provides Ukrainian workers with several routes to documented employment, ranging from short term (under 6 months), temporary (under 3 years) and permanent residence permits, but with truncated social security entitlements (Płomien and Schwartz, 2020). Polish workers access to EU labour markets came with the freedom of movement following the 2004 enlargement. The United Kingdom opened its labour market immediately, although rights to social security were limited in the first year of employment, while Germany imposed a restrictive 7-year transitional period. Compared with Ukrainians, Poles have privileged access to social protection afforded by their citizenship in an EU member state.

Through fieldwork in Poland, Germany and the United Kingdom in 2019–2021 we interviewed 37 transnational migrant workers, one owner of a migrant work agency and one representative of a migrant community organisation. Of these, 21 are Ukrainian and 18 are Polish, 19 are men and 20 are women, 14 work in food, 13 in housing and 10 in care. We recruited interviewees through visiting worksites, personal networks and social media advertising. We conducted the interviews in Polish and Ukrainian, analysing original language transcripts, and translating relevant excerpts into English. The Polish



respondents had residence rights and employment contracts or self-employment status, while the majority of the Ukrainian respondents had work visas and employment contracts, with only a couple residing in Poland permanently. We selected care, food and housing sectors due to their importance to transnational mobility and the ways in which they intersect the production and social reproduction spheres. These sectors straddle the unpaid and paid labour, with construction being the most commodified and care the least, and they differ in their gendered character – care being feminised, food mixed, and construction masculinised forms of work. Activities in these sectors are labour-intensive, linked to subsistence and locality and underpinned by gendered cultures, which limits cost-saving and productivity-increasing options. Labour mobility, thus, emerges as crucial to provisioning care, food, and housing and helps us understand the social organisation of welfare from the perspective of migrant workers seeking better conditions to ensure their social reproduction. We explore migrant workers' interests through the historically constituted 'growing differentiation in the productive attributes of the collective labourer' (Starosta, 2016: 89) through three distinct analytical moments: worker, migrant and citizen subjectivities. Inspired by feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1987; Smith, 1987), we focus on participant perspectives on social reality to theorise how 'the social and the personal are imbricated in one another' and how 'both are historically variable' (Scott, 1992, 35), probing multiple rationalities meaningful to migrants to trace large-scale reconfigurations at the level of the everyday.

## **Migrant workers en route to improved social reproduction**

The experiences of our study participants within differentiated market, mobility and welfare settings, display compulsions in the face of local labour market deficiencies, decreased state provisioning, diminished time available to fulfil needs through household work, as well as successfully navigating transnational working and personal projects. Attempts to overcome poverty wages, lack of suitable work and insecure employment, given public, community and family support limitations are intensely social processes. Migrant workers negotiate migration infrastructure, including the laws, agencies and actors delimiting or facilitating the workers' movements (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014), the institutional nature of segmented labour markets, influenced by the state and trade unions (McGovern, 2009), as well as institutionalised racism and sexism (Acker, 2006; McDowell et al., 2009; Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2022) at the intersection of multiple, often contradictory, regimes (Lutz, 2017; Williams, 2012).

Focusing first on the problematic of work, interviewees conveyed the variety of ways in which their decisions and actions are framed by the individualised, market valuation-based and differentiated nature of employment and working conditions. Yet, while their entanglements as migrants reproduced individualisation and market-determination of labour, these were interpreted or internalised differently. Some did not perceive differentiation from local workers or other migrants, others accepted its effects as normal or associated it with professional distinctiveness, while some treated it with detachment. Indeed, the real or perceived social differentiation does not always create a sense of discord or injustice. In Kyrylo's case, differentiation is something migrants know about only secondhand:

I suspected that Ukrainians might be paid less. You know how it is – a Pole is working in *his home*, and I came here *just* to make money. Some might say that you came here to rob them of *their* jobs. I personally never heard anybody saying this, but from what I've been told, it happens. But at this job we don't have this. Everything is above board and each job comes with set pay and conditions. I work together with Poles, just like they work, and nobody ever told me I am taking their job! We have equal relations; I'm treated just as if I were a Pole. (Kyrylo, 39, UA in PL, construction)

But Kyrylo's experiences differ from those that resonate with the scholars of gender, racial and migrant differentiation in labour markets that highlight the perpetuation of lower pay jobs, poorer working conditions and few advancement opportunities (McDowell et al., 2009). Less agreeable, more physically demanding and negatively flexible working conditions and pay, are accepted, legitimising and naturalising the core mechanisms by which markets confer differentiated value on labour as a collective effort. We note this in Daria's account:

People ask what it's like. You have to wash vegetables and the water is very cold, or stand sorting and packing all day, and in the summer, in hot weather, we weed in the fields. But it's fine. I mean, we work twelve hours, on Saturdays we have a short eight-hour day, and on Sundays we are off. Poles work eight hours, and we have to stay on and finish. Some of our tasks are worse than what the Poles do. It is tough, standing twelve hours washing leeks in cold water, so I'm cold, my hands and my feet are cold. But I'm used to it, and they [managers] are used to me. Everything they ask me to do, I do. '*Daria, go there, do this, and do that*' and they know that I will do everything the best I can. (Daria, 22, UA in PL, food)

Despite articulating the difference in working conditions vis-à-vis local workers, Daria accepted this treatment and approached managers' requests with earnestness, challenging neither the disposition of the Polish agricultural workers nor their managers. For Urszula, a carehome worker in the United Kingdom, similar experiences of differentiation are more nuanced:

We have a fantastic team, but we always have shortages. We have one dementia unit and dementia residents need support, they don't walk alone . . . we also have end-of-life care. We have shortages because, honestly, I work four-and-a-half days a week, but others, English mainly, work two or three days. And this sector demands 24-hours-a-day. I am still registered with [an agency] and I keep getting calls . . . We have massive gaps. Massive! My manager knows that I'm flexible if she needs me . . . we're on WhatsApp, if there's an emergency . . . she texts if I can cover a shift . . . I have a 36-hour contract, but I work over 50, so 208–240 per month . . . She asks which unit I'd prefer, I say '*I don't care, I can work on this unit or any other*' and she says: '*We need workers like you! You know, we're very happy that you are with us*'. (Urszula, 54, PL in UK, care)

Urszula displays a 'give-and-take' attitude towards the differentiation she experiences. Doing the same job as her English co-workers, and formally entitled to same working arrangements facilitated by the EU legal framework in the pre-Brexit United Kingdom, there is no clear advantage the employer can take through pay, but the 'massive gaps' she is called on to fill, seem to be compensated by the praise from management

and her own sense of professional duty that goes beyond that of her colleagues. This acceptance of differentiation ‘through pride’ contrasts with Daria’s acceptance of differentiation, who also values recognition as a reliable employee, but does not have the same legal status as local workers.

Yet experiences are not uniform even in ostensibly beneficial circumstances, as for Agata, a Polish nurse in the United Kingdom, seemingly ‘working at a cynical distance’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2003) related to her labour market skills:

I was a paediatric nurse in Poland and I liked it. But frankly, it was unsustainable. Post-graduation we had to pay premiums, when they started new contracts in healthcare. Suddenly wages dropped, there was so little you could do with this money. I always joked that it was ‘the 1500 zlotys generation’, no matter your degree, you were getting 1500. So I had to find something else and emigrated to England. . . . Some employers here were not flexible, making scheduling difficult, but I realised that if I was really dissatisfied and told them that, in that case, I have to find another job, they would reconsider. There is a lot going for nurses here, you can be a bit of a market-player. With decent experience you can be a little fussy. And they appreciate Poles. Often, especially given Brexit, my patients ask ‘*I hope you will not go back because we have shortages*’ and I laugh that we also lack nurses in Poland. ‘*But we need you more*’. They’re so smart – they would like to keep specific occupations, those that they need, and they know that Polish nurses are family-friendly, warm, that we have good qualities, know how to work hard. We have a reputation that we can create something out of nothing. (Agata, 33, PL in UK, care)

Migrants as workers have thus diverse experiences of differentiation in the workplace, feeling unaffected or deeming it temporary, accepting labour market disadvantages or taking advantage of their position. However positively or negatively they experience differentiation, their individualised engagement with the market on its own terms reinforces the structural position of migrants as (more or less privileged) migrants, with implications for the possibilities of breaking down differences, and the consequent hierarchies, among people.

Being a migrant, thus, influences the experiences of work and labour market expectations, but the projects of transnational mobility also contribute to the importance of migration as human capital investment, where migration, our second dimension, shapes the opportunities for workers not planning to live a transnational life. As this Ukrainian worker relayed:

I’m an agronomy college student back home and I came to Germany to work on a farm, learn about methods, crops, machinery. But basically, I do whatever they ask. They only grow two crops, the rest of the stuff they sell is from wholesalers. I drive the tractor, fix things, do construction on the house. I dig, move crates, deliver and unload at the market, help on the market-stall. In the end, it’s not useful for my skills, but the pay is decent, by the hour, 7:00 until 17:00, and the boss makes sure we stick to this. When I ask if I could work longer, he says he can’t pay me more because of regulations . . . I’m young, no responsibilities, want to make money and get additional experience. It’s not ideal, but being in Germany – doesn’t matter that I am a migrant – I can use it as a kind of self-improvement, I can say ‘*I worked in Germany!*’, which will be valuable in Ukraine. (Anatolij, 20, UA in DE, food)

Here, the motivation to acquire new experiences (if not skills) of working in Western Europe with the aim of improving labour market power or starting a business in the place of origin plays a positive role.

The positive assessment works whether one returns or not. Our illustration of the role of migration in connection with the experience of work is based on Jarek's story. Jarek decided to move to England in 2008, encouraged by his neighbour, who left Poland 2 years earlier, hoping to earn enough to finish building his own family house and then return to his wife Marta and their teenage son after 3 years abroad. In England, Jarek started working in a team of self-employed builders from the same town, specialising in constructing houses from the ground up. The builders also lived together, eight men sharing a five-room rented house and periodically visiting their families in Poland for 2–3 weeks at a time. Jarek and Marta constantly discussed his return, prolonging his stay abroad 3 months at a time to earn a little extra, even once the house was built – earnings centred short-term decision-making featured in narratives of all the builders we interviewed.

My buddy's wife is in Poland and he's been carrying on like this for 13 years. He tried to move back once, he was there for six months and all his savings ran out. They also built their own house. After half a year he just couldn't cope and returned to England. It's all about wages. I don't have to worry that I won't have enough, like it was in Poland. All the time I was anxious that after paying the bills, how much will be left until the first, will it suffice? Here I don't have that feeling, I just earn enough for whatever I need, I don't deny myself anything. England is beautiful, you can travel, such an old country, we like the churches, castles, mountains – plenty of this here to enjoy. (Jarek, 52, PL in UK, construction)

Jarek's extended his stay to 5 years, after which Marta joined him in England, both sharing accommodation with the other builders for 7 months, then moving to a rented two-bedroom apartment when Marta started cleaning houses in town. Their combined incomes and lifestyle allow them to financially support their son living in Poland with a partner and two children. Supporting his son and grandchildren is important to Jarek, as the money he and Marta earn 'cannot be taken to our graves'. In fact, Jarek claims that 'the whole point of having grandchildren is to support them'.

Without a doubt Jarek's and Marta's experiences are positive, centring on wages facilitating a decent quality of life. However, their sense-making applies a time-eclipsed transnational frame of reference, assessing their current situation in England against their life in Poland 13 years ago or what they imagine it to be like today. Jarek underscores how earning 2000 pounds a month goes much further than earning 2000 zlotys (although minimum wage in Poland at the time of interview exceeded 3000 zlotys, and a builder would earn much more), and Marta chimes in that the social insurance contributions for the self-employed are higher in Poland than in the United Kingdom. She notes how social security profits demographic groups other than theirs, given recently introduced benefits for children or pensioners, finding themselves being too old and too young to avail of either. Such a positive assessment using Poland or England as a reference point is not unique (Marczak et al., 2018), despite the relatively inferior labour market outcomes of Polish migrants in the United Kingdom (Drinkwater et al., 2009). Thus, Jarek

and Marta do not give equal weight to all the factors in their life-story. Jarek works five 9-hour days during the week and 6 hours on Saturdays, amounting to 50 hours of arduous labour per week, but still states ‘if I feel like topping up my income, I get extra jobs after work’. He understands that his hard-earned money is precisely that – hard earned, and that ‘the streets are not lined with cash, to earn you really have to work hard at some kind of cost’. Marta commented that in Poland she was earning well, enough for a family of three, they also owned an apartment, then a house, and were able to holiday annually – not a minimum wage-based lifestyle. Furthermore, both Jarek and Marta found the 5 years of transnational separation, supporting two residences, emotionally and financially difficult, with the feeling of displacement long-lasting, as Marta reflected in tune with Jarek:

We’re finding it a little hard, as obviously we will never feel at home here, we will never be accepted fully as ourselves. There . . . our family is there: mother, son, the whole family, my brother. Our lifelong friends are there. We have friends here too, but they are . . . kind of acquired over five or six years. And there is our whole life-centre (Marta and Jarek)

Being a migrant delineates not only the experiences of work and labour market expectations, but the ‘migrant’ identity shapes these workers’ transnational frame of reference. It presents to them a world of individualised, differentiated, segmented and unequal labour markets, enveloped by citizenship regulations that set them apart, as natural as the market itself. Their subjectivity as migrants, impacted by the reconfiguration of mobility with a substratum of markets and productiveness, reinforced by both legal and social differentiation ultimately redefines the prospects of welfare and the parameters of its relationship to labour.

Welfare, our third theme, was important to all the participants (see also Raphael, this issue), but they did not express their social citizenship rights in terms of claims on the state or the community. For most, motivations for moving include the desire or need to save money from earned wages for housing and other life projects, which are both prohibitive in the environment of welfare retrenchment and institutional design proffering markets to workers as their only means of satisfying reproductive needs, which nonetheless cannot adequately be met. For all our Polish and Ukrainian participants, transnational mobility meant accepting substandard living conditions in temporary accommodations, on a shorter or longer term basis. This meant difficult beginnings and more frugal subsistence budgets, limiting what is considered adequate in both places of origin and destination:

We live in a converted farm office building, three to four per room, and a shared kitchen. Bathroom and laundry facilities are also shared. And we pay rent for this to the employer. It’s at lower rate than something similar on the free market, not to speak of apartments in town. (Daria)

Several, after a few years abroad and in relationships with other income-earners, managed to turn the possibility of migration as a means of attending to important life-projects necessary for long-term security into reality:

I think we've reached a point that, actually, we have achieved something, we've invested a little, because when I think about how many years we've lived here, I think that anyone could. That is, I'm not looking into someone else's wallet, but it is possible to save up for something that's yours. And that's thanks to the fact that I left. In Poland I would not have achieved this much, unless I had a mortgage for 40 years or more. I met my husband here and we're together in this, so obviously it's easier . . . (Agata)

Thus, we see how in the context of market-oriented welfare, life projects reflect a subjective narrowing of focus on self-reliance through wages and family support, and where the status of migrants, be they Poles in Germany or the pre-Brexit United Kingdom, or Ukrainians in Poland, creates limits on the demand for and ability to receive welfare. Any improvement that transnational mobility affords is one of patchy (not flourishing) social reproduction of the worker and their family. Such welfare, understood as individual responsibility earned through paid work, has a definite value and can be shared or not at the discretion of the earner.

## **Conclusion: market participation society and barriers to welfare**

We have examined how Polish and Ukrainian migrants in care, food and housing sectors meet their and their families' social reproduction needs, and the ways in which their differential positioning (as workers, migrants and citizens) within the EU's economic and social policy framework affects their work-derived welfare. Differentiation of their experiences and interests was central to our analysis of the social organisation of labour and welfare and to our respondents' perception of their own relative gains. In this form of perception – subjective in its essence because, despite observed improvements of their material condition, it is difficult to assess what alternative outcome to migration would have delivered had they pursued life in Poland or Ukraine, and because there is no appropriate metric to weigh the costs they incur – even taking an 'investment logic' view. The sacrifices of being away from family, living in smaller, shared, often crowded quarters with other migrants, working in jobs with a nominally higher wage but ones many would not have considered earlier, and devoid of many social guarantees, all notionally pursued in the short term, were seen as producing material advantages in the longer term. Equally apparent was the fact that despite a calculated pursuit of improvement, our respondents became transnational migrants because of necessities arising from the economic and social conditions of post-socialist Poland and Ukraine, in which a diminution of welfare entitlements, socio-economic insecurity and higher living costs have coexisted with the accessibility of a transnational European labour market that has offered wage advantages.

While differentiation through work or status varied (ranging from acceptance, tradeable advantage, and cynical distancing), what was uniform was the individualisation of the labour-welfare relationship, positing the problem of welfare away from solidarity and collectiveness to market rationality and competition. Overwhelmingly, the workers' experiences point towards a normalisation of individualisation and market valuation of their labour as a justifiable means of improving their material conditions. This has



implications beyond the perceptions of our participants. The focus on self-reliance and market opportunism as a determinant of worth narrows the parameters of entitlement to those in waged labour and, conversely, justifies excluding those who are not participating in paid work or markets from the spectrum of social benefits.

In these circumstances, transnational social protection deriving from Europeanisation of economic and social policy plays a role. Comparatively, Ukrainian migrant workers, as third-country nationals in the EU, do not have identical mobility rights to Polish migrants. While Poland and Germany have secured minimal labour standards for Ukrainians, these do not approximate those formally enjoyed by Polish migrants in Germany or the pre-Brexit United Kingdom. Yet, Polish migrant care, food and housing workers' position in the labour market – the main determinant of their situation – is primarily that of *migrants*, limiting the kinds of opportunities in job hierarchies and pay they themselves pursue or are offered. Given what our interviews reveal about *both* groups of workers being regarded as *migrants*, their treatment and subjective expectations are not dissimilar. They are differentiated, their labour is undervalued and their working and living conditions are inferior, they knowingly pursue their aims in conditions of relative deprivation as a form of investment against future advantages, and in both cases the basis of welfare is individualised, market-determined and competition-based, producing a downwards pressure on pay and welfare.

Furthermore, even the fuller transnational social protection offered to the Polish migrant workers pertains to their position as *workers* and is centred on criteria determined by their utility in a set of market relations and to markets generally. Thus, corroborating recent research (Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2022; Shutes and Walker, 2018), EU mobility rights – seemingly the best current transnational social protection standard – fail to level up both the subjective and objective entitlements of migrant workers to an adequate degree, where migrant workers trade on their *migrant* status, and beyond that, they are offered to workers qua *workers*, strictly in relation to paid work and on an individual basis. Their families in Poland benefit from aspects of this transnational social protection attained by embedding markets in Brussels (Caporaso and Tarrow, 2009), but these are not commensurate with the loss of migrant workers' productive contributions (Boccagni, 2017; Plomien and Schwartz, 2020), instead nourishing local societies' reproduction needs by providing products and services more affordably.

While extending existing practices of EU social protection to Ukrainian (and other third-country), workers would undoubtedly improve their position, such a policy frame necessitates 'coalitions between workers in precarious positions in a range of workplaces' (McDowell et al., 2009). At the same time, it would reinforce market-based welfare, failing to attain a flourishing social reproduction presupposed by the total social organisation of labour that encompasses equitable paid work and dignified unpaid work and livelihood (Glucksmann, 1995), and social citizenship that fulfils redistribution, recognition and representation (Fraser, 2009). A transnational social protection policy that would live up to the above framing would need to overcome the limitations of both the market participation logic underpinning the social question (Nguyen, Rydstrom and Mao, 2023) and the primacy of positing workers as economic agents availing of opportunities to join a hierarchically-divided global workforce, which reinforces transnational mobility and cements the already vicious divide between workers of different races,

ethnicities, gender and citizenship statuses (Ferguson and McNally, 2015). Developing the political initiatives mentioned at the outset of the article, including by amplifying existing efforts of organising precarious and migrant workers, would better incorporate currently marginalised groups in the *paid-worker* category. An even more encompassing sense of *work*, however, would mean that labour not only regains political hegemony over the state, but does so to transform the distribution of total value in society for universal welfare conceived as flourishing social reproduction.

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### ORCID iD

Ania Plomien  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5883-2297>

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### Author biographies

Dr Ania Plomien is an associate professor at the Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics & Political Science, where she teaches on gender, social policy and feminist economics. Her research is situated in the area of feminist political economy, particularly social reproduction, focusing on the nexus of paid and unpaid work, employment, care, and labour migration and the role of policy in shaping these processes in the context of the EU, the UK, Poland and Ukraine.

Dr Gregory Schwartz is an associate professor at the University of Bristol Business School, where he teaches sociology of work, employment relations and global political economy. He has researched the effects of the transformation of global political economy on the nature of work, the social organisation of labour and workers' subjectivities, identities and class, and the gendered political economy of labour migration and social reproduction in relation to European integration and social change in Eastern Europe.