

Excellent experience or wasted time? The effects of foreign migration in the context of cultural capital of the Silesian re-emigrants

Introduction

It is excellent experience, excellent. It sets you up so there nothing is impossible.

Woman, 43 years old, 2-year stay in the United Kingdom, 3-month stay in the Netherlands, secondary education

The work I performed was of a very low level of professional career ladder. I think, that the time I spent in America was time wasted.

Woman, 53 years old, 6-year stay in the United States, tertiary education¹

The article presents the results of the survey carried out within the framework of the project “Destination Silesia – the impact of socio-economic potential of re-emigrants on the Silesian Voivodship development in the context of the region readiness for the reception of returnees”. The project carried out between October 2010 and March 2012 by the company Strategic Consulting Centre on the basis of the agreement with the Voivodship Labour Office in Katowice and co-financed by the European Union within the framework of the European Social Fund. The project objective is *inter alia* estimation of the current and future scale of re-emigration, determination of social, economic and cultural potential of repatriates, as well as indication of directions and the character of re-emigration influence on the region’s economy².

The presented surveys largely concern occupational and educational history of female re-emigrants

and their situation on the labour market after returning. According to the definition applied in the project, a re-emigrant is a person who stayed abroad for at least three months in the years 2004–2011 and who settled within the Silesian Voivodship territory after returning to Poland. Women constitute 40% of this population³.

Characteristic of female returnees in the Silesian Voivodship

The in-depth interviews with returnees to the Silesian Voivodship indicate that emigration persons’ crucial life experience, which plays an important role in identity narration of an individual and positively influences self-assessment. Almost each of returning women irrespective of the purpose of her migration and the kind of activity she was involved in abroad positively assessed emigration. The majority (67%) of female repatriates are strongly satisfied with their stay abroad, while one fourth (25%) is satisfied. Therefore, overall of 92% positively perceives their decision concerning foreign migration. Such a high level of satisfaction among repatriates is probably connected with acquired economic capital – 77% of female returnees declared that they had managed to accumulate some savings during their stay abroad, while 60% stated that their and their families standard of life increased because of emigration. Acquisition of economic capital is an obvious consequence of migration and the main incentive to emigrate. The classical spatial mobility

theories stated that none of the flows could equal in its volume the one that emerges from the desire to improve material standard of life ingrained in most people [Ravenstein; quoted after Górny, Kaczmarczyk 2003, p. 14]. In the Silesian Voivodship 82% of the repatriates went abroad in order to take up paid work.

However, in this paper I intend to focus on cultural capital of Silesian female repatriates, which beside economic and social capital was specified by Pierre Bourdieu as one of the main assets of an individual. Because of the project “Destination Silesia” research objectives, I will also refer to the conception of human capital understood wider than cultural one as education, occupational experience, abilities, health, or psychical well-being [Czapiński 2008, p. 5–6]. The Bourdieu’s conception allows construction of the overall effect of migration in the individual context. According to this conception, cultural capital may take three forms: the embodied one, i.e. the permanent attributes of an individual manifesting themselves in behaviours and manner, objectified – in the form of cultural artefacts such as books or pieces of art, and institutionalised – in the form of scientific degrees, formal qualifications, diplomas and certificates [Bourdieu 1986, p. 47]. The acquisition of cultural capital, particularly in its embodied form, requires from an individual a significant input of time and resources. What is significant, in the context of the overall effect of foreign migration, similarly to economic capital, cultural capital may also be susceptible to loss and devaluation.

In the context of the capital cultural theory, female re-emigrants in the Silesian Voivodship comprise a specific group. Most of them are young, 57% are below 30 years of age (Figure 2). What is more important, a half of this population (51%) have tertiary education as compared to over one fourth (28%) of men – Figure 1. In 2010, women with tertiary education constituted 20% of all women at working age in Silesian Voivodship (Labour Force Survey - LFS). In respect to education, therefore, female re-emigrants possess significant potential.

Women differ in respect to their motivation to go abroad. For 22% of them, the main objective of migration was education (see Figure 3). For comparison, only every twentieth men (5%) went abroad because of this reason. Therefore, while for men the main mobility factor is economic capital, in case of women, cultural capital also plays an important role in making emigration decision.

Figure 1. Education of female and male re-emigrants in Silesian Voivodship [%]

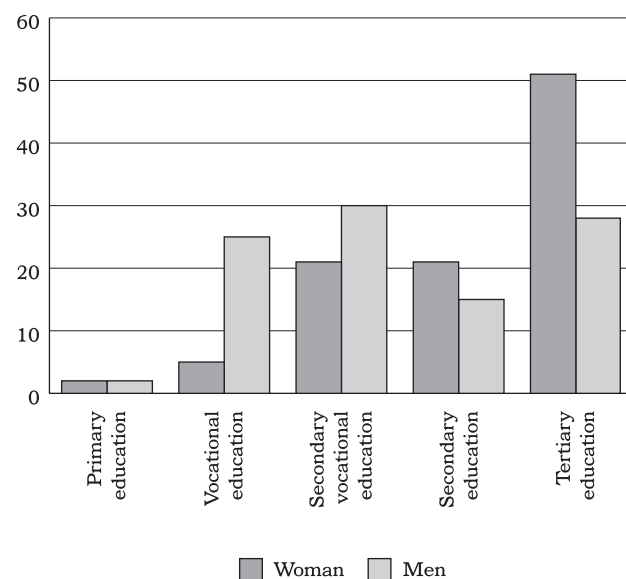


Figure 2. Silesian female re-emigrants by age [%]

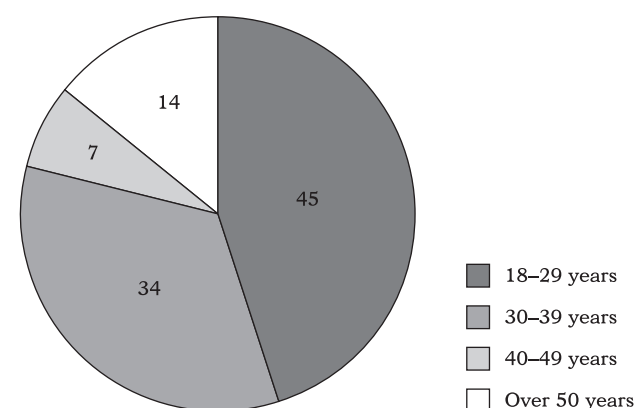
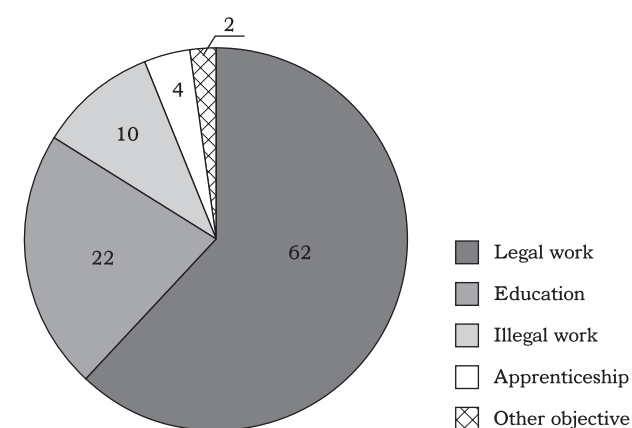


Figure 3. The female re-emigrants’ main reason for emigration [%]



The range of cultural capital of returning women

One fifth of female repatriates (19%) completed school or studies abroad. However, probably only a small part of them acquired a diploma of a foreign college (university). Most of them comprise persons who went abroad in order to participate in the Erasmus Programme. One of the respondents presented various advantages of such emigration during the in-depth interview:

I realized that I could study in English. It is not a problem for me. I'm very glad that I have learned this other language Flemish, although I would have to revise it a little to use it. It was interesting to meet people from other cultures and somehow living with them for half a year.

Woman, 27 years old, half a year stay in Belgium, incomplete tertiary education

Women who have opportunity to study abroad are particularly privileged. Beside the institutionalised form of cultural capital, they also acquired embodied capital – they are fluent users of a foreign language. 94% of female returnees (including all those who migrated for educational purposes) declare that they had learned a foreign language or improved their language skills. The respondents' declarations indicate that this practical language skill induced by the necessity for everyday communication in occupational life after completion of education.

I had English in secondary school and at university, but its level was very poor. [...] At the stage of my moving there, it was such English that I was afraid of speaking. Nevertheless, I overcame that there. Because I had to.

Woman, 29 years old, half a year stay in Ireland, tertiary education

I must admit though that this [stay in] Ireland gave me a lot, as currently I work in a language school. There is a British man employed here and despite the fact that all [my colleagues] are qualified teachers, philologists, I'm the only one who always understands him at first time.

Woman, 27 years old, 1.5-year stay in Ireland, tertiary education

The long stay abroad is also related to a change in lifestyle and perception of environment. In case of

persons who stayed abroad for many years such as the respondent below telling about her life in Greece, some change of *habitus* may also be referred to.

I realized that I had absorbed a huge number of things from them. I assumed some various habits. They are not bad at all. They are positive things in my opinion. For example, I realized that there were no unhappy people there. [...] At the beginning, it was difficult; I could not understand many things. Later I decided that it was not the time for understanding, but whether I would get used [to all that] or not. Then I returned to Poland and realized that I had changed.

Woman, 38 years old, 10-year stay in Greece, secondary education

Moreover, the female repatriates believe that staying abroad results in changes in strategies of communication with other people. 89% of women declare that because of migration they became more open and tolerant.

Flexibility, adaptation to different situations, different places, people.

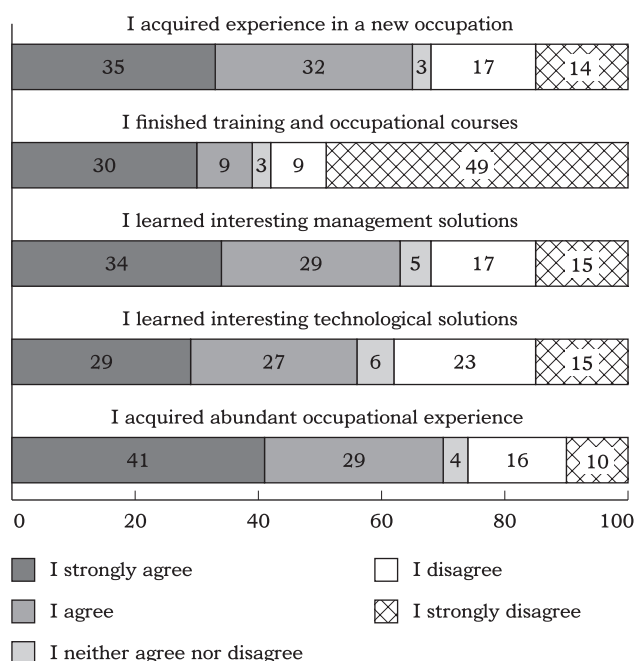
Woman, 29 years old, 1.5-year stay in Ireland, tertiary education

Cultural capital versus work abroad

However, the project "Destination Silesia" focuses on occupational aspect of foreign migration. Almost three quarters of female repatriates (72%) left the region in order to take up paid work. Most women (70%) declare that during their stay abroad they gained abundant occupational experience, whereas 39% attained formal knowledge through training and occupational courses. Most of them learned new solutions in the field of management and work organization (63%) or got to know new technologies (56%).

The data presented in Figure 4 seem optimistic: as many as two thirds (67%) of women declared that they had acquired experience in a new occupation. However, this information is worth to be closely analysed. In the CATI survey, female returnees were asked about the occupation in their work before migration, the occupation in their work abroad, and their learned occupation. Based on the *Classification of occupation and specialities* there were determined occupations belonging to the second large group "specialists". They require a high level of knowledge,

Figure 4. Occupational experience of female re-emigrants [%]



skills and experience. It turned out that for as many as 45% of women their learned occupation belonged to the second group (as compared to 25% of men), which should not be surprising if we take into account the fact that a half of the female re-emigrants have tertiary education. However, a less than every tenth woman was employed abroad as a specialist (8%), while before emigration the respective share comprised only 2%⁴. If we compare occupation of female repatriates in all groups of *Classification*, it turns out that work abroad in accordance with their education had two fifths of women (40%), while over a half of them were employed below their qualifications (57%).

Female repatriates in the individual in-depth interviews largely indicated the problem of work below qualifications. The respondents mentioned lack of satisfaction with performed manual work, while 13% women declared that migration damaged their health.

For me it is simply work that destroys me mentally; in no way I fulfil myself in it. It is my failure, it does not satisfy me at all. I do not want to work like this.

Woman, 24 years old, 2.5-year stay in Ireland and the Netherlands, secondary education

Acquiring academic qualifications by an individual requires a significant input of time and work from her and economic capital from her family of origins.

It is expected that these investments will profit in the future on the labour market [Bourdieu 1986, p. 51]. However, the studies in the project "Destination Silesia" show that in case when educated people decide to go abroad. They are appointed an immigrant status in the country of destination; they are expected to take up work appropriate for immigrants in the secondary sectors of the labour market [Górny, Kaczmarczyk 2003, p. 28].

Foreigners do not get a better job. It is just so. I have not met a person who has just come after completing their studies and got a job in some corporation, company. It is impossible. Unless someone was brought up there, has a family of high status somewhere, than maybe... But just right away, there is no option.

Men, 25 years old, 3-month stay in the United Kingdom, tertiary education

Figure 5. Comparison of job positions of female re-emigrants before emigration and during their work abroad [%]

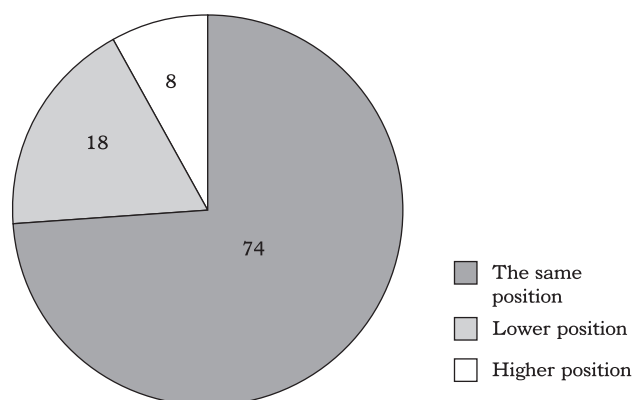
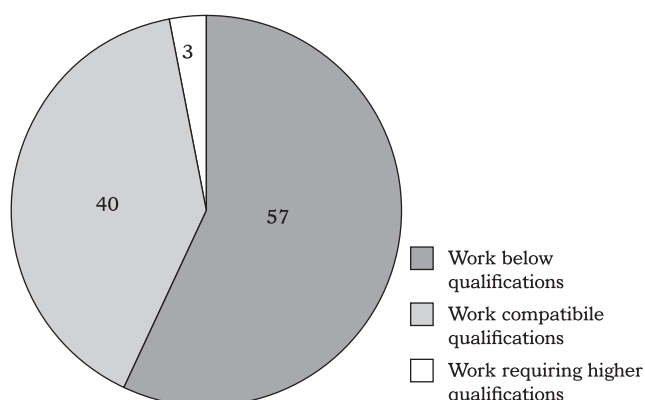


Figure 6. Occupational qualifications of female re-emigrants vs. their work abroad [%]



Female emigrants with basic vocational education seem to be in a better situation, as they do not experience a change in social status. When working abroad they have a chance for development in their learned occupation and achieving more satisfaction from better-paid work. Whereas people who have rich resources of capital cultural tend to be doomed to social degradation.

To a great extent, people who... Actually, beauticians, hairdressers, carpenters, mechanics, sprayers. Such people when they came, they were able to work in their occupation. Whereas most people – as there were those who had university or licentiate degree – it was obvious that they would not find work in their occupation. Just like me [...]. Then it was company; let us say most people with primary education, maximum secondary. Let say, just simple people [...]. For me it was a little strange issue, as I have [completed] two fields of studies.

Woman, 29 years old, 1.5-year stay in Ireland, tertiary education

Work below their qualifications, which was performed by over a half (57%) of female repatriates abroad, translates into difficulties with finding a job after returning. Such problem had 42% of women in the Silesian Voivodship. It is particularly severe in case of school leavers or university graduates who had not had any occupational experience before they went abroad. Such situation was shared by every fifth migrating woman (see Figure 7). For these female repatriates returning to work in their occupation may be every difficult, or even impossible.

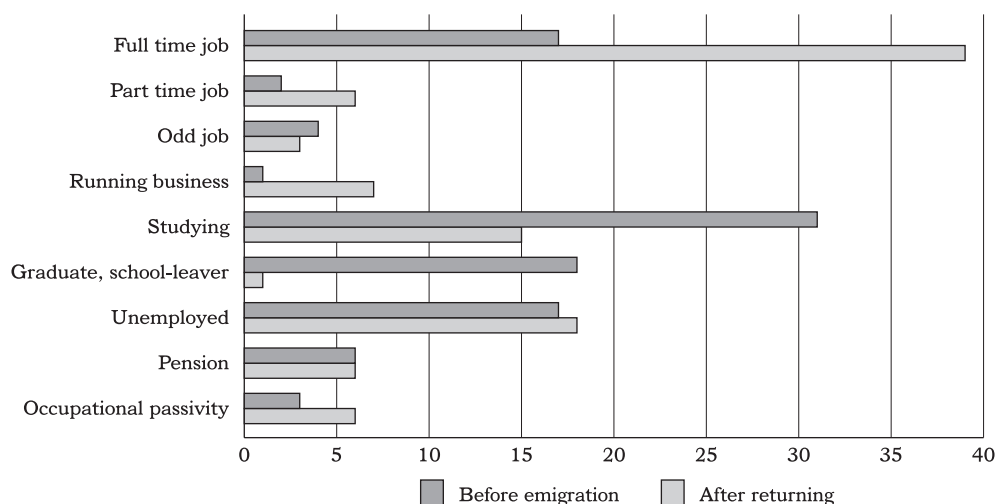
I will not work in my occupation [psychologist]. Firstly, too much time has passed since I completed my studied. Secondly, I do not have any experience in this occupation. Now, I don't even think to go back to this. I would like to work as an accountant.

Woman, 32 years old, 8-year stay in the United Kingdom, tertiary education

However, only a small percentage of female repatriates consider their stay abroad as the time wasted. Only 10% in the CATI survey agreed with the statement: "I feel that I wasted my time while the others were developing professionally". Therefore, it seems that the experience of work and life in another country and qualifications acquired in a new occupation albeit not corresponding to high level of education compensate most women for work below qualifications. Almost universal satisfaction with staying abroad is also connected with the rationalisation mechanisms. However, it is rather unlikely that this concerned as many as 92% returnees.

Comparison of optimistic declarations of female repatriates with their situation on the labour market shows that, in some sense, they have reasons to feel satisfaction. Figure 7 presents occupational situation of the returnees before their emigration and after returning to the voivodship. As we may see, a decision concerning foreign migration made many people who were at school, studied or had just completed school or tertiary school. Only every fourth female emigrant worked full-time (17%), part-time (2%), or had casual jobs (4%). However, closer look at their situation after returning, shows that almost a half of them works full-time (39%), while over-

Figure 7. Comparison of occupational situation of female repatriates before going abroad and after returning home [%]



all of 55% have paid work. While less than every fifth of them (18%) stays unemployed. For comparison, employment rate among women in the Silesian Voivodship in the first quarter of 2011 comprised 42%, while female unemployment rate 10% (CSO LFS)⁵. The higher percentage share of the unemployed among female repatriates may be caused by the strategy, called a post-migratory break, which some of them adopt after returning. During a first few month after returning home, the returnees decide to have a “rest” and they neither take up nor look for employment [Grabowska-Lusińska 2010, p. 36]. Nevertheless, some of them register in the job office in order to have health insurance.

Also worth mentioning is an increase in the share of people who conducted their own business after returning. **Emigration has a positive impact on entrepreneurial attitudes.** As many as 90% of returnees claimed that emigration increased their self-confidence. Whereas, every fifth woman (21%) declares that she brought an idea for her own business from abroad.

I want to launch my own business. Some people encourage me, other discourage [saying] that I'm not going to succeed. I would like to set up a childminder agency. Something similar to which I worked for in Belfast, but here in our Silesia.

Woman, 24 years old, 2.5-year stay in Ireland and the Netherlands, secondary education

Migration of well educated women versus brain drain in the Silesian Voivodship

The notion of brain drain came up after the accession of Poland to the European Union in media debate. Media publish articles regarding the employers' fear of the outflow of qualified labour force [Łosińska-Niewińska 2010]. There is also underlined that the people who leave are young, talented and well educated [Łuczyński 2008]. However, the surveys carried out within the project “Destination Silesia” show that we cannot refer to brain drain (i.e. strong outflow of highly qualified workers employed abroad on positions requiring high qualifications), instead we may rather refer to brain waste. This takes place when a qualified worker abroad takes a job that does not require the level of education he/she attained or his/her occupational experience

[Kaczmarczyk, Okólski 2005, p. 45]. It is impossible to determine whether the same situation would be observed if female re-emigrants had decided to look for a job in the Silesian Voivodship instead of going abroad.

Recapitulation

From the individual perspective, work below qualification abroad may be frustrating and it may mean the loss of social status, which do not transpose into lower self-assessment. Most female re-emigrants think that the decision about going abroad was strongly a right one, while as many as 90% believes that thanks to emigration their self-confidence increased. Acquisition of economic and social capital compensates for the loss of cultural capital (95% women declare that they made interesting acquaintances abroad), while less than a half of women suffers the problems with finding their place on the labour market. New life experiences positively influence the returnees' assessment of migration. The attitude of the majority of returnees is well summed up by the opinion of a female returnee who for two years performed hard manual work abroad.

If not this emigration, I could have said that I had had an average life, nothing much happened in it. I experienced more during these two years than during the [previous] forty.

Woman, 43 years old, 2- year stay in the United Kingdom, 3-month stay in the Netherlands, secondary education

¹ All quotation come from 30 individual In-Depth interviews carried out between November 2010 and January 2011 with the repatriates from the Silesia Voivodship and the interviews carried out within the framework of case studies between December 2010 and April 2011 within the framework of the project “Destination Silesia”.

² More information about the project may be found on the website of the Strategic Consulting Centre www.cds.krakow.pl, the link “Destination Silesia”.

³ All quantitative data come from the CATI survey carried out in April 2011 on the sample of n=17722 households from the Silesian Voivodship. The survey objective was *inter alia* assessment of the scale of foreign migration and re-emigration. At the second stage n=528 telephone interviews were carried out with the returnees concerning their experiences from their stay abroad and their situation after returning to Poland.

- ⁴ However, we must remember that only 24% of women had paid work before migration; see Figure 7.
- ⁵ Similar research carried out by the Strategic Consulting Centre in 2010 in the Małopolskie and Dolnośląskie Voivodships showed that the share of unemployed re-emigrants was much higher and comprised 35% w in the Lesser Poland and 25% in the Lower Silesia.

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