

# Free Movement of Workers and Right of Establishment in Light of the Barriers and Challenges of the Italian Labour Market: a Case Study of Highly Skilled Polish Women Professionals

KAMILA KOWALSKA<sup>1</sup>

ORCID: [0000-0003-3477-9633](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3477-9633)

University of Gdansk, Department of Political Science

## Abstract

Labour migration from Poland to Italy initiated in the second half of the 1980s, being characterised by employment in the shadow economy and secondary segment of the labour market. In the following decades, significant changes in the nature of these flows have been registered as a result of the Iron Curtain's fall, visa requirements abolition, Italian migration policy and finally with Poland's accession to the EU. The aim of this article is to analyse to what extent the implementation of the free movement of workers and the right of establishment have equalised Poles' employment opportunities in Italy, preventing their professional discrimination and 'brain waste'. The research questions posed are the following: 1. have Poles improved their professional situation in Italy since 2004?; 2. what principal barriers and difficulties they faced; 3. and what strategies have they used to bypass the obstacles and build their careers? The discussion part of the paper is based on a case study of two mixed method research projects on highly skilled Polish female workers and women entrepreneurs in Italy. The choice of this target was driven by the predominance of women among Polish immigrants (feminisation) and the assumption that workers with high human capital and qualifications could potentially benefit most from the new adopted regulations. The results obtained lead to the conclusion that the structural and systemic barriers of the Italian labour market together with economic crisis and new emigration directions for Poles after 2004 have caused the myth of the attractiveness of the Italian labour market to collapse.

**Keywords:** Polish post-accession migration, free movement of workers, Polish immigration in Italy, female migration, highly skilled workers

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<sup>1</sup> e-mail: [kamila.kowalska@ug.edu.pl](mailto:kamila.kowalska@ug.edu.pl)

## Introduction

The labour market in Italy is categorised as a Mediterranean regime of welfare state (Bonoli 1997; Gentilucci 2020). Cicia argues that economies operating under such conditions are selective towards women and young people, with a high share of the informal sector and numerous precarious forms of employment (2015). For Esping-Andersen, the so-called Latin Rim model, which together with Italy includes Spain, Portugal and Greece, is characterised by the fact that the constitutional obligations in force are not encased in a legal, institutional or social infrastructure and that there are considerable differences in social security systems at work, and relatively underdeveloped family policies (Karpowicz 2006). This is confirmed by Save the Children Italia Report, which indicates that in the 2021/2022 school year, only less than 30 percent of children under the age of two attended private and public nurseries (2023). That resulted in significantly lower female labour market participation compared to the European Union: 56.5 percent against an average of 70.2 percent in all the Member States (Eurostat 2023). In the case of migrant women, the employment rate in Italy was even lower – 47,5 percent, while the rate of unemployment was 15,2 percent (Ministero del Lavoro e delle politiche sociali 2023).

Generally, when analysing the employment situation of foreigners in Italy, four important issues become apparent. First of all, Italy is perceived as one of the least promising destinations among OECD countries in terms of the availability of positions for highly skilled migrants when compared to Italian workers (OECD 2017). Secondly, as already mentioned, the ineffective Italian public care and social system results in an increased demand for workers in the private care services sector, and Italians themselves are incapable to bridge the gap (Kowalska, Pelliccia 2012). As a consequence the need for foreign workers, especially women, seems obvious (Ambrosini 2005). The third issue is that acceptance of lower salaries for migrant workers is broadly accepted in Italian society (Dell'Aringa et. al 2012). And finally, the widespread employment of immigrants in the shadow economy results in their failure to be included within the social security system (Melchionda 2016).

The above described unfavourable conditions for migrant workers in the Italian labour market, both systemic and structural, create an effective obstacle in their professional inclusion. On the other hand, there are factors facilitating labour migration to the country: high demand for migrants in selected economy sectors (i.e. agriculture, tourism, services, domestic and care), ease of finding employment for middle-aged and older migrants and often higher wages than in their country of origin, in case of so-called low skilled jobs within the second segment of the labour market.

In this context, Polish migrants, EU citizens, mainly women who account for 75 percent of all Poles in Italy (Istat 2023), are also active, pursuing their careers, while facing problems and dilemmas similar to those of other foreigners. Labour migration from Poland to Italy has been present in the country starting in the second half of 1980s.

The official information on the number of Poles appeared in the Italian source data for the first time in 1989 – indicating the residence of a little more than 10,000 persons (Istat 1990), only a few of whom had the status of migrant workers. The early 1990s saw significant changes in the nature of these flows and their intensification, firstly as a result of the Iron Curtain’s fall, and secondly, when visa requirements for Polish citizens were abolished in April 1991. It was then that migrants from Poland appeared in Italy on a larger scale, mainly as undocumented and circular workers; their stay in the country was based on a different title than in the case of the emigrants from earlier years and they were subject to different entry rules, allowing them to return to Poland frequently (Kowalska 2022). Thanks to the 1995 and 1998 government’s abolition acts, in 2000 a significant increase in the number of Polish nationals was recorded – up to 30 500 (Golemo et al. 2006). Thus, the Italian registers at this point included migrant workers from Poland who were already in the country: mainly women working undocumented in Italian households, usually as cleaners, child and elderly carers (Małek 2013). The regularisation effect from a year earlier was evident again in 2003, when the number of Poles officially residing in Italy increased to 66,000 (Pittau, Ricci, 2006). In the following years it continued to rise constantly, up to the maximum of 109,000 in 2010 (Kowalska et al. 2016), even if Poland’s accession to the European Union has significantly changed the directions of Polish emigration. Post-2004 mobility has created new preferences for destination countries, focusing on those with more attractive conditions of living and more employment opportunities, including for highly skilled workers. The countries which were perceived as attractive destinations before, such as Italy and Germany for example, have given way to new ones: Great Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands or Scandinavians. However, Italy has still remained important for a large group of Poles – 74,000 in 2023 (Istat 2023). As for the profile of Polish migrants, two principal factors became apparent: feminisation and the predominance of people of a working age. In the post-accession period, migrating Poles were also characterised by a higher level of education, both in relation to Italians and to citizens of other EU countries (Kowalska 2022). The source data emphasises that the main reason for Polish citizens to emigrate is work (GUS 2018), which also finds its confirmation among those choosing the Italian direction. A survey commissioned by the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Rome and the Polish Consulate General in Milan, conducted in 2015, revealed that for more than 55 percent of respondents (72.6 percent of men), the main reason for coming to Italy was to seek employment (Kowalska et al. 2016).

The aim of this article is to answer the question to what extent the introduction of the freedom of movement for workers and the right of establishment with respect to Polish citizens in Italy has equalised their opportunities in the Italian labour market and prevented both professional discrimination as well as the so-called ‘brain waste’, caused by structural and systemic difficulties and barriers of this labour market. Particular attention will be paid to highly skilled Polish female workers, whose situation

is discussed here based on the examples of two case studies. The choice of this target group – highly skilled women – was driven by the specificity of the Polish immigration in Italy, i.e. the predominance of women and the assumption that, due to their high qualifications, they could potentially benefit most from the new adopted regulations.

The empirical part of the paper presents two research analyses: the first one regarding employment of highly skilled Polish women in Italy, that was conducted by the article's author in the period of 2009–2019, and the second one – co-authored by the same, carried out in 2023, that concerns Polish women entrepreneurs in Italy. These are mixed method research studies, examining among others the following issues: if respondents have managed to improve their professional situation in Italy since Poland's accession to the EU; what principal barriers and difficulties they have faced; and what strategies they have used to build their careers in the reality of the Italian labour market.

The uniqueness of the two case studies presented in this paper is based on the fact that the post-accession employment of Polish female workers in Italy has been analysed so far from the perspective of the secondary segment of the labour market. Rosińska (2005, 2008, 2014) described the position of women working in live-in care in Naples; Małek (2010, 2011, 2012) and Kloc-Nowak (2018) have conducted similar studies in Rome and Bologna respectively. On the other hand, there is little literature on highly skilled migrant women pursuing careers in Italy. Even less is known in this respect about the Polish female workers. The findings of the quantitative and qualitative research studies presented in this article allow us to answer the question about the most important problems experienced by Polish female professionals employed in the primary segment of the labour market in Italy and operating businesses after 2004, as well as the strategies they undertake to pursue their careers. The article thus fills an existing gap in the subject literature, providing the author's contribution to the research and analyses on the migration and employment of highly skilled women, with particular attention to Polish post-accession female workers in Italy.

The structure of the article is divided in the following sections: introduction, the second part that gives notions on the free movement of workers and right of establishment in the European Union, the third – that discusses the general context of migrants' inclusion in the Italian labour market, the fourth one that deals with employment of Polish workers in Italy in the period of 2004–2024, the fifth – which describes theoretical and methodological design, the sixth – that is a case study on highly skilled Polish female professionals and finally – the conclusions.

## Free movement of workers and right of establishment in the European Union

Poland's accession to the European Union and the subsequent implementation of the freedom of movement and right of establishment for Polish workers constituted a strong basis for possible changes in their employment status in Italy (i.e. new legal and public employment opportunities, easier recruitment procedures, simple and clear rules for setting up a business). This does not mean, however, that the real changes have actually taken place, given structural conditions and numerous systemic barriers of the Italian labour market.

EU-wide discussions on the labour mobility phenomenon have become an important political and social topic in the last two decades. Linking of welfare state issues with migration has also influenced the emergence of one of the biggest political crises in the EU after 2004: in fact, it became the basis for Brexit on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2020, which clearly demonstrated that free movement of workers had both supporters and opponents (Raczyński 2017).

However, the free movement of workers in the EU represents one of the four freedoms that make up the single market of the European Union. Under the current legal system, it applies not only to workers and their family members, but also to EU citizens who have already left the labour force as employees or the self-employed together with their family members, to students and their family members and, in some cases, to unemployed persons and their family members. One of the main objectives of this freedom is to abolish discrimination on the basis of nationality against workers from the Member States (as well as workers from the European Economic Area and Switzerland), both with regard to the remuneration as well as other working conditions (Art. 45(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – TFEU). Moreover, it does not only apply to employment, as it regulates the recognition of professional qualifications too, as well as the acquisition of rights to pensions and health benefits.

Within the current legal order, in addition to being anchored in EU primary law (Title IV TFEU), the free movement of workers is also regulated in secondary law: in Directives 2004/38/EC and 2005/36/EC, in Regulations No 883/2004 and No 492/2011, as well as in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (Art. 45) and in the case law of the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU). According to the above legislation, Member States' workers enjoy the following fundamental rights: the right to apply for real employment opportunities in the EU and the right to move within the territories of the Member States for that purpose; the right to remain in a Member State in order to work there, in accordance with the laws, regulations and administrative provisions on the employment of workers in that State; and the right to remain on the territory of a Member State after having ceased to be employed there, under the conditions laid down in the Regulations (Kielc 2008).

At the start of 2009, the Committee on Legal Affairs of the European Parliament presented the opinion on the application of Directive 2004/38/EC (EC 2010), highlighting the incompatibility of parts of the legislation of most signatory countries with the letter and spirit of the document, resulting in violations of the free movement of workers. It also pointed out that the national administrative practice of EU countries often and significantly hinders Member States' citizens from enforcing their due rights – only in seven of the then 27 Member States (Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Spain, Luxembourg, Malta and Portugal), the transposition of the Directive was satisfactory. Italy was not among the countries that would meet EU requirements. This was confirmed by the 2009 research study on tertiary-educated women from Poland employed in the Italian labour market – it clearly indicated a low percentage of diploma recognition and a significant underutilisation of their professional and educational potential (Kowalska, Pelliccia 2012).

As for the right of establishment, it is considered pivotal for business development and mobility of professionals in the European Union. The aim of this freedom consists in the elimination of discrimination on the grounds of nationality for self-employed EU citizens operating in different Member States, together with the adoption of measures that facilitate their setting up of businesses compared to the rules applied to non EU migrants. As stated in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Art.49): "(...) restrictions on the freedom of establishment of nationals of a Member State in the territory of another Member State shall be prohibited. Such prohibition shall also apply to restrictions on the setting-up of agencies, branches or subsidiaries by nationals of any Member State established in the territory of any Member State. Freedom of establishment shall include the right to take up and pursue activities as self-employed persons and to set up and manage undertakings, in particular companies or firms within the meaning of the second paragraph of Article 54, under the conditions laid down for its own nationals by the law of the country where such establishment is effected (...).

Going beyond the EU freedoms perspective, it is not without significance for the general popularisation of the issue of running a business by people on the move, that this activity makes it possible to create a positive message around the phenomenon of migration, which is often the subject of various controversies (Brzozowski 2019b). In Italy, due to the specific labour market and cultural conditions regarding the role and significance of women in society, female migrants face and struggle with various difficulties. In the case of entrepreneurial migrant women, what needs to be underlined, their stories often contradict the common social constructs.

## General context of migrants' employment in the Italian labour market

The Italian labour market is considered unfavourable for both employed and self-employed foreign workers, when compared to other European Union countries. In the case of third-country nationals, this is mainly due to the regulatory specificity of the employment procedure that is considered complicated and, as reported by the Italian organization of industry employers *Confindustria*, for many years it has been the cause of the demand for these workers in Italian industry not being transferred to their availability (Coccia, Pittau 2016). The European Union citizens also face various obstacles in this regard, just to mention the example of difficulties with implementation of the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications, which leads to their discrimination and impossibility to make use of the human and cultural capital they possess (Airinforma 2019). Italian National Statistical Office *Istat* confirms that a significant problem in the employment of migrants in Italy is the 'brain waste'. In 2014, when the country had officially emerged from the crisis and economic indicators recorded the first positive signs, around 30 percent of foreigners worked under-qualified (against 11.5 percent of Italians). In the case of immigrants with a university degree, more than half worked without using their competences (with 14.6 percent of Italians respectively). Even greater differences were evident in the statistics for women, with 15.1 percent of migrant women and 3.8 percent of Italian women failing to use their professional potential. This situation is a clear confirmation of the Italian labour market segmentation, with five times as many foreigners as Italians doing unskilled work. As many as 25.4 percent of immigrants turned out to be workers in unskilled employment despite holding a university degree; those with dual citizenship, including Italian, accounted for 6 percent and Italians for 0.2 percent (Istat 2015). In a survey carried out by the Italian National Statistical Office, among the reasons for under-qualified employment according to the respondents themselves, 36 percent indicated 'not being Italian', while for 22 percent of naturalised migrants the decisive factor was 'not being Italian by birth'. Among the two other main reasons for the inferior labour market situation of foreigners in Italy were poor knowledge of the Italian language – 34 percent, and the lack of recognition of a diploma obtained abroad – 22 percent (Idos 2018).

The above systemic problems are further deepened by the structural ones: Dell'Aringa (2012) indicated a shadow economy and regional differences in terms of the offer, quality and conditions of employment as main factors affecting the Italian labour market negatively. This is reflected in Eurostat data, according to which in 2023, female employment rate in the south of Italy was 39 percent, against 56,5 percent in the whole country. On the other hand, lack of effective welfare state solutions leads to a proliferation of demand for care services in the private sector, generating necessity for migrant work, mainly for females. Women with migration

experience, often irrespective of their human capital, find employment easily in the secondary segment and in ethnic niches (care and domestic services), enhancing the phenomenon of workforce segmentation in the Italian economy.

Deeper analysis of migrants' participation in the Italian labour market clearly shows the trend of female-dominated migration playing a crucial role for several decades. Persistent high demand for workers in Italian households – mainly in elderly and child care, but also cleaning and general housekeeping (Kowalska, Pelliccia 2012), as already mentioned, is a result of the relatively poor Italian social system which does not function properly, with the family model that is no longer able to meet their own care needs (Saraceno 2002). Małek also points in this context to an important status factor, i.e. employing a foreign woman as a housekeeper is perceived by Italians as a distinguishing feature of a higher socio-economic status (2017). It is well considered in the subject literature that migrant women workers face a double disadvantage in the host country, as migrants and women: structural and economic, connected to the maintenance of the family and in parallel to the migration process and its dangers (Kindler 2008). This is also confirmed in the context of migrant women employed in the first segment of the labour market (González Enríquez, Triandafyllidou 2016). In the latter case, it is also due to employers' preferences (choosing men as more flexible for business trips and night shifts), their racial and ethnic biases and lack of trust given previous negative experience (Bolzani et al. 2021). A significant barrier to the labour market's inclusiveness for females with migration experience is represented in Italy by the gender gap. The Gender Equality Index report for 2023, analysing the equality situation in the Member States, placed Italy on the very last position among EU countries in the labour market area (EIGE 2023). Considering women's employment opportunities in the country, it's necessary to assume that it is the issue largely linked to cultural and social conditions, too. The traditional role of women, above all as mothers and caregivers, remains still a widespread social construct. Such expectations are addressed as well to foreign women who are in relationships with representatives of the dominant culture.

The economic stagnation that has been observed in Italy for most of the last two decades (with 2007–2014, as a period of important consequences of global economic crisis and the period of the 2020–2022 covid pandemic), put additional pressure on the already difficult situation of migrants (males and females) working in the Italian labour market. Between 2008 and 2012, a total of 460,000 people lost their jobs in Italy (Ferrucci, Galossi 2013). It should be noted that employment conditions worsened in this period much more for immigrants than for autochthonous workers: the number of foreigners unemployed increased by 138 percent, against 50.8 percent of Italians respectively. The unemployment rate rose by 3.6 percentage points for Italians, by 6.1 percentage points for EU workers and by 5.1 percentage points for non-EU migrants. Yet another manifestation of the recession was a significant increase in the wage gap between foreigners and workers with Italian citizenship: 4 percent in 2009



and 10.5 percent in 2012 (Ferrucci, Galossi 2013). In the OECD's 2018 employment report, Italy was identified, despite the country's official emergence from recession in early 2014, as having a low degree of labour market security (Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione 2015).

Coupled with the existing opinions among researchers that immigrant labour is seen somewhat by the Italian legislature as a threat to the native workforce (Mafek 2017), it should be noted that, nevertheless, in 2023 there were 2,374,471 foreigners employed in Italy out of a total of 5,030,716 registered in the country. The employment rate of immigrant women was 41.7 percent in the same year, half a percentage point lower than that of Italian women – 42.3 percent. Overall, immigrants recorded higher rates of labour force participation (68.8 percent against 65.2 percent) and employment (60.6 percent against 60.1 percent) compared to Italian workers. At the same time, more foreigners than Italians were unemployed – 12 percent against 7.6 percent. The effects of joblessness were felt more strongly by immigrant women than Italian women, with 54.7 percent of foreign women and 48.6 percent of Italian women respectively among the unemployed. Most migrant workers were employed in services (64.2 percent), followed by industry (29.3 percent) and agriculture (6.5 percent). 30 percent of foreigners were engaged in unskilled occupations, 32 percent were labourers and craftsmen, 30 percent were clerks and 8 percent were skilled personnel. One third of all were underqualified – 33.1 percent (Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2023)

## **Employment of Polish workers in Italy in the period 2004–2024**

Poland's accession to the EU has triggered an increase in Polish workers' interest to take up legal employment in Italy. Despite the lack of a full opening of the labour market, due to the Italian government decision to maintain the transition period until July 2006, signing an employment contract starting from May 2004 became easier in the formal sense. An analysis of the available data shows that, in 2004, some 40,000 Poles started new formal employment: nearly 30,000 with open-ended contracts and 10,000 – with temporary work (Kowalska-Angelelli 2007). According to the data of the Italian institution INAIL (National Institute for Accidents Insurance), in the first group almost half (13,789) worked in a sector without a specific definition in the statistics. Given the general division of INAIL's formal archives into well-defined professional categories within the three basic sectors: agriculture, industry and services, it must be presumed that these were workers employed in Italian households (care and housekeeping services), also due to the fact that the biggest number of Polish workers (mainly women) were employed in this sector in 2004. In second place was agriculture with 13,673 workers and in third – services with 9,164 new

contracts. The latter was dominated by accommodation and catering (over 3,000), followed by trade (over 1,900), construction (about 1,050) and real estate brokerage (over 1,000). Italian industry accounted for a much smaller share of Polish workers (1,667), primarily in the food (541), metal (244), textile (163) and mechanical (114) industries, which was caused by a lower percentage of Polish male immigrants, traditionally taking up industrial jobs.

Shortly after Poland's accession to the EU, the proportion of Polish workers in the Italian health service (8.3 percent) was also significant (Kowalska-Angelelli 2007). These were mainly women working as nurses: in 2004, considering new contracts, Polish nurses ranked third after Romanian and Peruvian (Mellina et al. 2006).

Despite the formally applied transitional arrangements in the two post-accession years', the Italian annual entry quotas set for the 'new' EU workers in certain branches were by far higher than expected. In 2005, a part of the 75,500 places guaranteed for citizens from recently joined Member States remained vacant and the same repeated in 2006, when the quotas were increased up to 170,000. As a consequence, in the second half of 2006, the Italian labour market was opened for all the 'new' EU citizens, including Poles. However, due to the highly developed shadow economy in the country, a number of Polish workers struggled to achieve legal jobs. A survey conducted in 2005 in Rome among a sample of male migrants from Poland showed that 40.9 percent of respondents worked without contracts at that time. Many of them, so as to improve their professional situation, considered starting to run their own businesses (Gąszowska et al. 2006).

Italy's decision in July 2006 to grant Polish workers full freedom of movement and the consequent change in their legal employment situation and status opened up new opportunities. Poles, identified before 2004 mainly with professional activities such as domestic helpers and caregivers of the elderly (females) and in construction and agriculture (males), were increasingly employed in hotels, catering, trade and offices (Kowalska-Angelelli 2007). Unfortunately, the full opening of the Italian labour market coincided with the first signs of the economic crisis in Europe and in the world. The financial collapse in the Member States at the end of 2007 had far-reaching effects on the Italian economy. The factor of stunted economic growth is obviously reflected in the reduced attractiveness of the labour market for immigrants (Ferrucci, Galossi 2013). It has also had visible repercussions on the employment of Poles in Italy. The scale of the recession in the case of Polish workers was highlighted by an increase in their number receiving unemployment benefits – by 234.8 percent – from 1,144 to 3,830 in the period 2008 – 2014 (Centro Studi e Ricerche Idos 2016).

Despite the difficult economic situation and its negative effects on the condition of migrants, the search for work remained the main reason for foreigners moving to Italy in times of crisis. In 2014, it concerned 57 percent of arrivals: there was no change in this regard between 2008 and 2014 (Istat 2014). In the same year, the employment rate among Poles aged 15–64 was 61.2 percent, and was higher both

in relation to foreigners as a whole (58.5 percent) and Italians (55.4 percent). An even greater difference became apparent in the case of the female employment rate: 55.4 percent for Polish women, 50.2 percent for all foreigners and 46.4 percent for Italian women. This confirms the trend during the first post-accession decade of the gainful nature of Polish immigration in Italy, despite the existing difficulties in the labour market. In the period 2004–2014, there had been a reversal in the proportion of Poles employed in the industrial and agricultural sectors. The former employed 22.4 percent of Polish citizens in 2014, while the latter employed 3.3 percent. It can be assumed that the increased share of Polish workers in industry and the reduced share in agriculture were emerging new post-accession trends. The service sector continued to record the highest number of Poles – 74.2 percent. It was dominated by elderly care – 37.8 percent, followed by construction – 9.2 percent, and hospitality and accommodation services – 8.8 percent (Kowalska et al. 2016).

Available data for 2017 showed a continuation of the previous tendency. The dominance of the service sector was confirmed (73.4 percent), with industry remaining firmly behind (19 percent) and agriculture in third place (7.6 percent). The increase of 4.3 percentage points in employment in agriculture compared to 2014 can be explained by a more frequent registration of contracts in this sector and the move away from the previously commonly practised ‘grey zone’ work. However, the most significant change was the decrease in the share of Poles working in Italian households, which fell by 7.9 percentage points over the three years.

Statistics on employed persons show a decrease of Polish workers in Italy of about 20 percent between 2008 and 2017. While in 2008, 61,713 people were registered, in 2017 – 49,435. Highly skilled workers accounted for 12.4 percent and 28.3 percent performed unskilled jobs (Centro Studi e Ricerche Idos 2016).

Data on the employment market for foreigners refer mainly to long-term and settlement immigration. Nevertheless, in the case of Italy, the share of seasonal migration, oriented towards work in tourism and agriculture, is also significant. However, OECD statistics show both a decrease between 2010 and 2016 in the volume of new settlement migration to Italy (from 445,300 to 212,100) and in that of temporary migration related to seasonal work: from 41,500 to 3,500 (OECD, 2018). The same trend has been noted in the Polish community in Italy, which has continued to lower from 2017 when there were 97,000 Poles registered in the country, dropping to 74,387 in 2023 (Istat 2023).

The opening of the Italian labour market to Polish citizens at a difficult economic moment has certainly been linked to their failure to take full advantage of the freedom of movement of workers in the EU. This was combined with unfavourable conditions of the Italian labour market, unchanged migration patterns, but also with regulations that make it difficult to recognise qualifications and as a consequence that systemically impose the status of a low-skilled worker to migrants seeking employment in Italy, including EU citizens. However, the analysis carried out in this section

clearly shows that, despite weak economic conditions, Poles have managed, to some extent, to change the nature of their work in Italy for the better. This is evidenced, for example, by the reversal of the proportion of employment in agriculture and industry and the lower percentage of employment in domestic care, but does not at the same time mean an improvement in the quality or inclusiveness of work, access to existing labour rights, an easier career path, etc.

It's important to consider that when referring to the contemporary picture of Poles in Italy, dating back to the early 1990s, it's a classic example of a community initiated by women. Female dominance was marked in statistics before Poland's accession to the European Union, too. Eurostat data shows that between 1998 and 2004, the percentage of Polish women increased from 64 to 74 percent. Italian *Istat* confirmed the trend of feminisation of Polish immigration also in the post-accession era. The percentage of Polish women was then consistently above 70 percent, which means that the share of men has never reached 30 percent during the period 2004–2024. This is an important advantage in females' presence, justified by both the characteristics of Polish family migration to Italy (a significant number of mixed marriages between Polish women and Italians), as well as by the segmentation of the labour market and the demand for migrant female workers in the domestic sector (Kowalska 2022).

The above situation explains the aforementioned studies on the employment of Polish female workers in Italy taking, so far, the perspective of the secondary segment of the labour market. However, from the point of view of the inclusion of Poles in the EU freedom of movement for workers, it can be assumed that the greatest changes in the quality of employment may have taken place in the primary segment professions. The case studies presented in this article show whether and to what extent there has been an improvement in the labour market situation for highly skilled women from Poland.

## Theoretical and methodological design

Professional activities of migrants are embedded in a complex and multidimensional context of political, administrative-legal, social and cultural conditions. In the case of women on the move, it is necessary to consider global socio-economic conditions and socio-cultural constructs that determine their agency in a host countries' labour markets. In the first context, female migrants' decision to engage in a professional activity or set up a business can be seen as an expression of (social, economic) emancipation and empowerment in their environment, that leads to increasing resources enabling social participation, gaining influence and control over their own lives (Andrejuk, 2015). Moreover, it is considered as a strategy to independence and self-realization (Morokvasic, 1991; Apitzsch and Kontos, 2003; Carter et al., 2015;

Vershinina et al., 2019). In the second case, it might be perceived as a form of questioning certain cultural constructs (e.g. taking responsibility for the family's financial situation – the so-called 'feminisation of responsibility') and going beyond social roles and norms or finally redefining one's own identity.

The case study that represents the example of Polish female post-accession migrants' professional careers in Italy is based on selected findings of two research projects. The first one regards the employment's situation of highly skilled Polish women and was conducted by the author of the paper in the period 2009–2019. The second one, co-authored by the same, was carried out in 2023 and concerns Polish women entrepreneurs. For the purpose of this article, the OECD definition of highly skilled workers was adopted, according to which persons with a tertiary level of education, including technical or vocational, that may have taken less than a bachelor's degree are also included (Chaloff 2009). Respondents taking part in the research met these conditions.

The first research analysed is the longitudinal study, whose objective was to show the changes in the professional situation of highly skilled Polish women over a decade after Poland's accession to the EU, in a context where the free movement of workers has been already well established (2009–2019). The project aimed to discuss whether the implementation of one of the most important European Union freedoms towards Polish female workers in Italy has really prevented the underutilisation of their skills as well as discrimination in the labour market, while the structural and systemic barriers continued to persist and what strategies have been taken to overcome existing obstacles and difficulties. The methodology applied was the following: first, between February and July 2009, 75 in-depth interviews were carried out using a semi-structured 60–90 minutes interview (coded and transcribed). The eligibility criteria included: having at least a secondary education and active employment in Italy. A non-random snowball method was used as a technique for selecting respondents. It involved recruiting participants through those who had already participated in the study or had heard about it (e.g. when they were contacted as potential respondents, but did not meet the requirements).

The female participants in the project were 26–72 years old: seven in ten were aged 26–45, one in five 46–55 and one in ten was over 56 years old. They were residents in Rome and the Province of Rome. More than a quarter of respondents held citizenship of the host country and almost 7 in 10 had an Italian husband. The average length of stay in Italy was 13 years at the time of the research. Such a long time may have meant a very good knowledge of Italian context, but did not always translate into an equally long experience in the labour market (Italian cultural model provides, for example, longer breaks for maternity and child-caring by women). From the point of view of issues relevant for employment, the vast majority of research participants (eight in ten) have completed a tertiary education, while all of them have passed the *baccalaureate* exam. All of them declared performing skilled jobs in Poland before

arriving in Italy. During the 2009 survey, less than half of the respondents were working in line with their qualifications (Kowalska 2022).

On the basis of a secondary analysis of the 2009's results, a survey questionnaire (PAPI) as well as instructions for semi-structured individual interviews (IDI) were prepared for the second phase of the longitudinal research that was carried out in 2016–2019. A survey research (open and closed questions) with 38 out of the previous 75 female respondents who participated in the 2009' study was carried out (difficulties in reaching more interviewees due to e.g. changing their contact details, leaving Italy, etc.). Later, as the next stage, individual in-depth interviews with ten of the respondents were conducted. Given the presented research was rooted in the prior project carried out in the past, it was capable of showing career paths of highly skilled Polish women in Italy from 2009 to 2019.

The second study analysed was carried out among Polish female entrepreneurs and its objectives, among others, were to explain the reasons and motivations for their interest in starting businesses in Italy as well as investigate their development strategies for a professional fulfilment. The research, conducted in 2023 by the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Rome together with the Emigration Museum in Gdynia, consisted of two phases: the first one carried out with the use of the desk research method and the second one that involved empirical tools: computer-assisted web interviews-CAWI (quantitative) and individual in-depth interviews-IDI) (qualitative).

The target group was defined and contacted on the basis of a database provided to the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Rome by the Italian Chamber of Commerce, and taking into account the Embassy's mailing list of the Polish community in Italy. The survey took place from April 21<sup>st</sup> until May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023 and involved 187 female respondents. For 51 of them, the business activity was an additional, rather than the main source of income, so they did not meet one of the basic criteria for participation in the research and did not complete the questionnaire (business as a core activity); in other cases (42) surveys were significantly incomplete, so they were removed from the dataset. Finally, the analysis of the questionnaire outputs was carried out on a sample of 94 respondents. The qualitative study was carried out in the form of telephone interviews (one-on-one format with 15 Polish businesswomen). The scenario for the individual in-depth interviews was divided in the following study areas: emigration history, social networks, perception of Italian labour market, specificity of business conducted, policy recommendations and future plans. They lasted 45 to 65 minutes, were recorded, transcribed and coded for structured analysis of the obtained data. Among the eligibility criteria for IDI respondents, emphasis was placed on: age, length of migration, form of business, length of time in the market and territorial distribution of the companies.

Polish female entrepreneurs interviewed represented a variety of age groups from 21 to 74 and the majority obtained higher educational qualifications. Half of them had a master's degree, and almost one in five – a bachelor's or engineering degree.

Secondary education was declared by one in four respondents. They represented the dominant family model – 7 in 10 were married or in a stable relationship, the same share declared to have children – usually one or two. The partners of the respondents were generally Italian – almost 9 in 10 indications, which is important information from the point of view of their positioning in the social and cultural context of the host country.

Migration studies are generally subject to significant methodological limitations. They also occur in the methodologies of the two presented research projects, affecting the way the findings are interpreted. In the case of quantitative research, the selection of respondents was not based on random sampling but a purposive sampling. In addition, the research was carried out on small samples and therefore, these surveys are not representative. Similarly, qualitative research, by its very nature, offers limited scope for making inferences about the entire studied population. Though the projects' results should not be directly extrapolated to the entire population of highly skilled and entrepreneurial Polish women in Italy.

## **Highly skilled Polish female workers in Italy: research findings & discussion**

The Italian labour market is particularly challenging for female migrants due to its structural, cultural and social conditions. Using the example of Polish highly skilled women, the case study analyses whether the introduction of free movement of workers and right of establishment has changed their professional situation in Italy or existing barriers and difficulties have proved determinant. The initial part of this section will discuss the findings of the longitudinal study on highly skilled Polish women carried out by the paper's author, whereas the final section will present selected results from the research on Polish female entrepreneurs in Italy in which the article's author participated too.

According to what was stated by the first study participants, there was a slight predominance of answers confirming the trend of employment improvement in the period 2009–2019. Among the PAPI research responses 21 persons out of the total of 38 surveyed (55 percent) considered their professional situation as better or much better than in 2009. For 9 of them (24 percent) their situation had not changed and for 8 surveyees it had worsened – 21 percent (Figure 1).

Interestingly enough, the questionnaire results showed that the perception of a better employment situation was not solely conditioned by financial factors – only three in ten of the sample (34 percent) declared an improvement in this area (with a minimum increase in income of 5 percent and a maximum of 70 percent). At the same time, almost half of the respondents – 17 of them – (45 percent) indicated unchanged earnings during this period, while 8 women (21 percent) – a decrease in the remuneration – from 10 to 50 percent (Figure 2).

Figure 1.

Survey respondents' perception of changes in their employment situation in 2009–2016

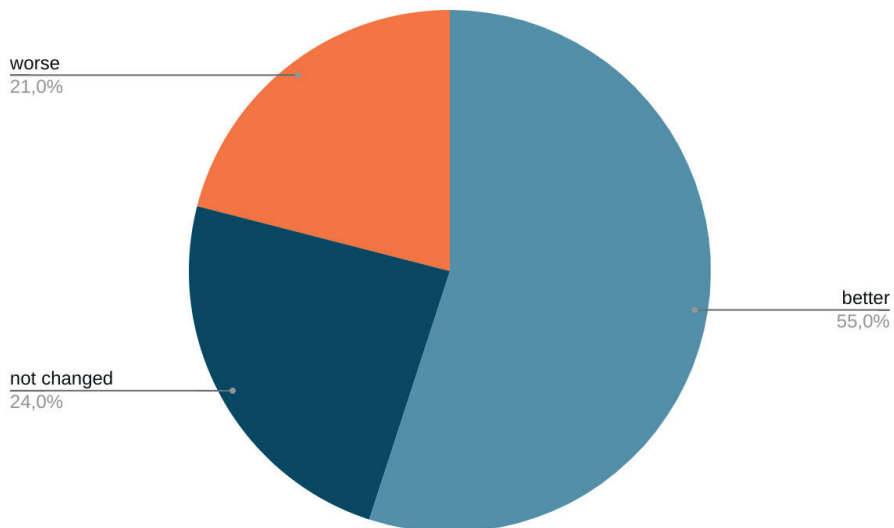
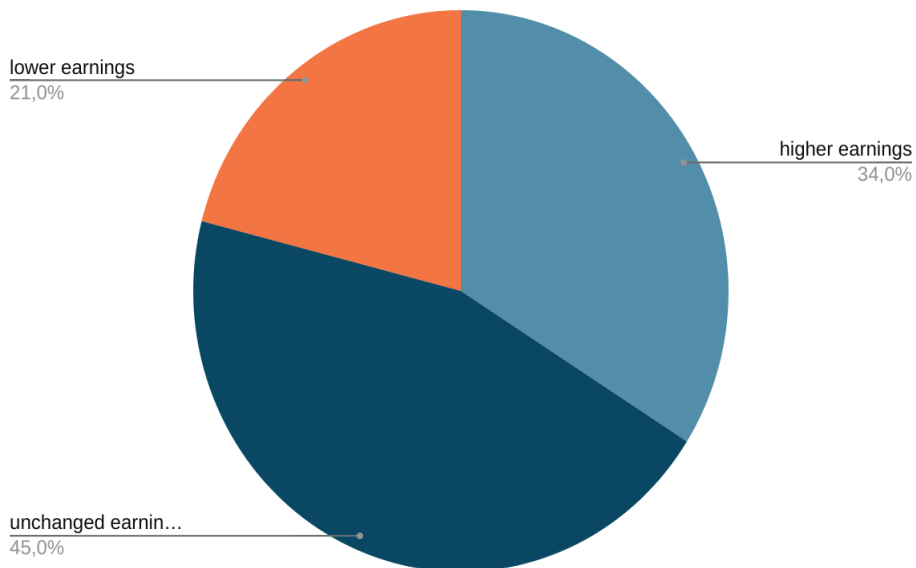


Figure 2.

Changes in survey respondents' remuneration in 2009–2016





The above findings are confirmed by research of Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi, who analysing the Italian labour market in this respect, argued that financial factors as a basis for guaranteeing job satisfaction are less important and can become substituted, for example, by emotional and non-material gratification (Barbiano di Belgiojoso, Ortensi 2018). These arguments then repeated in the in-depth interviews:

*When I chose Italy as my country of emigration, I was aware that salaries here are not high. However, I derive professional satisfaction from other things, such as the fact that my job gives me the opportunity to travel frequently, and I really enjoy travelling. (R1)*

*Nothing has formally changed in my work in recent years, but I have gained recognition*

*during this period, my satisfaction has increased, and my fulfilment. All of this was due to the trust my employer showed in me at one point. He gave me the opportunity to face challenges that were objectively beyond my preparation. (R2)*

*Here in Italy, you don't live for work, but life at work is important. Relationships at work are important. Sometimes an employer says that we are family, that someone is for him like a son, like a daughter. I know that this can also lead to abuse of employees. But in a normal situation it is a positive sign. One that gives fulfilment (R3).*

Gaining recognition with employers or creation of 'family like' relations in the company was important for research participants. Such gratification can lead to some negative aspects on the one hand (e.g. crossing the employer-employee relationship – cfr. Vosko 2004), but for Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi the emotional bond with employers remains crucial in the context of migrants' employment. They argue that, in some circumstances, it can counterbalance the isolation and segregation of foreign workers (Barbiano di Belgiojoso, Ortensi 2018). It should be noted that this does not apply only to the primary segment of the labour market, and domestic-care workers can be satisfied with their jobs if employers provide them with the right conditions. The results of a study conducted among Polish caregivers of elderly people in Catania (Sicily), carried out by Maksymowicz-Mróz (2018) confirm this trend – in interviews, women emphasised their happiness because of good treatment of the family they work for, their trust, etc. Małek had the same observations after interviewing Polish women employed as carers in Rome (2011). She noted that their labour migration, even if considered by the respondents tiring, was a respite from problems in Poland. One woman, for example, recalled that she felt joy when going to work in Italy because, as she explained it, she 'gained inner strength' there.

Referring to the results of the questionnaire and in particular to a relatively small improvement in the employment situation of research participants between 2009 and 2019, even if a kind of stagnation of their professional situation was in some way

accepted and justified, there was a sense of resignation about their future careers. An example of this attitude was expressed by interviewee [R4]:

*In my opinion, an educated woman at the apogee of her knowledge and professional capabilities, who, in addition, is a foreigner, does not have any chance in Italy to pursue a career that could truly satisfy her. From the perspective of having worked in this country for more than 10 years, as a person no longer in my 40s but in my 50s, I have come to understand that, in fact, my career opportunities here were non-existent.*

Another 40 year old respondent concluded in a similar way:

*At my age I don't want to think about changing jobs anymore. I remember how I started here: I worked as an interpreter, a guide, an assistant. I did a lot of different things. I wouldn't like to go through that again. Now I have achieved stability. I work where I work. It's fine the way it is. (R1)*

Many of the narratives included pejorative comments towards the Italian employment market. Respondents observed, among other things, its closure to foreigners, its segmentation in the context of hiring foreigners and the associated depreciation of their competences. [R5] described it as follows:

*The Italian labour market is not prospective. However, it is certainly better than it was. It is a market that is difficult to penetrate. It is hermetically sealed. There are always the same people who are stuck for years in institutions and in companies. There are no vacancies, as far as I can see. New places are not being created, so it is difficult for the younger generation to find something.*

Another woman pointed out the instability and lack of security and prospects in the Italian labour market:

*There is such job insecurity. People are working below their qualifications. Below their own expectations. Often in different places because one simply isn't enough. Or they work in a shop because that is where they are given a contract. Although they would prefer, for example, to work in a publishing house. It's just that in a publishing house they wouldn't have a permanent contract. And the need for stability is important, it determines choices in the Italian labour market. (R6)*

In the opinions of Polish highly skilled females who participated in the longitudinal study, among the main factors blocking their professional career in Italy, there are difficulties with the recognition of education and professional qualifications acquired in Poland. It is considered a part of the global trend of depreciation, deskilling and 'brain abuse' of migrant women, which is one of the main problems affecting foreign female workers – most migrant women work below their qualifications, regardless of their human and cultural capital, often in a shadow economy (Kowalska 2022).

The existence of a general tendency towards lower evaluation of human capital and experience gained in the country of origin is confirmed in studies of Fuller and Martin (2012). Analysing the first research respondents' opinions in more depth, one can conclude that it is not just a matter of lower rating, but rather the concept of 'ethnic penalty', that is creating disadvantage on the basis of origin, in a situation where migrants with the same competences as national workers underperform in the labour market of the host country (Barbiano di Belgiojoso 2019). Discrimination on the basis of non-recognition of qualifications and work experience from the country of origin has been described by [R4] as follows:

*What stopped me in my career development was the fact that all my previous professional achievements, all my previous education is not recognised in Italy. Completely. I mean, I could possibly recognise the baccalaureate exam here, whereas all my university qualifications, studies, diplomas, postgraduate training, additional training, etc. are not recognised. At first, right after arrival, I even considered having my degree recognised, but at some point I came to the conclusion that, for a woman of over 40 years of age, it is not the right path of career development.*

Among the factors frequently mentioned by research respondents as blocking career progression, a foreign-sounding surname proved to be the second most important. This is a significant obstacle that is difficult to bypass in the Italian context. Marriage to an Italian citizen and adoption of Italian nationality is not a solution, as local law does not provide for the possibility of changing one's surname as a result of marriage (*de jure* one remains with the family name). This causes a kind of paradox, since a woman who does not have Italian nationality can affix her husband's Italian surname or adopt it (under the law of the country of origin, if permitted), whereas a naturalised foreign woman cannot. The statement of [R4] confirms the 'inconvenience' of this situation: *'With a Polish name and surname even with Italian citizenship I will always be a foreigner in Italy. Always at a disadvantage.'*

A study conducted in Australia confirmed that people with a foreign-sounding surname have fewer chances in recruitment processes and are rejected more often. The research authors have found, in particular, that resumes with non-English names receive 57.4 percent fewer positive responses for leadership positions than identical resumes with English names. For non-leadership positions, ethnic minorities receive 45.3 percent fewer positive responses (Adamovic, Leibbrandt 2022).

The women interviewed in the longitudinal research noticed as well the existence of strong clientelism and the importance of social networks in the Italian labour market. They emphasised that, as foreigners, they are again disadvantaged in this case as they generally do not have these kinds of contacts. The quote below shows that this situation limits their ability to access some job offers, and even if accessed, they do not manage to get a position:

*Contacts and acquaintances are very important here. Everyone prefers to hire someone who is somehow connected to their circle of closer or further acquaintances. It is a kind of a 'guarantee' that the employee is 'safe', that he or she will work well, that he or she will not go on monthly lay-offs every now and then. This is important especially in the private sector. (R8)*

A similar observation was shared by another respondent:

*The Italian labour market is mainly based on nepotism. It is more important to trust the employee, not the merit of the employee. This market reflects the cultural model that exists here, the Italian mentality. Jobs are obtained through connections, family. (R2)*

In the Italian context, family ties play a significant role in making decisions on women's professional careers, too. Many Polish females have entered into binational marriages with Italians, following the typical local family model. In their case, the work ambitions often become secondary and the priority is taking care of the home and raising children, which, due to the lack of an adequate support infrastructure, often inhibit aspirations for professional and economic independence and fulfilment. [R5] summarised it this way:

*I don't think about leaving Italy because this is my home. This is where I have my family, my children. This is my priority. Not the career. Although work is also important to me. I like my work. However, family issues are what keep me here in the first place.*

When asked about the implementation of the freedom of movement of workers and the resulting actual changes for Poles in the Italian labour market, the respondents were rather unanimous in stating that these changes had not really occurred. [R4] expressed herself in this context as follows:

*When I came to Italy, I hoped that it was a European country, a Western country, which would create opportunities... I had this idea of the country as being similar to other Western European countries, but out of these imaginings nothing has come true. Freedom of movement for workers has changed nothing. In my case, basically the only success I have achieved in the last 10 years, is that nothing has changed. And that can already be called a success.*

This statement was confirmed by [R5]:

*In my opinion, considering in which sectors and in which positions most Poles work, I would say that the free movement of workers has not changed their situation. Theoretically, there are new possibilities, but it doesn't always match with practice. There is certainly an ease of taking up simple jobs, but I don't see many people in prominent positions.*

[R10] pointed out, in turn, that because the free movement of workers has not specifically affected the emergence of better offers for Poles in Italy, 'self-employment has increased among them'. This means that some Polish citizens, seeing no other possibility to improve their situation in the Italian labour market, have taken matters into their own hands, opting for a strategy of entrepreneurship.

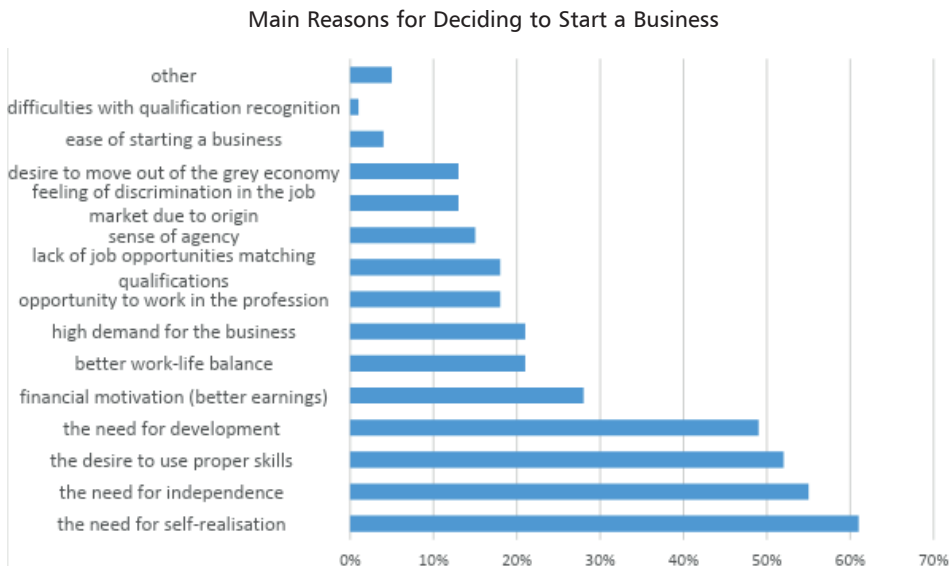
The issue of Polish business owners in Italy is still an under-recognised area of research. In 2023, the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Rome in cooperation with the Emigration Museum in Gdynia, carried out the first empirical study in this field, in which the author of this article was involved in (Kowalska, Michałowska, Raczyński 2024). It's important to underline that in recent years, entrepreneurship of migrants has been among the most important topics in both entrepreneurship research and in migration studies (Brzozowski 2019a). In the case of Italy, as far as the Polish community is concerned, of particular interest is that in 2021, among all the Polish entrepreneurs registered in the country, 53 percent were women (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS 2022), whereas out of all the businesses owned by immigrants in Italy in 2018 – 24 percent belonged to female migrants (Osservatorio Scientifico Imprese Femminili 2023). It clearly shows that this strategy may be considered a 'winning scenario' in response to the lack of real prospects for improvement in the Italian labour market regarding Polish workers (and in particular Polish highly skilled females), 20 years after Poland's accession to the European Union. Taking into account the previously mentioned limitations of the welfare state infrastructure, which make it difficult for migrant women to combine the role of mother and worker, it is also called in the subject literature 'family defender strategy' (Andrejuk 2018).

The main objective of the research on the phenomenon of entrepreneurship among Polish women in Italy was to explain the reasons and motivations for their interest in starting businesses in this country; to investigate the challenges they encountered and the development strategies undertaken to overcome the obstacles; their perception of themselves as entrepreneurs from the point of view of their integration in the host society, as well as their use of social support networks. It has also become important to reflect on the sense of agency and empowerment of these entrepreneurs and their escaping from entrenched stereotypes and constructs existing in Italy.

Referring to the results of the research study carried out with the use of mixed methodology, the survey data indicated four reasons for running a business the need for self-realisation (61 percent), the need for independence (55 percent), the desire to use proper skills (52 percent) as well as development (49 percent). This may indicate an opportunity and not a necessity-driven purpose (Huang et al., 2023), in line with the trend of developing one's career and using human capital possessed through entrepreneurship. It seems to be a clear response to the Italian labour market's offer that did not satisfy the surveyed Polish women (Figure 3).

Motivations for starting an entrepreneurship activity by migrant women can be considered both from the point of view of opportunities and barriers related to

Figure 3.



their functioning in the labour market (or more broadly: in the economy) of the host country, and it can be assumed that the decision to start a business activity is usually the result of both of these types of conditions. Research respondents are women striving for independence, self-realisation, and have a strong sense of agency. Setting up a business was based on their own decisions.

The quantitative part of the study confirmed the above. Participants in the research talked about their decision-making on starting a business in this way: *‘I prefer the uncertainty of an entrepreneur about whether I will have clients or not, but to have this fulfillment and to ‘steer the boat’ by myself, and not just to be a participant.’ (P6)*

The other one explained her decision this way:

*Once I saw that I already had the skills to get by, I felt a little undervalued by what the offices offered me. Every time I said I was leaving them, they changed their mind and then suggested something else. But for me it was too late. That’s why I said: I’ll try on my own. (P2)*

It appeared that exactly for 1 in 2 respondents their business profile was not compatible with their education, which may suggest that the Polish women who participated in the survey are flexible in the labour market and capable of changing the sector of operation and retraining.

The Italian dichotomy of the labour market, with its division into a primary and a secondary segment, where the latter is predominantly occupied by migrants, turns out to be a serious barrier that makes people with high human, cultural and social

capital do unskilled jobs. Setting up entrepreneurship, in the case of a significant number of research respondents, represents a way to escape from the stereotype of the Polish domestic or care worker.

Though, the interviewees pointed to many difficulties they encountered on their way towards entrepreneurship, too. The most frequently mentioned were related to the peculiarities of the Italian economic system: complex bureaucratic procedures and legal and financial regulations, as well as the great dispersion of competences between Italian authorities, which leads to systemic discrimination. The relatively frequently mentioned constraints regarded the economic crisis and problems in finding suitable employees. One in five respondents experienced difficulties in reconciling work and private life. Italian traditions and related cultural patterns pose a certain obstacle to women's professional involvement. The role of women in family life, the model of maintaining a household by a man, discrimination against young women and mothers in the employment market and working hours until 6:00–7:00 p.m. are only some of the examples. One respondent commented on it as follows:

*I also did not consciously decide to go full-time or look for a full-time job, although I have been to recruitment interviews [...], to work full-time. And this was mainly due to the fact that the mode of full-time work in Italy is until 6 or 6.30 pm and I decided after the birth of my child that I emigrated to have a family, and not to put the child in the hands of a babysitter and come back after 7.30 p.m. (P4)*

Another factor that influences positioning in the labour market is the role of social networks and social capital or rather relationship networks, that through nepotism, clientelism, finding jobs through acquaintances, favours Italian workers over migrants. In the case of research respondents, given their high level of social capital the opinions like the following were also presented: *I had Italian friends who helped me, and my first clients, and slowly things went. (P5)*

Polish female entrepreneurs participating in the research feel blended into Italian society and do not consider themselves labelled as migrants. They feel Italian (40% of respondents possess Italian citizenship) and that is how they often present themselves.

Nevertheless, feeling comfortable with doing business in Italy does not always mean being supported by public (national or regional) politics. South-north differences remain significant and in some parts of Italy, it is much easier to get funding for setting up business; there are more opportunities for an entrepreneur to be networked and receive support. This is how female entrepreneurs living in the north of the country see it:

*I belong to such an organisation here, it is based in Milan and also in Rome, it's called AREL. These are ladies, who are in high positions – either architects, CEOs, board of directors, or simply high-level directors. I have managed to exist here in Milan thanks to this organisation. I specifically looked for it, because when my boss entrusted me with*

*Milan, I thought: "And how I'm going to enter this environment, because it's closed, [...] almost hermetic, so how am I going to enter it?" And I signed up to this organisation and thanks to these ladies, through acquaintances [...] – they meet, they organise symposia, meetings, so thanks to this organisation, I'm present in this sector, in this market here, in Milan [...]. Without them, I don't know if I would have managed so quickly [...]. (P5)*

*Our company belongs to Confindustria Emilia-Romagna [...]. In Italy it is very important to belong to these institutions, to be part of them, because in this way companies are simply supported in some way. Well, you can also get to know other companies, so I think this is very positive. (P11)*

Being part of the Italian female entrepreneurial community and networks confirms that Polish businesswomen operating in the country go far beyond the social construct of migrants doing ethnic businesses and targeting mainly a nationality of origin audience. It stresses their positioning as ambitious, self-aware, resourceful, and hardworking individuals, emphasising their agency and empowerment.

The results of both the research studies mentioned above show similarities in general conditions, barriers and challenges experienced by the Polish highly skilled women in the Italian labour market, pointing to the significant influence of the local legal and economic system as well as social peculiarities and cultural patterns. This means that structural constraints hinder the professional development of both the highly qualified Polish female migrants operating in the Italian labour market under freedom of movement of workers and those who take matters into their own hands, deciding to set up a business. On the other hand, it must be stressed that Polish women manage to navigate in the hostile conditions of the Italian economy, adopting proactive attitudes resulting in at least partial personal and professional fulfilment. In many cases, they use their status as migrants, coming from a different socio-cultural reality, making it an advantage, emphasising their transnationality and using the human capital acquired in their country of origin, augmented by that of the host country.

## Conclusions

Italy belongs to the group of highly developed and wealthy countries. In terms of Gross Domestic Product, it is currently the 9th largest economy in the world (Cebr 2024). However, immigrants arriving in the country find it difficult to use their human, social and cultural capital in the tough Italian labour market, characterised by features such as dualism, nepotism, clientelism, and a large informal employment sector. Polish highly skilled females – the research studies participants – agreed on these barriers, stating that as foreigners they lack networks and their access to better job positions is more limited. Migrant women find themselves in an even more



challenging situation, having to contend not only with the structural characteristics of the labour market and economic constraints but also with cultural conditions and stereotypes regarding the role of women in Italy. Respondents confirmed in many cases their fitting into the existing construct of women in Italian society – as mothers and wives who focus on raising children and maintaining the warmth of the home, often at the expense of professional self-realisation.

The onset of the global economic crisis at the end of 2007 and its strong repercussions on the labour market coincided with the start of the freedom of movement for workers and the right of establishment granted for Poles in Italy. The economic crisis has been felt most by migrants whose large groups have lost stable jobs. This undoubtedly affected the employment opportunities of Polish citizens; however did not represent the main reason for the decreasing interest of workers from Poland to follow the ‘Italian direction’. The collapse of the myth of Italy for Poles in the post-accession era was caused first by new migration destinations created after 2004 (Ireland, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Scandinavia), that offered better prospects and it was there that Polish labour migrants were mainly headed for.

Nevertheless, the specificity of the Italian labour market and, above all, its negative features affecting foreign workers more often than the autochthonous ones, (segmentation, certain aspects of discrimination, difficult career development) played an important role in demotivating them from looking for jobs in Italy. Poland’s accession to the European Union and, consequently, gaining the freedom of movement and the right of establishment by Poles has not changed their actual situation in the Italian labour market much, mainly due to the already mentioned structural and cultural conditions. In the case of employees, the study participants confirmed only a slight improvement in their professional situation in 2009–2019 and opted for the *status quo* strategy rather than for new work challenges, emphasising the importance of the need to broaden one’s interests, to invest in oneself, and to realise on the family front.

However, unfavourable economic conditions linked to unchanged migration patterns led some of the research respondents to professional stagnation and skill underutilisation. In order to balance their dissatisfaction, they focused on non-financial gratifications in the labour environment (good atmosphere, ‘family-like’ relationship, job stability). An important structural barrier in career development represents difficulties in qualifications’ recognition for the highly skilled Polish women, which goes against the EU non-discrimination principle. Another one resulted in the foreign-sounded surname, seen as a disadvantage in the labour market, where the job interviewee is labelled *a priori* as migrant.

As the research findings show, the entrepreneurial strategy was considered a valid solution for self-realisation by the study respondents, using proper human, cultural and social capital as well as developing a career path in Italy. Crucially, the interviewees largely choose the path of entrepreneurship themselves, rather than feeling forced

into it by external factors. Many Polish women entrepreneurs are also able to effectively leverage their migrant status to develop transnational businesses. In this way, they successfully utilise the human and social capital acquired both in their country of origin and in their country of settlement (language skills, cultural understanding, networks). Thus, what is considered a limitation according to the social construct (migrant status), Polish businesswomen in Italy manage to turn into an advantage.

It is necessary to remember that all of this takes place under unfavourable circumstances from a macro perspective. This is not only due to the ongoing economic crisis in Italy, but also due to the conditions of public policies. At least some of these policies do not help in overcoming negative social constructs. In this context, the main issues are regulations that make it difficult to recognise qualifications (systemically imposing the status of a low-skilled worker) or laws that do not allow for adopting the husband's surname, which means that even a fully socially integrated woman with citizenship will always be at a disadvantage in the job market (being labelled as migrant). The issue of highly skilled female workers has not received much attention in the subject literature so far, and more research is needed to monitor the situation of migrant women occupied in the primary segment of the labour market and in business activities. This article is the authors' contribution to initiate the scholar discussion on the situation of Polish female professionals and entrepreneurs in Italy.

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