

# Changing Gender Norms among Polish Migrants in the Nordic Countries: A Scoping Review Analysis

Dominique Keizer\*, Olga Sasunkevich\*

*The article synthesises and reviews existing research on Polish migrants in the Nordic countries with a specific focus on gender identities and gender roles. The authors argue that migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) fall between the cracks in the current research on gender equality and migration in the Nordic countries. Being the trademarks of the Nordics, the ideals of gender equality and sexual rights play an important role in the debate about migration. However, the dominant focus of the current research is non-Western racialised migrant groups. While migrants from Poland are privileged as white and European, they come from the context with less egalitarian gender norms and the weaker state policies supporting gender equality. The article aims to understand how Polish migrants navigate this difference in gender values and norms between home and host societies. The article concludes that structural factors are important for migrants' ability to learn and adopt the gender norms of the host society. In line with the translocational approach, migrants navigate between home and host societies, choosing appropriate gender roles accordingly. The social status, the degree of integration and the sense of (non)belonging also play a crucial role in migrants' openness to the norms of the host society. The article also suggests several directions for further research.*

*Keywords: Poland, Nordic countries, gender equality, sexuality, racialisation, intersectionality*

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\* Department of Cultural Sciences, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Address for correspondence: olga.sasunkevich@gu.se.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to synthesise and review existing research on Polish migrants in countries defined by the EU Commission as Nordic countries – Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland (Eurostat 2025a) – with a specific focus on the changes in gender roles in the process of transnational mobility. The article aims to answer three research questions:

- What knowledge already exists about gender roles and practices among Polish migrants in the Nordic countries?
- Which factors does the existing literature consider as the most decisive for transgression or reinforcement of gender norms in the situation of migration from Poland to the Nordic countries?
- What gaps exist in this research and how can this field be developed further?

Gender equality has become the trademark of the Nordic countries, incorporated as it is into their state identity and nation branding (Jeziarska and Towns 2018; Larsen, Moss and Skjelsbaek 2021). It has also shaped the discussion about migration. Being imagined as exceptionally progressive in terms of gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, the Nordic countries promote these values as the core of their national identity, which migrants are expected to learn and respect (Edenborg 2020; Hvenegård-Lassen and Mauer 2012; Keskinen 2012). Research on femo- (Farris 2017) and homonationalism (Puar 2007) in the Nordic context (Akin and Svendsen 2017; Kehl 2024; Sager and Mulinari 2018) reveals how various political actors instrumentalise gender equality and sexual rights for constructing racialised and orientalist discourses about non-Western migrants. Another strand of research explores how various groups of non-Western migrants construct their gendered and sexualised identities in the context of such politics of othering (e.g. Akin 2017; Farahani 2017).

Migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including Poland, fall between the cracks in this research. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the EU enlargement to CEE in 2004 and 2007 caused a wave of concern about mass migration from the former socialist countries in Europe (Zelano, Bucken-Knapp, Hinnfors and Spehar 2014). The Nordic countries have become one of the most desirable destinations for labour migration from CEE in the 2000s. According to estimations, 600,000 people from the CEE region, mainly from Lithuania and Poland, went as labour migrants to the Nordic countries between 2004 and 2011 and many of them settled in the host countries (Eldring and Friberg 2013: 12). Given Central and East Europeans' 'proximity to whiteness' (Zorko 2024), their status as EU citizens (in the case of nationals from the Baltic States, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) and their high level of involvement in the labour market in the Nordic countries (Eldring and Friberg 2013), the public and political concern about this migration has gradually dissipated, being replaced by a discourse about the 'refugee crisis' caused by mass migration from the Middle East and African countries in the 2010s.

Nonetheless, migration from Central and Eastern Europe, the region that is still ambivalently positioned as 'European internal Other' – being 'Europe' and 'non-Europe' at the same time (Dzenovska 2016) – represents an interesting case in terms of understanding how migration experience makes people reimagine and reconstruct their gendered identities and daily life practices. On the one hand, the gender regimes in postsocialist CEE still carry the legacy of the socialist gender equality project, with women's mass mobilisation into the labour force and state paternalism at its core (Gal and Kligman 2000). On the other hand, scholars have also observed the re-traditionalisation of gender relations in CEE after the fall of the Iron Curtain (Steinbach and Maslauskaitė 2022). Moreover, since the 2010s,

countries like Hungary and Poland have become the cradles of anti-gender politics and related policies propagating the heterosexual nuclear family and complementary gender roles as the national norm (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Kováts 2020). With this background, the article argues, moving from CEE to Nordic countries can provoke a shift in gender norms and practices among migrants.

Polish migrants, as the largest group of CEE migrants in the Nordic countries (Eurostat 2025b; OECD 2024) are selected as the case study for the understanding of cross-regional mobility between Central and Eastern Europe and the Nordic countries. The theoretical basis of the article is the translocational approach to migration (Anthias 2012). The methodology follows the scoping review approach. Scoping reviews map the available evidence and identify knowledge gaps, as will be observed in this study. This approach also allows themes to be explored that are yet to be researched (Munn, Peters, Stern, Tufanaru, McArthur and Aromataris 2018: 2). The article is structured as follows. In the first section, the chosen theoretical approach to gender and migration is discussed. The methodology and the research stages are then presented, before the findings provide answers to the posed research questions and suggest directions for further research.

### **Gender and migration: The translocational approach**

The article builds on Floya Anthias' (2012) translocational frame in migration research. This frame problematises 'the idea of people emanating from discrete national or indeed ethnic origins... as all people, whatever the legal/national borders, inhabit transnational spaces in the modern world' (Anthias 2012: 103). The translocational approach allows us to consider the migrants from Poland as representatives of a broader migration wave from CEE, the region with a particular history, including that of gender relations. The translocational frame does not deny the importance of the national but it attends to the multi-layeredness of migrant experiences recognising 'interconnectedness of different identities and hierarchical structures relating to gender, ethnicity, "race", class, and other social divisions at local, national, transnational and global levels' (Anthias 2012: 102). In the translocational approach, 'space' is understood as both physical and social and mobility as a movement between physical places but also across social hierarchies and identities.

While the translocational approach is intersectional, gender is its central category (Anthias 2012). Traditionally, research on migration assigned a passive role to women. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was common to use the phrase 'migrants and their families', meaning migrating men with their wives and children – and 'men were the prototype migrants' (Anthias 2012: 105; see also Amelina and Lutz 2018: 13). The narrative of women's presence was mainly attributed to studies on family (Herzberg 2015: 176–177). However, by the 1980s, this pattern had already begun shifting when migration scholarship started recognising women as autonomous migrating subjects and analysing women's experience of migration within a system of gender relations (Morokvašić 1984; Nawyn 2010). Since then, gender has become an established analytical lens in migration research (Kofman and Raghuram 2022; Morokvašić 1984), covering a range of topics from the feminisation of transnational migration and the gendered division of productive and reproductive migration labour (e.g. Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Parreñas 2001, 2005) to the influence of migration experiences on intimate relations, sexuality and renegotiations of feminine and masculine norms (e.g. Christou 2016; Dávalos 2020; Luibhéid 2025; Parreñas 2005; Wojnicka, Priori, Mellström and Henriksson 2025).

One important question streaming through the gender and migration literature focuses on how 'gender relations shift as a consequence of migration and settlement' and how gendered practices are maintained or renegotiated in the process of migration (Nawyn 2010: 751). Understanding gender

power relations as fluid and negotiable under the influence of changing socio-political circumstances challenges *both* the assumption that migrants stick to their gendered preferences even upon arrival in the new destination *and* the expectation that they can just learn anew gender norms in the new cultural circumstances. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas' (2001, 2005) pioneering research on the subject formation of Filipino migrants shows that the constitution of gender among transnational migrants happens 'in-between' multiple physical and social spaces – at the intersection of national cultures, public and private expectations on normative gender behaviour and individual agency. Transnational migration can simultaneously transgress and reinforce gender relations and gender norms (Morokvašić 2014; Parreñas 2005).

The gender analysis of migration examines 'how gendered institutions and gender relations are reconstituted and transformed following migration through interactions of micro- and macro-level processes' (Nawyn 2010: 750). According to Amelina and Lutz (2018: 20), the gender analysis of migration includes three dimensions: 1) an analysis of feminised and masculinised occupational fields; 2) the distribution of domestic and care responsibilities among migrants; and 3) the changes in welfare regimes in host and home countries. In line with the results of our research, we unite these three dimensions into one theme – namely, structural factors influencing the difference in migration experience along the gender line. In our review we focus on how gendered structures influence gender norms, roles and identities among migrants. The Nordic gender value system acts in this research as a point of departure to understand how gender norms are negotiated depending on the migrants' experience of structural opportunities and emancipation. This is relevant since gendered sectoral and hierarchical segregation often divides people or groups into different ranks within a system, where higher ranks experience more privilege. As an example, when looking strictly from a gender perspective, women tend to be over-represented in certain sectors – including the public sector – and under-represented in male-dominated occupations such as construction or finance. In addition to under-representation, women are also often employed in non-managerial roles with lower salaries (Napierała and Wojtyńska 2017). As a result of this segregation, qualification patterns influence the gender composition among migrant inflows and how their integration with Nordic gender values are impacted on by occupational opportunities (2017). The conducted literature review is meant to analyse the existing literature on the underlying reasoning behind how migration and the discourse on gender roles are continuously shifting.

Gender as social differentiation 'involving (...) the organisation and reproduction of sexual difference' (Anthias 2012: 105) is more than the binary analysis of female and male experiences of migration. Along with other scholars of gender and migration (Anthias 2012; Amelina and Lutz 2018; Kofman and Raghuram 2022; Morokvašić 2014; Nawyn 2010; Parreñas 2001), we strive for the intersectional analysis of gendered migration which is attentive to the overlap between gender, ethnicity/race, class and sexuality. Here we attend to another prominent dimension of the translocational approach to migration – the intersectional analysis of belonging beyond the overemphasis on ethnic identities which migration studies used to be known for (Anthias 2012). Anthias (2012: 104) argues that the analytical primacy of ethnic identity in understanding migrants' experiences overshadows 'the crosscutting influence of other dimensions of their location, such as how ethnic categorisations, which produce the idea of ethnic groups, crosscut with gender, generation, class, political values, experience, opportunities and very importantly agency'. The differentiated social positions that migrants occupy in host and home countries impact on the ways in which national and ethnic boundaries of (non)belonging are produced and maintained. The intersectional translocational analysis reveals how migrants' embeddedness in multiple social milieus (home country or local community of origin, family, workspace, transnational migratory networks) with different and, at times, conflicting normative systems and expectations

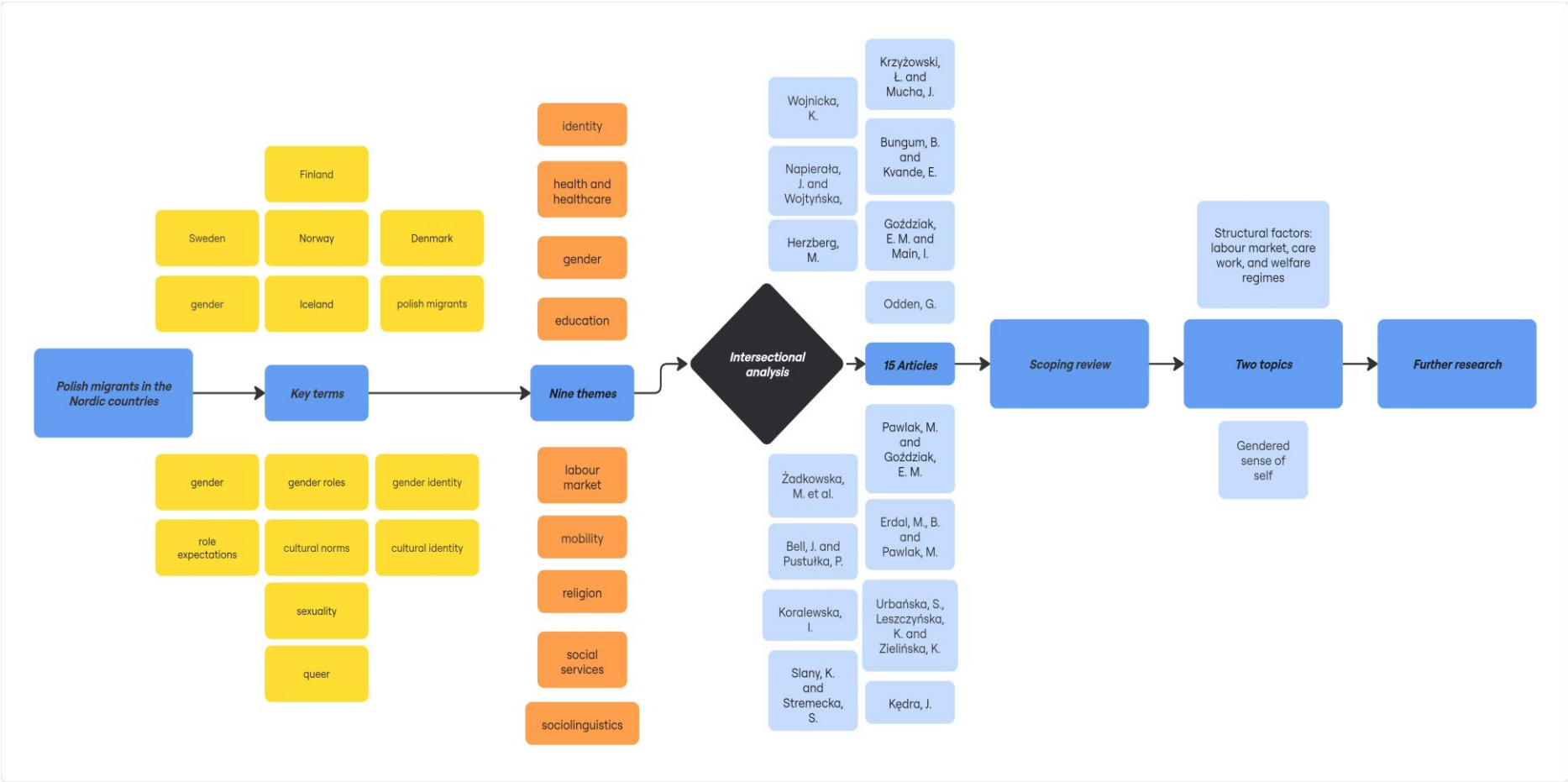
contributes to a complex sense of gendered, ethnicised and classed self (Parreñas 2001, 2005). The translocational framework challenges the assimilation approach which expects migrants to passively adopt the normative order of the host country (Gordon 1964); however, it also undermines the culturalist stance suggesting that migrants from culturally different contexts can never approximate the norms of the new society. The translocational approach emphasises the agency of migrants in adapting, reinterpreting and reinscribing the norms in home and host societies depending on their position in multiple social hierarchies rather than simply on where they originate from (Anthias 2012; Morokvašić 2014).

## **Methodology**

This study employs a scoping review approach, understood as a systematic and structured form of literature review. Given the purpose of this study – to map the available knowledge and identify research gaps – the scoping review provides a framework to constructively examine existing research. Following Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) definition, a scoping review is undertaken for four main reasons: a) to examine the broader nature of research activity; b) to determine whether a full systematic review might be of value; c) to summarise research findings; d) to draw conclusions from existing literature and identify possible research gaps (Arksey and O'Malley 2005: 21). For this particular study on gender and migration among Polish migrants in the Nordic countries, the scoping review was used to categorise the available evidence, with the emphasis on areas not reviewed comprehensively before. This approach allowed us to identify recurring themes and trends across studies.

The scoping review for this article was conducted in the following steps. Initially, a preliminary article search was conducted in two languages – Polish and English. The databases used for this process included Springer Open, Political Geography (Elsevier), Google Scholar, Centre of Migration Research and the library database of Gothenburg University. Database searches were performed in both languages. The key terms employed were: 'gender', 'religion', 'Polish migrants', 'Sweden', 'Norway', "Denmark", 'Finland', 'Iceland', 'gender roles', 'gender identity', 'role expectations', 'cultural norms', 'cultural identity', 'sexuality' and 'queer'. The data search according to the employed key terms has shown that most research tends to adopt a binary perspective. Sexuality or queerness as concepts are rarely used as an analytical lens, meaning that most studies focus on how context and circumstances impact on the understanding of gender roles rather than how sexuality would shift the discourse on Polish migration in the Nordic countries. The choice of religion as a key term is due to statistics that indicate that Poland is one of the most religious countries in CEE, with the highest percentage of religiosity (Evans and Baronavski 2018). Given the religious influence, particularly the role of the church, it is likely to impact on Polish migrants' experience of sexuality and family dynamics. Through combining the employed key terms, databases revealed relevant articles that relate to the purpose of this study – namely, to understand the changing gender norms among Polish migrants in the Nordic countries. The scope includes both single-country articles and comparative articles in which a Nordic country is one of the national cases. To understand the more recent experiences of Polish migrants, the articles published between 2015 and 2022 are chosen for the analysis. Moreover, this study attends to experiences of migrants who reside in the Nordic countries long term.

**Figure 1. The scoping review proces**



In the initial search, 198 articles were found. They were then screened through abstracts and conclusions. The screening allowed researchers to exclude from the database articles which did not explicitly address questions of gender identity and gender norms and to preliminarily divide all articles into several research topics. To triangulate this division, a word analysis using the *ATLAS.ti* software was conducted. As a result, all articles were divided into 9 general topics – education, gender, health and healthcare, identity, labour market, mobility, religion, social services and sociolinguistics. Then one of the co-authors (Dominique Keizer) went through articles in each topic and identified their main research focus. A visual mind map with the main ideas and concepts was created to analyse the connections between articles. Through this, 15 articles explicitly addressing the intersection between gender and other categories of differentiation were selected for closer analysis. The theoretically informed analysis of selected articles is structured around 2 main topics: 1) the structural conditions enabling or preventing the transgression of gender norms in the context of migration; and 2) the role of migrants' sense of self and (non)belonging in reconsidering the existing gender norms. Figure 1 illustrates the analytical process undertaken to conduct the scoping review.

## Findings

In this section we present the findings from the scoping review based on the close reading of 15 selected articles. In accordance with the theoretical approach to gender and migration presented above, we divide this section into 3 parts. The first part contains the analysis of how structural factors – the gender segregation of the labour market, the division between productive labour and care work and the difference in welfare regimes between Poland and the Nordic countries – influence the process of reimagining gender norms and gender roles among Polish migrants in the Nordic countries. The second part covers how migrants' sense of (non)belonging to home and host societies is constructed along gender lines. In the third part we attend to the gaps in the current research and suggest themes for further inquiry.

### *Structural challenges and gender norms: labour market, care work and welfare regimes*

Labour mobility for improved working conditions or higher incomes is a prominent reason why Polish migrants move to the Nordic countries. Gender and the experience of employment play an important role in how and whether gender roles are being questioned. Magdalena Herzberg conducted several interviews with Polish women living in Norway. Her research shows that migration leads to several changes in how one sees oneself and one's relationships with others. Due to migrating, the lifestyle tends to change, leading women to question how society works and also the different standards of femininity (Herzberg 2015). In particular, facing more emancipatory standards can lead to redefining culturally appropriate gender norms when migrant women start reshaping their needs and ways of thinking on gender roles. Yet potentially emancipatory changes depend on structural opportunities (Herzberg 2015). For instance, in a context of better career opportunities, Polish women may question traditional expectations of domesticity and motherhood by looking for growth within professional spheres. Also, exposure to a more gender-equal society encourages the advocacy for shared domestic responsibilities. The same applies to men who, with the Nordic policies such as inclusive parental leave, become differently engaged in fatherhood and have the opportunity to question traditional roles of fathers in child-rearing (Bungum and Kvande 2022). At the same time, if career opportunities for

women are hindered due to the gendered sectoral segregation, the male privilege tends to be maintained, creating a barrier to approximate the gender norms of the Nordic countries.

The labour market is an important resource for integration and exposure to different gender norms in the new society. However, Polish migrants who experience limited structural opportunities, such as precarious working arrangements in the host country, are hindered from successful integration. Elżbieta M. Goździak and Izabella Main have researched the working arrangements of Polish female nurses in Norway. Their research suggests that, even though the nurses enjoyed more financial prosperity than in their country of origin, their precarious working environment included short-term assignments without the potential for upward mobility. The precarity arises from policies that channel the hiring of foreign-born nurses through private agencies without an oversight by the Norwegian Health Directorate. These private recruitment agencies operate without adherence to the World Health Organization's ethical recruitment guidelines (Goździak and Main 2022: 248). Short-term assignments combined with the perceived or real reluctance of Norwegian nurses to form social connections with foreign-born nurses – like sharing casual conversations or organising trips – obstruct Polish nurses from feeling integrated into the team. As a result, the space to acquire knowledge about gender roles and patterns in the Norwegian society also shrinks (2022).

In the Nordic countries, the state policies encourage the inclusion of men in parental and domestic duties. As a result, countries like Norway ranked 2nd on the Global Gender Gap report (GGGR). In comparison, Poland ranked 51st on the GGGR (Żadkowska, Kosakowska-Berezecka, Szlendak and Besta 2022). European Union reports and existing research suggest that increased male participation in domestic and childcare responsibilities benefits women's career development and positively impacts on men's health. Żadkowska *et al.* (2022) offer a comparative analysis of values and practices among Polish couples living in Norway and those living in Poland. The authors' starting point is that gender relations in Poland are less egalitarian than in Norway due to the difference in state-driven family policies, something which the authors consider as a crucial factor in the establishment of egalitarian norms in European societies. Norway has a well-developed family policy promoting a family-friendly working life and equal parenting. There is a high rate of working women in Norway combined with men's substantial engagement in domestic work. The situation is different in Poland. Polish women also actively participate in the labour market due to the legacy of communist gender-equality policies. However, Polish men 'only assist women in childcare and household duties rather than take full responsibility in these areas' (Żadkowska *et al.* 2022: 405). The article analyses to which extent the relocation from Poland – a country with a lower level of gender equality – to Norway – a country with more egalitarian values and policies – incites Polish couples to rethink their domestic responsibilities and adopt more egalitarian practices. Importantly, people with higher education dominate in this research. The study concludes that Polish couples in Norway appreciate Norwegian welfare and accept the more egalitarian gender norms facilitated by Norwegian family policies. The study also convincingly shows that inclusion and acceptance by Norwegian society are essential conditions for Polish migrants to adopt the egalitarian practices and advocate them further within the Polish community (Żadkowska *et al.* 2022: 416).

Thus, structural factors play an important role in adopting the gender norms and values of the host society. Even in a situation of limited integration, Polish migrants appreciate the Nordic welfare system – including the availability of subsidised kindergartens, shared parental leave and other social benefits. This creates the possibility to start questioning the gender role structure from their country of origin, at least to some extent (Pawlak and Goździak 2020: 86). Yet favourable structural conditions are not sufficient to explain why some migrants are more prone to changing their gender values and practices

than others. Research on Polish migrants proves that integration – or the lack of it – and a sense of (non) belonging related to it is another important factor that can affect whether or not Polish migrants adopt the egalitarian values propagated in the Nordic countries. As Justyna Bell and Paula Pustułka (2017) suggest, Polish men rely on traditional gender roles and hypermasculinity to compensate for their lower social status as a foreigner and a sense of nonbelonging related to this. As Bell and Pustułka conclude, by strengthening the masculinity traits associated with the home country, Polish men choose to reproduce familiar contexts, in this case what is understood as Polishness.

### *(Non)belonging and gender norms*

As mentioned above, integration is an important precondition for discussing socially structured gender roles. Without the sense of belonging, migrants tend to revert to culturally familiar patterns from the country of origin to reclaim their agency. In the case of Polish migrants, religion, in particular the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), plays an important role in how migrants maintain their sense of belonging to Polishness, including gender patterns. The RCC in Poland has prominently formed itself as being against gender equality, questioning it as foreign ideology and, instead, promoting traditional gender values (Urbańska, Leszczyńska and Zielińska 2023: 1327). As a result, the RCC in Poland remains homogenous and conservative. This is the case, in part, due to the country's lack of ethnic and religious diversity, which leads to a limited exposure to alternative viewpoints and cultural influences. In their research, Urbańska *et al.* (2023) provide insights into how men's feeling of exclusion in countries of migration tends to be compensated with increased power in the sacred places. Authors (*ibidem*: 1329–1330) employ the concept of 'compensatory patriarchy' referring to it as: '(...) an impulse to somehow balance the sense of migrants' deprivation of power in the secular world by exercising such power in the religious sphere'. The priest power in the transnational context is a form of bargaining with egalitarian elements in countries such as Sweden. The priest, also known as the 'brother guardian', portrays this contradictory paradigm. This specific priesthood is mainly practiced outside Poland by migrant Polish priests who are inclined to shift from the authoritarian and closed RCC towards a more inclusive and egalitarian community space. For Polish migrants, the church serves as a space for both religious expression and community-building, compensating, especially for men, for a sense of exclusion and nonbelonging in the post-migration environment (Urbańska *et al.* 2023: 1338). On the one hand, the 'brother guardian' form of priesthood reproduces inclusive relationships, particularly among male migrants who are integrated in religious power structures. However, it simultaneously maintains the hierarchical *status quo*. The 'brother guardian' embodies hybrid masculinity combining emotional openness and orientation towards community with the conservative understanding of gender roles. While women are actively participating in church activities, their access to leadership roles, such as the priesthood, remains contested (*ibidem*: 1338). This research is a relevant contribution to the understanding of how patriarchal power can also adapt to a more egalitarian context.

At the same time, migrants' exposure to more egalitarian gender norms may lead to a decrease in their religiosity due to several factors, such as integration in a more secular society, questioning the institution of the RCC or seeking another kind of spirituality that transcends the traditional understanding of religion. Some Polish migrants also consciously disassociate from the patriarchal culture that the RCC represents for them. The research by Koralewska (2016) is particularly interesting here. It explores the relationship between the process of religious emancipation and the perception of gender roles by Polish women who emigrated to Iceland (Koralewska 2016: 23). The findings show that migration to Iceland encourages Polish women to realise that it is possible to bypass the institution of

the RCC in the experience of their own religiosity. They also start reflecting on the roles of women and men in society. Rejecting religious institutions during the migratory process plays an important role in how gender roles are negotiated. The construction of the world and value systems are then not institutionally established but based on individually negotiated spirituality. Just like religiosity, the perception of social roles is a subject of reflection and negotiation. The respondents in Koralewska's study negotiate their roles as women and the roles of religious people and thus facilitate the process of cultural adaptation, the necessity of which was, in turn, the impulse to start negotiations (Koralewska 2016: 31).

The research also suggests that migrants' agency in renegotiating gender norms and rethinking gender expectations established in their home country is tied to their social status. In the case of religious practices, as the number of studies suggests (Bell and Pustułka 2017; Erdal and Pawlak 2018), migrants who experience a decrease in their social status due to migration tend to reproduce familiar contexts from their country of origin in a bid to regain agency. This can increase religiosity among migrants, who consider the church as a space of community-building and inclusion (Koralewska 2016). In that case, as Mălina Voicu (2019) has demonstrated, many individuals often 'do gender' in order to 'do religion'. Traditional gender roles become a way of internalising religious belonging. Within Catholicism this might be visible through underlining the importance of maternal caregiving (Voicu 2019). The 'brother guardian' creates the sense of emotional availability and a form of family outside the home country (Urbańska *et al.* 2023). This experience remains attractive also for women who, in spite of the hierarchical and patriarchal forms of power in the church, may return to familiar institutionalised religiosity due to structural exclusion (Koralewska 2016; Voicu 2019). The tension between the Catholic-influenced traditional roles and the Nordic gender-equal norms has led to welfare debates in topics such as integration or childcare practices (Voicu 2019). The report by PRIO Oslo, *Trust across Borders: A Review of the Literature on Trust, Migration and Child Welfare Services*, by Korzeniewska *et al.* (2019) shows how trust is a key factor in how migrant families decide to interact with the authorities and child welfare services. The beforementioned sense of nonbelonging quite often stems from power imbalances between migrant families and institutions. Mistrust deepens when families feel judged or not heard, leading Polish families to reorient themselves to religious traditions that offer understanding. This cycle reinforces conventional gender roles which continue to impede integration (Korzeniewska *et al.* 2019).

However, in line with the translocational approach, migrants often form transnational belongings – they may simultaneously maintain connections with multiple locations and contexts, choosing appropriate gender roles accordingly (Anthias 2012; Parreñas 2001, 2005). In the process of adjusting to the host country, migrants negotiate their understanding of gender identity between the familiar home-country context and the unfamiliar host-country context (Erdal and Pawlak 2018). Research by Gunhild Odden (2016) suggests that Polish women tend to negotiate 3 social roles, namely as migrants, mothers and employees. As parents in the Nordic context, Polish women are exposed to a more egalitarian understanding of parenthood established in the Nordic countries. At the same time, migrant women often take more responsibility for maintaining the family's cultural connection to the home country through supervising the linguistic development of their children and maintaining contacts with family back in Poland (Odden 2016). Joanna Kędra's (2021) research shows that the feeling of obligation to family communication and support stems from the cultural idea of the '*Matka Polka*' (Mother Pole). This concept portrays a self-sacrificing woman who prioritises the family and the house, embodying Polishness even in challenging circumstances (Kędra 2021). '*Matka Polka*' in migration – the Migrant Mother – '(...) brings together the traditional characteristic of a Polish woman – resourcefulness, caring,

dedication (...) – with entrepreneurship, bravery, and ingeniousness abroad’ (Slany and Strzemecka 2015: 170).

Besides parenthood, Polish women remain integrated in the gendered structure of the home society through their responsibility for elderly parents who remained in Poland. The intergenerational care of daughters for parents is characteristic of the Polish family contract (Krzyżowski and Mucha 2014: 33–34), therefore Polish women are expected to make additional efforts to guarantee the financial and social security of their elderly parents. Their financial remittances compensate for the lack of direct help in the household. The male members of the family who do not migrate rarely take up the obligations performed by women. In a situation where a daughter works abroad, it is instead another woman – such as a daughter-in-law – who provides the necessary personal care to ageing relatives. According to the same research, female Polish migrants support their parents financially more often than do their male counterparts. Yet greater financial responsibility for the extended family at home does not give women more power; rather, this transnational family constellation strengthens traditional gender roles (Krzyżowski and Mucha 2014: 28), as migration research in other contexts also shows (Parreñas 2005).

### *Further research*

In line with the translocational approach, current research on Polish migrants in the Nordic countries focuses on the complexity of positionalities of migrants, leading to a gendered difference in their experience of adapting to the new social context – including new gender patterns. While this research is intersectional, it mostly highlights the hierarchies along the lines of nationality, gender and social status omitting aspects of sexuality and gender identity. The binary understanding of gender as a social division between men and women dominates this research field. Therefore, further research about Polish and, more broadly, CEE migrants in the Nordic countries needs to include sexuality and gender identities as an important category of analysis, given the increased level of politically motivated homo- and transphobia in the region related to the anti-gender mobilisation of the 2010s. As research about Polish queer migrants in London (Mole 2024) suggests, LGBTQI+ people from Poland move to countries like the UK in pursuit of what they imagine as ‘a greater freedom to perform their sexuality in line with their own desires’. Since the Nordic countries have long promoted themselves as particularly tolerant in terms of sexual rights, it would be interesting to research whether this makes them a popular destination for queer migration from CEE countries and to what extent the idealised image of the Nordic countries is attainable through the lived experiences of CEE migrants (Dima and Dumitriu 2023). Sexuality as an analytical category may also shed different light on the process of constructing belonging. In the context where, in particular, Polishness is linked to heteronormativity and traditional gender roles, the ways of maintaining connection with the home nation for queer migrants may differ from those on which heterosexual migrants rely.

Another growing field of research on CEE migration to Western and Northern Europe is that concerning racialisation and whiteness (Krivonos 2023; Lapiņa and Vertelytė 2020; Loftsdóttir 2017; Parutis 2011). While the role of gender in reproducing whiteness among CEE migrants is less pronounced, there exist some important studies – such as Lapina’s (2020) autoethnographic research on the sexualised perception of East European women in Denmark or Krivonos and Diatlova’s (2020) article on the construction of whiteness by Russian-speaking women in Finland. A study by Wojnicka (2023) covers the intersection between masculinity and whiteness. According to Wojnicka’s study, Polish migrant men in Sweden benefit from the privilege associated with their whiteness and Europeaness, which allows them to uphold traditional, patriarchal forms of masculinity (Wojnicka

2023). Their masculine status remains intact because they are not racialised in the same way as non-white, non-European migrants (Wojnicka 2023: 166). At the same time, their whiteness as East Europeans is ambivalent and their status in relation to local men is lower within the racialised hierarchies of Western or Nordic European societies. This is foremost manifested through the difficulties which these men encounter in creating intimate relations in the new country. Further research could investigate, among other things, how the experience of the racialisation of CEE migrants varies along gender lines.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore what strategies CEE migrants use to approximate whiteness and what role narratives of gender equality and sexual rights play in this process. For example, Krivonos and Diatlova (2020) explore how Russian-speaking women in Finland 'redo' their femininity and sexuality in order to pass as white when they discover that East European women in the Nordic countries are perceived as excessively feminine and sexualised and, consequently, 'not emancipated enough and hence not quite white' (Krivonos and Diatlova: 116). In turn, Wojnicka (2020: 54) argues that the debate about masculinity and migration in Western Europe is based on 'the unspoken assumption that white, European, Christian/non-religious men are more progressive than Muslim, non-white men'. However, given the rise of anti-gender sentiments and state homophobia in CEE countries (Graff 2010; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Hanley 2017), this assumption needs to be scrutinised. Previous research on Polish migrant men suggests that they are often more racist and homophobic than migrant women (see, e.g. Gawlewicz 2016, cited in Wojnicka 2020), although such attitudes prevail among older-generation migrants (Wojnicka 2020). Simultaneously, the appeal to gender equality is an important strategy for Polish migrant men who wish to distinguish themselves from 'Muslims', as studies in the German context show (Wojnicka and Nowicka 2022). By depicting Muslim men as those who 'do not accept equality of women and men, and treat women in a disrespectful way' (Wojnicka and Nowicka 2022: 241), Polish migrant men draw a civilisation line between themselves and non-European others, (re)claiming their Europeaness and whiteness.

Finally, it is also little known what political and cultural remittances Polish migrants contribute to their home country. Scholars of migration define remittances as 'the act of transferring political, [social and cultural] principles, vocabulary and practices between two or more places, which migrants and their descendants share a connection with' (Krawatzek and Muller-Funk 2020: 1004). An important line of inquiry would be to study whether Polish and other CEE migrants communicate new gender values and norms back home through their social networks or upon their remigration. Given the fact that Poland itself is increasingly becoming the receiving destination for migrants from non-EU Eastern European countries (mainly, Belarus and Ukraine) (Andrejuk 2018; Homel 2022), the Polish case is instrumental for studies of the transnational circulation of gender norms and values within and beyond CEE. The migration from Belarus and Ukraine to Poland is significantly feminised (Homel 2022). This trend has been intensified since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Switzer 2025). Research suggests that Ukrainian women in Poland experience economic marginalisation emerging at the intersection of age, ethnicity, gender and migration status (Andrejuk 2018). As in the case of Lapina's (2020) and Krivonos' and Diatlova's (2020) research about the perception of East European women in the Nordic countries, Ukrainian women in Poland are also often sexualised (Andrejuk 2018). However, despite the cultural proximity between Ukraine and Poland, Ukrainian women perceive their migration experience to Poland as emancipatory because they encounter less sexism in the Polish labour market (Andrejuk 2018: 36). At the same time, this emancipation is 'not quite' complete (Kaminska 2025) since many Ukrainian women, especially those who came to Poland due to forcible displacement in 2022, find

themselves in the context of significantly worsened sexual and reproductive rights in comparison to their home country (Switzer 2025).

## Conclusion

This scoping review analysis intended to answer the following research questions: a) What knowledge already exists about gender identities and gender roles among Polish migrants in the Nordic countries?; b) Which factors does the existing literature consider as the most decisive for the transgression or reinforcement of gender norms in the situation of migration from Poland to the Nordic countries?; c) What gaps are identified in the existing research and how can this field be developed further?

Starting with the first research question, we conclude that the research on the Polish migrants in the Nordic countries is attentive to the issues of gender identity and gender norms. However, the binary (women and men) and heteronormative understanding of gender identities and gender practices prevail in existing studies. Research on gender norms covers the large range of topics identified in the scoping review such as education, gender, health and healthcare, identity, labour market, mobility, religion, social services and sociolinguistics. The existing research is intersectional, with the focus on gender, nationality, class and professional belonging.

In line with the prevalent theoretical approach to gender and migration, the reviewed literature acknowledges the importance of analysing macro- and micro-level processes for the understanding of how gendered relations and norms are transgressed or reinforced in the process of transnational migration (Morokvašić 2014; Nawyn 2010). The existing research shows that structural factors play a significant role in whether and how migrants start questioning gender regimes and roles inherited from their home countries. The gender segregation of the labour market – when migrant women are employed in lower-paid sectors with limited leadership opportunities and when men dominate higher-paying fields like construction, thus upholding their breadwinner status – reinforces traditional gender norms. Nordic welfare policies, such as shared parental leave and subsidised childcare, may encourage more egalitarian domestic roles and enhance women's career opportunities. However, limited labour options for migrants segregating them in precarious and short-term jobs is a perceptible hindrance for meaningful engagement with the gender norms of the host society.

On the micro level, the sense of belonging (or the lack of it) is another important factor influencing Polish migrants' openness to rethinking gender identities and gender roles. Migrants with a greater feeling of nonbelonging in the host society tend to resort to familiar gender patterns which often imply a more traditional division of gender roles. Simultaneously, the existing research confirms what the translocational frame in migration studies argues for – migrants tend to belong to multiple locations geographically, culturally and socially. This means that migration and adjustment to a new context do not automatically entail migration into a new gendered order. Rather, as this review shows, migrants navigate between gender structures in the host society and the society back home.

The scoping review analysis has distinguished directions for further research. As we mentioned before, most studies focus on binary gender roles and heterosexual families without attending to sexuality and gender identity. Further research could focus on the experiences of LGBTQI+ Polish migrants in the Nordic countries. Another direction is related to the racialisation and whiteness of CEE migrants in the Nordic countries and how these processes intersect with gender and class. Related to this is research on how CEE migrants use the Nordic ideas of gender equality and sexual rights to (re)claim their whiteness *vis-à-vis* non-European migrants, whom the anti-migration discourse often portrays as homophobic and patriarchal. Finally, more research on the social and cultural remittances

of CEE migrants is required. Currently, little is known about whether migration into more egalitarian gender orders facilitates the process of communicating values of gender equality and sexual rights back home. Since Poland emerges as the host destination for migrants from other, non-EU, Eastern European countries, it becomes an important case study for research on migration and the transnational circulation of gender norms.

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Dominique Keizer developed and implemented the methodology of this study; she also wrote the first draft of research results. Olga Sasunkevich provided the contextualisation of this research by writing an introduction and a theoretical section. She revised the research results to ensure the coherence between theory and analysis in the article and developed the section Further research.

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No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **ORCID IDs**

Dominique Keizer  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0644-0572>

Olga Sasunkevich  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1426-6830>

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