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## Mobility for a Better Life: A Fragmented Story of the Migrant

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### Abstract

*Almost all nations in the world are affected by the migration phenomena, which is becoming more and more widespread and complex. Although they are frequently connected to the concept of globalization in general, the broad social, economic, and political grounds of this movement are varied and not always necessarily known. This paper introduces qualitative research findings from the semi-structured interview with the migrant, who made up her mind to change her life by moving from her home country to Poland in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper utilized such concepts as migration, student mobility, culture shock, the COVID-19 crisis, and social service provision to analyze the findings of the interview. The results from the interview demonstrate the fragmented story full of challenges that the migrant experienced including cultural adaptation, economic constraints, and social support. Despite challenges, the interview participant was able to look at her life opportunistically and gladly shared her story filled with kind people and lessons learned. On the example of one story, this qualitative research helps to reveal some gaps in the social support and migration systems to be improved as well as foresee some issues with migration restrictions in the future.*

**Keywords:** migration, adaptation, social services

### Introduction

Since the earliest times, moving from one place to another has been something ordinary, and, for nomads, it is a certain way of livelihood. Some people move in search of work or economic opportunities, to join family, or to study. Others move to escape conflict, persecution, terrorism, or human rights violations; as well as in response to the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters, pandemics, or other environmental factors. Such a phenomenon is called 'migration'.

There is no single term from antiquity that can be used to describe modern concepts of "migration" today. The extensive language used in ancient Greece and Rome to discuss the different behaviors connected to human mobility shows the cultural, legal, political, and other practices and assumptions connected to mobility that were unique to each civilization and time (Isayev & Baroud, 2015). The evidence for migration is diverse, dispersed across literary, archaeological, and epigraphic sources, and occasionally dependent on speculative demographic models, which present particular obstacles to studying migration today.

The dynamics of global migration have undergone a significant transformation, as highlighted by the International Organization for Migration's findings (IOM, 2022). The staggering rise in international migrants, estimated at almost 281 million globally in 2020, signifies a substantial increase of 51 million since 2010. Among this cohort, nearly two-thirds were labor migrants—individuals seeking work opportunities and economic advancement beyond their home countries. This surge in international migration underscores its growing significance, constituting approximately 3.6% of the global population in 2020, compared to 2.8% in 2000 and a mere 2.3% in 1980, showcasing a steady upward trajectory.

Furthermore, the profound shift in demographics is exemplified by the fact that more people than ever before reside in countries different from their country of birth. This statistic not only portrays the scale of contemporary global mobility but also underscores the intricate interplay of factors—economic, social, political, and cultural—that propel individuals to traverse borders in pursuit of diverse aspirations,

opportunities, and livelihoods. This trend reflects the evolving nature of migration, signaling its deep-rooted impact on societies worldwide and emphasizing the need for nuanced approaches to address the multifaceted dimensions of this global phenomenon.

Migration manifests in diverse forms, with some driven by volition and others by imperative circumstances. The global landscape of migration is marked by this dichotomy: individuals driven by choice seeking better opportunities, juxtaposed against those compelled by necessity to escape persecution, conflict, or human rights violations. The UNHCR's report of 89.3 million forcibly displaced people by the end of 2021 starkly reflects the latter group's predicament (UNHCR, 2022). These individuals face harrowing realities—uprooted from their homes due to persecution, violence, or disruptive events severely impacting societal stability. Their migration is not a pursuit of betterment but a desperate quest for survival and safety amidst tumultuous environments. This staggering statistic encapsulates the urgency and complexity of the issues surrounding forced migration, underscoring the dire need for global attention, humanitarian aid, and sustainable solutions to address the plight of forcibly displaced populations worldwide.

The transitional phase migrants undergo, straddling their former lives and the hurdles of adapting to a new environment, is a complex interplay of personal determination and societal reception. This intricate process goes beyond individual willingness, extending to the host society's preparedness and willingness to embrace and assimilate newcomers. The integration of migrants into a new societal framework poses multifaceted challenges and remains a focal point in both political agendas and scholarly discussions, as highlighted by Cranston et al. (2023). This integration is far from straightforward; it grapples with issues of cultural assimilation, social inclusion, economic participation, and the fostering of a sense of belonging. The discourse surrounding migrant integration underscores the necessity for a reciprocal effort—where migrants endeavor to adapt and contribute, while societies must demonstrate openness, support mechanisms, and inclusive policies to facilitate a harmonious integration process. The complexities inherent in this process emphasize the need for holistic approaches that acknowledge the diversity and dynamics involved, fostering environments conducive to the successful integration of migrants into their new societies.

This study delves into the multifaceted challenges of mobility stemming from migration through in-depth semi-structured interview with one participant sharing her migration narrative. The research aimed to scrutinize several key facets of the migrant: gauging the preparedness of the migrant for new environments, evaluating her adjustment pre- and post-migration, understanding the impact of social relationships on her post-migration life, exploring her future aspirations, and delineating the role of social services in facilitating the migration process. By addressing these objectives, this study seeks to shed light on the complexities of mobility due to migration and the various factors that influence a migrant's journey and integration into a new societal framework.

## **Methodology**

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach, employing a semi-structured interview to delve into the layered experiences of a young woman's migration from her home country to Poland in 2020. Drawing upon scholarly articles, theoretical frameworks, international reports, and official statistics, the study illuminates migration through lenses encompassing cultural adaptation, economic constraints, and social support, using the participant's fragmented story as a focal point. Initially motivated by educational pursuits, her journey expanded into labor migration, coinciding with the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This global uncertainty shaped her migration trajectory, introducing complexities like mobility restrictions and economic limitations. The choice of a semi-structured interview facilitated a nuanced exploration, capturing her fragmented storytelling, which was instrumental in conducting a thematic analysis. This analysis uncovered overarching categories offering insights into her proactive measures, efforts to acclimate, the role of connections, and aspirations. Ultimately, this approach provided a comprehensive view of her migration experience, highlighting challenges, resilience, and the profound impact of migration on her personal and professional growth.

## **Results**

The study resulted in different aspects of the migrant's experience: checking how ready she was for a new place (preparedness), seeing how well she adapted after moving (adjustment), figuring out how social connections and availability of social services affected her life after moving (expansion of social relationships and service support, exploring), and what she wanted to do in the future (future endeavors). The findings also assist in understanding how social work helped with the whole migration journey.

**Table 1.** Results Interview

<b>Category</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Proving statements from the interview</b>
Preparedness	Physical logistics	<i>"I had the Polish test exam as well as the speaking skill exam"</i> <i>"I gave up my job, visited my parents, got a visa, packed my things and clothes"</i>
	Emotional preparedness	<i>"...openness to new experiences..."</i> <i>"Maybe, I knew that I would stay, I don't know"</i> <i>"..previously I never imagined that I would arrive in Poland and stay here"</i>
	Helping factors	<i>"I moved to Poland two years ago as I had gotten a scholarship"</i> <i>"The Scholarship Program I participated in had been assisting me with some issues during preparation for immigration (ex. in visa-related issues, contact a cross- border services) and for the first months of adaptation in Poland"</i> <i>"I also put some effort into learning the Polish language"</i>
Adjustment	Cultural adjustment and understanding	<i>"Even though it was not my first time abroad, living in a foreign country is absolutely different"</i> <i>"...but I still try to feel deeply the Polish mentality and values"</i> <i>"But of course, I had to adapt to a new country anyways graciously and with respect"</i> <i>"I was pleasantly surprised by multiculturalism, architecture, cheap and tasty food, slower pace of life in Warsaw compared with the capitals of other countries"</i> <i>"...providing a sense of safety for all immigrants and a free-barrier environment for people with disabilities by the government"</i>
	Language apprehending	<i>"I also put some effort into learning the Polish language"</i> <i>"At the beginning of my staying in Poland, I did not talk with Polish people a lot but later I could not stop doing that:) I practiced my Polish skills every day"</i>
	Challenges in adaptation	<i>"...be patient as bureaucracy is one of the main characteristics here"</i> <i>"Tax system is unprofitable for business"</i>
Expansion of social relationships and service support	Appreciating friendship	<i>"I already knew some Polish language, it helped a lot..."</i> <i>"My friends, the scholarship foundation's employees (e.g. animators), the psychologist"</i> <i>"I am so grateful to Poland that I've met great people and life-long friends"</i>
	Difficulties	<i>"People are not such open-minded as in my country"</i>
	Social support system	<i>"I did not have money to pay for expensive legal assistance, therefore I turned to the lawyer of the Multicultural Centre in Warsaw. He provided me</i>

		<i>with a free legal consultation which was helpful for me then</i>
		<i>"I hear a lot about social services to support migrants with various issues such as getting registration, language learning, community meetings, etc. I think they are very valuable for any new person in the country."</i>
Future endeavors	Understanding of own boundaries	<i>"I will be living here for at least 2-3 years, maybe more but not my whole life"</i>
	More independence in the future	<i>"I am young and I would like to explore what else I can achieve, not necessarily in Poland"</i>

## Discussion

### Preparedness

The UN Migration Agency defines a migrant as "any person who moves away from one's place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons"<sup>1</sup>. Generally, migration is a global phenomenon entailing socio-demographic changes and greater cultural diversity. Why do people migrate? There are known a few motives for migration such as economic factors, governance and public services, demographic imbalances, conflict (ethnic/religious), environmental factors, and transitional networks (IOM, 2022).

Besides, the fact that the understanding of the term "migration" is much more complex and entails many different aspects, it has also changed in many ways from what it was in the past. Globalization has played a key role in this transformation, especially a great influence that has marked family structure changes. Davis et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of solving the problem of a cultural component of migration processes as communication of carriers of various cultures which determines the tolerance level in society. As a result, such manifestations of inter-ethnic problems highlight the necessity of transition from the policy of migration processes regulation to the policy of ethnocultural regulation. This statement is also supported by the informant who *"had to adapt to a new country graciously and with respect"*.

There is another term that can be also mentioned in this research paper such as "international student mobility" which is often conceptualized as a form of cultural capital, with intercultural competencies acting as a distinction (Cranston & Duplan, 2023). The researchers Cranston & Duplan (2023) name it as a "privileged form of migration" characterized by easy access to migration where university bodies promote international student mobility to prepare students for the neo-liberalized labor market. Organizational architectures of higher education institutions present international student mobility as an aspirational form, promoting access through financial support and visa sponsorship. One of the helping factors in the preparedness for the interview participant was the Scholarship Program that *"had been assisting me with some issues during preparation for immigration (ex. in visa-related issues, contact a cross-border services) and for the first months of adaptation in Poland"*.

Migrants are often the ones who are most vulnerable economically, socially, and politically (IOM, 2022). They face significant challenges in accessing education, healthcare, precarious living conditions, and employment opportunities. Such limitations may result in abuse and exploitation. According to the findings from the interview, the participant confirmed facing some of those economic and social difficulties in a new environment:

*"... money, if someone plans to rent an apartment and needs more time to find a job...; markets and shop - centers are closed on Sunday ...; be patient as bureaucracy is one of the main characteristics here ...; People are not such open-minded to help as in my country."*

### Adjustment

While migrating to Europe during the pandemic, the informant did not experience most of the challenges in comparison with other migrants: *"Since I moved to Poland as a Research Student the process was not such complicated for me as for other migrants despite pandemic time"*. However, it is known that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global crisis unprecedented since the first half of the

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.iom.int/about-migration>.

20th century, impacting human mobility and migration. Researchers say that the COVID-19 lockdown may mark the end of the age of migration, as the pandemic tends to impact migration decision-making with some people being less likely to move due to disasters including the pandemic. On the contrary, for others, the pandemic may result in a period of unpredictable and fast-changing migration and mobility flows (Gamlen, 2020). In both ways, the situation may change dramatically some period after the pandemic ends fully.

Since it is necessary to take into consideration not only the objective factors (civil and political rights, employment) but also the subjective factors (well-being, participation in community life, networking) (Bardauskienė et al., 2014), for my informant it was vividly easy to adapt to the new cultural environment as she already knew the language well enough, received an initial support from her academic program which helped to get determination in continuation of her stay in a new country.

*"I did not have high expectations; therefore, I feel good in Poland. But of course, I had to adapt to a new country anyways graciously and with respect, food was not very different, I already knew some Polish language, which helped a lot, especially it helps a lot now when I work for the Polish organization"*

According to the study on the conceptualization of Cultural Shock, where it is specified as "a consequence of strain and anxiety resulting from contact with a new culture," it is crucial to emphasize the pivotal role that language proficiency plays in the process of cultural adaptation and coping (Winkelman, 1994). Language serves as both a tool and a bridge, facilitating the understanding of new cultural norms, values, and ways of life. It is, essentially, the key that unlocks doors to awareness, learning, and meaningful interaction in a foreign culture.

For my interview participant, language proficiency emerged as one of her most significant coping mechanisms and a valuable resource for intercultural communication. Even before embarking on her migration journey, she recognized the importance of mastering the language of her destination country. This proactive approach allowed her to navigate the challenges of cultural shock more effectively, as she could comprehend and engage with her new environment on a deeper level.

Language, in her case, served as an interface that not only facilitated communication but also acted as a bridge connecting her with the local community. It allowed her to access educational and professional opportunities that might have otherwise been inaccessible. Moreover, it played a pivotal role in reducing the strain and anxiety typically associated with adapting to a new culture.

This underscores the significance of language acquisition as a coping mechanism and an essential skill for migrants. It enables them not only to cope with cultural shock but also to thrive in their new environment. In essence, language becomes a tool for empowerment, fostering a sense of belonging, and opening doors to diverse experiences and opportunities. As such, it serves as a fundamental element in the narrative of successful migration and cultural adaptation.

It is obvious that integration for a migrant is known as the process that requires personal efforts to maintain its ethnical identity on one hand and proves to have enough skills to be able to participate in the cultural and social life of the majority on the other. Integration has gained prominence on the global agenda with the advent of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda which recognizes for the first time the contribution of migration to sustainable development. 11 out of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) contain targets and indicators relevant to migration or mobility. The Agenda's core principle is to "leave no one behind" including migrants (SDG, 2020).

### ***Expansion of social relationships and service support***

According to Huddleston et al. (2015), the success of integration depends on many factors including the country of origin, the host community context, and the skill level of immigrants. However, this all should be considered with fair economic remuneration. Following research on OECD countries shows that migrants in most countries have on average worse outcomes than the native-born population in areas such as educational attainment and labor market participation (OECD, 2015). As is proven by this story, where the informant says that she is not paid fair enough and equally in comparison with the native citizens. This is definitely interpreted as a sign of persisting barriers to effective integration.

*"I also noticed that often migrants were paid less than citizens of Poland. In the beginning, it was hard to find a job to sustain myself. I applied to more than 15 positions and when I received the job I have now, it was not paid even close to what the Polish people received. I am still struggling with this unfairness, that's why I have to do extra activities to earn for living."*

Along with economic, psychological, and social factors, the huge contributor is impacted by bureaucratic delays at the government level. Specifically, it was mentioned in her story that this was one of the hindrances to a smooth integration into a new environment. In fact, migration has been already a part of our society, and bureaucracy in this regard should have gone through certain transitions. However, we may see that this is relevant when the government reacts to certain emergencies and only then the document processing is simplified. The vivid example may serve the recent war between Russia and Ukraine, when more than 7.4 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded across Europe since February 2022<sup>2</sup>. According to IOM (2022), it was extremely important to provide quick and smooth movement to neighboring countries. This work included the rapid training of government officials and local humanitarian responders on the identification and referral of different persons in need. IOM's strong and longstanding relationship with border authorities in the region, who faced up to 15 times the volume of normal border flows, enabled rapid technical assistance and equipment to help manage this extraordinary situation while ensuring sensitivity to particular vulnerabilities of the population fleeing the war.

Moreover, many humanitarian organizations stress the work of social services. Social work significantly differs from other professions, because social workers focus both on the person and their environment. According to the Systems Theory<sup>3</sup>, a person is always interacting with their environment, and various aspects that function as a system have an impact on how they behave. The external influences that affect a person's position and viewpoint can be dealt with by social workers. They also provide chances for assessment and intervention, assist clients and communities in successfully adjusting to their reality, and, if required, alter that reality (McCave & Rishel, 2010).

*"I hear a lot about social services to support migrants with various issues such as getting registration, language learning, community meetings, etc. I think they are very valuable for any new person in the country."*

Social workers play a pivotal role in facilitating cooperation between organizations operating at both international and domestic levels. This collaborative effort is indispensable in ensuring that essential support reaches those who need it the most, particularly vulnerable populations like migrants. Migrants often find themselves in precarious situations economically, socially, and politically, making it crucial to provide comprehensive and tailored social services to address their unique needs.

The spectrum of social services offered to migrants is both diverse and essential. It encompasses a wide range of support mechanisms designed to empower individuals and families as they navigate the complex challenges associated with migration. Some of these key support services include but are not limited to cultural adaptation training, legal consultation, integration support, networking opportunities, psychological support, first aid and emergency assistance, and referrals to other services. As it was found in Thailand, where transnational social work has thrived for over a decade, aiding distressed Thai nationals abroad by upholding social work principles rooted in justice, human rights, and mutual respect (Senanuch 2023). Such practice emphasizes collaboration among various agencies, leveraging civil society, community networks, and organizations in both home and host countries. It specifies that operating as a social innovation transcending borders, it aligns with international social work goals.

It is imperative that social services are not only comprehensive but also culturally sensitive and adapted to the specific circumstances of each migrant. Social workers, through their collaborative efforts with various organizations, play a vital role in bridging the gap between migrants and the services they require. In doing so, they contribute to the well-being and successful integration of migrants into their new environments while promoting inclusivity and social cohesion. It is also proved from the interview when the heroine referred to the Multicultural Center for support with legalization:

*"I had to do my best to solve legalization issues. I did not have money to pay for expensive legal assistance, therefore I turned to the lawyer of the Multicultural Centre in Warsaw. He provided me with a free legal consultation which was helpful for me then".*

### **Future endeavors**

Despite all the challenges the migrant experienced, she continued looking at her future with aspiration and hope. The migrant envisions a foreseeable future with a temporal boundary, planning to

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/ukraine/crisis-movements>.

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from Encyclopedia of Child Behavior and Development [https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-0-387-79061-9\\_941](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-0-387-79061-9_941).

reside in the new environment for at least 2-3 years, but not indefinitely. This mindset reflects an understanding of personal limits and a pragmatic approach to her stay. Furthermore, there is a keen aspiration for increased independence and exploration beyond Poland's borders, fueled by youthfulness and a desire to discover further potentials and accomplishments beyond the current setting. As inspired by Collins's research (2018), this outlook embodies a balance between acknowledging present commitments and harboring aspirations for broader experiences and achievements in the times ahead.

From the story of the interview participant, it is possible to see all these dimensions of a typical migrant who faces economic and social difficulties in a new environment. Even though each situation might be quite different from the others, it still provides a valuable understanding of why social work should be dispersed equally to cover all necessary spheres of support.

## **Conclusion**

The phenomenon of migration leaves indelible imprints on the lives of those who undertake this challenging journey. It encompasses not only the physical relocation but also profoundly impacts individuals emotionally and culturally. The extensive theoretical and empirical research discussed throughout this study underscores that migration is a powerful force driven by global changes, reshaping societies and individuals alike.

The personal narrative of my interview participant is a testament to the transformative power of migration. Although her journey was fraught with a spectrum of challenges, she has emerged as a resilient and accomplished professional with clear goals and notable achievements. Her personal growth and adaptability are evident, reflecting the profound impact of her migration experience.

As she navigates her present, it is notable that her vision of the future may currently lack absolute clarity. Nonetheless, she appears to derive fulfillment from her current work and personal life, embodying the resilience that characterizes many migrants. Her readiness to embrace new challenges and opportunities, born from her previous experiences, exemplifies the adaptability that is often a hallmark of those who have undergone migration.

From my perspective, as a researcher and a social worker, listening to her migration story has been profoundly insightful and valuable. Her account provides a deeper understanding of the motivations behind migration, the support systems that sustain individuals like her during their journeys, and the intricate fabric of work-life balance in a new environment. Above all, the research participant's journey serves as an inspiring example, not because it was unique, but because she persevered through adversity and transformed her negative experiences into opportunities for growth.

Finally, migration is a multifaceted phenomenon that leaves enduring traces on the lives of migrants. It is a testament to human adaptability and resilience in the face of change and adversity. Understanding such narratives is crucial for policymakers, researchers, and social workers alike, as it equips us with the knowledge and empathy needed to support and empower those who embark on this transformative journey, ensuring that their experiences contribute positively to their personal and societal development. Therefore, it is significant to develop transnational social work that focuses on providing support, advocacy, and services to individuals and groups living across different countries and navigating diverse cultural contexts.

## **Suggestions**

The following suggestions aim to guide future research endeavors and inform policy development, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of migration experiences and the development of effective support systems for migrants, especially during times of crisis.

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Future research could benefit from longitudinal studies that track the experiences of young migrants over an extended period, allowing for a deeper understanding of their long-term adaptation, challenges, and successes.
2. **Mental Health and Well-being:** Investigate the mental health and well-being of migrants, particularly in the context of the post-COVID-19 pandemic. Explore the psychological impact of isolation, uncertainty, and cultural adjustment, and propose strategies for mental health support.
3. **Policy Recommendations:** Collaborate with policymakers to develop evidence-based policies that address the specific needs of migrants during times of crisis, such as pandemics. This includes considering mechanisms for ensuring access to essential services and support.
4. **Community Engagement:** Explore the role of local communities in facilitating the integration of migrants. Investigate successful community-driven initiatives that promote cultural understanding and social cohesion.

5. Language Proficiency: Delve deeper into the role of language proficiency in cultural adaptation and social integration. Explore strategies for improving language education and access for migrants.
6. Economic Integration: Investigate the economic challenges faced by migrants, particularly during economic crises. Analyze how policies can support economic integration and empowerment.
7. Gender and Migration: Examine the gender-specific experiences of migrants and the impact of migration on gender roles and relations. This research can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of migration dynamics.

### Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my interview participant for sharing her valuable experiences and insights, without which this study would not have been possible. I admire your strength and level of resilience that made this journey continuing to your dream.

### Brief bio

**Leila Salimova** is a Master of Social Work with Children and Youth (ESWOCHY'23). Leila previously held degrees in both teaching and law and fellowships in gender studies and social psychology. Subsequently, for about 15 years she devoted herself professionally to youth, organizational, and community projects in Kyrgyzstan. Leila's research interests focus on problems with adolescent suicide, social work in crises, and social psychology.

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