Descriptive Finding

The distortion of fertility due to migration:
A comparative analysis of migrants in the
Netherlands and stayers in Poland

Nasim Ahamed Mondal

Agnieszka Fihel

Weronika Kloc-Nowak

Contents

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Nasim Ahamed Mondal[1]

Agnieszka Fihel[2]

Weronika Kloc-Nowak[3]

Abstract

BACKGROUND
Several studies have shown that migrants from Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe experience an increase in fertility after migration. The literature on migrants' childbearing patterns offers several explanations for this phenomenon.

OBJECTIVE
This study examines the childbearing of Polish women who migrated to the Netherlands, comparing their fertility to that of non-mobile Polish women.

METHOD
Using the Families of Poles in the Netherlands (FPN) survey and the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) for Poland, we calculate the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and average number of children for Polish female migrants in the Netherlands by cohort, socio-demographic characteristics and declared migration objective.

RESULTS
The TFR for Polish migrants, standardised according to the sending population distribution by age, education, partnership status and region of origin, was 1.02. Before and in the year of migration, their TFR was 0.87. Already in the first year after migration, the TFR increased to 1.76 and remained elevated, especially for family migrants, but declined considerably in the fourth year after migration.

[1] Doctoral School of Social Sciences and Centre of Migration Research (CMR), University of Warsaw, Poland. ORCID: 0000-0003-3468-006X. Email: n.mondal@uw.edu.pl.
[2] Centre of Migration Research (CMR), University of Warsaw, Poland. ORCID: 0000-0002-8747-1299. Email: a.fihel@uw.edu.pl.
[3] Centre of Migration Research (CMR), University of Warsaw, Poland. ORCID: 0000-0001-9213-4134. Email: w.kloc-nowak@uw.edu.pl.

CONCLUSIONS
Controlling for observable socio-demographic differences between migrants and the sending population does not explain the differences in fertility. Family migrants experienced an increase in fertility after migration, suggesting an interrelation between mobility and childbearing timing. Women declaring other reasons for migration experienced a smaller and less sustained increase in fertility. Childbearing patterns were most distorted for those who migrated during peak childbearing years.

CONTRIBUTION
For Polish women in the Netherlands, periodic fertility measures are inflated due to tempo distortions in the early years after migration, which conceals different childbearing patterns for different types of migration.

# 1. Introduction: An ambiguous relationship between fertility and migration

Migration can affect fertility behaviour in various ways (Kulu 2005; Milewski 2010). In the case of people migrating from very low fertility settings, such as Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), to countries with higher, but still moderate, fertility levels, the effects of migration can be illustrated as follows (see Figure 1). The hypothesis of the interrelation of childbearing and mobility suggests that people who migrate do so to start or enlarge a family, usually with a partner who has already settled abroad. This leads to a decline in fertility just before migration and a compensatory ('catch up') recovery shortly afterwards. In turn, if migration is related to economic and social difficulties or to a separation from a partner, fertility timing may be disrupted in preparation for migration, during it, or long afterwards; whether or not the migrant's fertility later recovers is not subject to the disruption hypothesis. The self-selection hypothesis refers to a situation where a particular group is more prone to both migrate and have a distinct fertility pattern. For instance, rural dwellers who have a more conservative approach to the family are also more at risk of unemployment and therefore migrate for work, or people with certain psychological traits, such as low risk aversion, are more likely to both embrace mobility and enter into relationships. The selection mechanism can result in migrants having higher or lower fertility levels than in their country of origin, and this difference can appear not only directly at the time of migration but at any stage during the reproductive period (see Figure 1 for two possible developments, though these are not the only ones). Migrants, even those who moved as children and adolescents, are influenced by the social institutions and structures of both the sending and the receiving countries. Thus, adaptation and socialisation hypotheses explain the evolution of fertility long after

migration: the former postulates an increase in fertility up to the level in the destination country, whereas the latter suggests a stabilisation of fertility at the low level observed in the country of origin.

The effects of interrelation and disruption are observed shortly before and after migration and adaptation takes place long after migration, whereas selection and socialisation operate throughout the entire reproduction period. These mechanisms are ideal types of real processes: what we observe in large groups of migrants is a mixture of two or more effects. For instance, migrants whose fertility pattern has been disrupted may, in the long run, adapt to the TFR observed in the destination country. Moreover, although the hypotheses of selection, disruption, and interrelation are distinct, their empirical implications are not mutually exclusive. For example, migrants who are selected for characteristics associated with delayed childbearing (e.g., career orientation) may exhibit fertility patterns resembling the disruption effect, while selection for family-oriented traits could resemble the interrelation pattern. This overlap underscores the challenge of attributing observed fertility disparities to a single mechanism without exhaustive data on both observable and unobservable selection factors.

Which of these hypotheses best applies to migrants from CEE countries, which have experienced a strong outflow of population to the west of the continent following their accession to the European Union (EU)? Studies using the periodic approach show that CEE migrants either have very low fertility after arriving in the host country (Robards and Berrington 2016; Waller, Berrington, and Raymer 2014), or a brief increase in fertility followed in a couple of years by a gradual decline (del Rey Poveda and Grande Martín 2017; Mussino and Strozza 2012). These results may correspond to the developments predicted by four of the hypotheses presented above: Migrants maintain the low fertility of the country of origin (socialisation), mobility pushes fertility levels downwards (disruption), childbearing and migration are interrelated in such a way that an immediate fertility decline is followed by a catch-up effect, or the migrants mostly come from social groups with low fertility (selection towards low fertility).

Figure 1: **Six hypothetical developments in the fertility of migrants from a low-fertility country, migrating at the age of 30[a]**
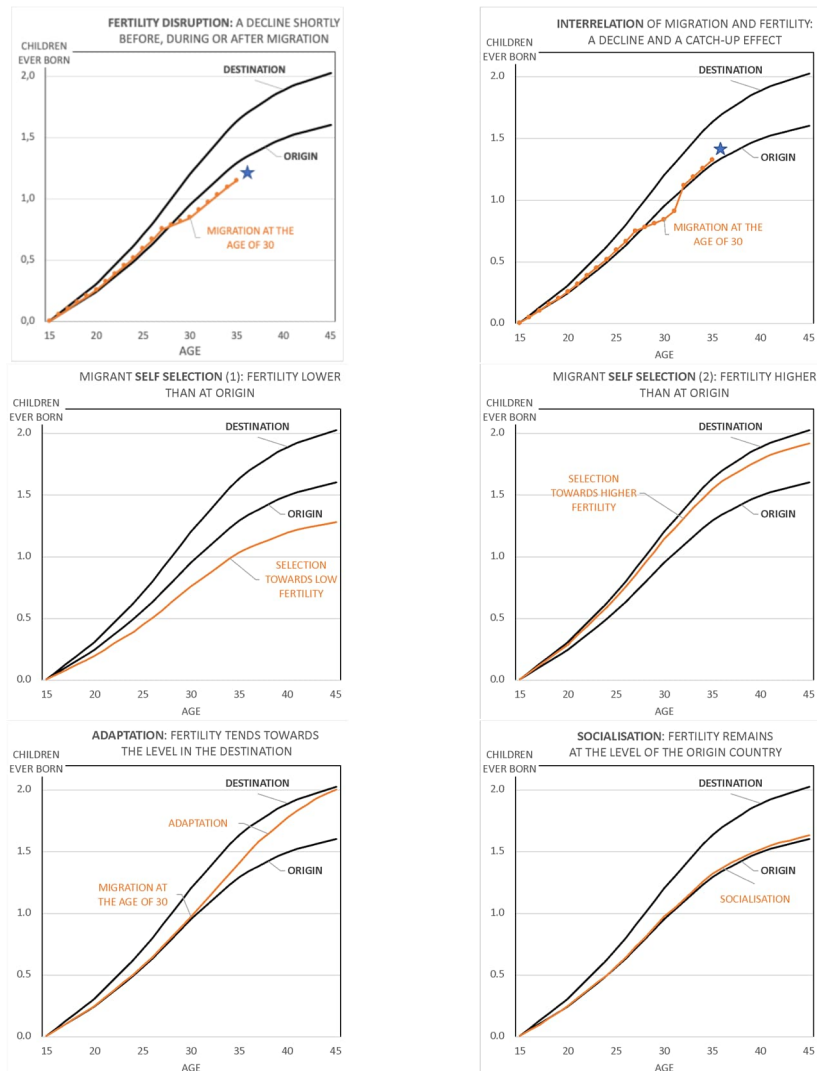
Notes: [a]Asterisks indicate that the final fertility level is not the subject of theoretical considerations. With regard to migrant self-selection, only two potential fertility developments are presented. However, selection can occur throughout the entire reproductive period and may result in higher or lower fertility compared to the populations of origin or destination, depending on the characteristics of the selected group. The presented developments are illustrative; the actual developments may be more complex or encompass combinations of several presented effects.
Source: Own elaboration.

Two decades after the EU enlargement, we can only observe short-term changes in migrants' fertility. Therefore, in this study we focus on the three relationships outlined above: disruption, interrelation, and selection, and examine which stipulations of these three hypotheses apply in the case of female migrants from Poland, where in 2004–2014 the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was around 1.3, and who settled in the Netherlands where the TFR was 1.7 (Eurostat 2024). This objective is not trivial because depending on the effect at work, migrant fertility will evolve in different ways in the future: stabilise at the level registered in the country of origin (if interrelation of events is observed) or below it (disruption or selection towards low fertility). The analysis is based on a representative survey of Polish migrants in the Netherlands using a questionnaire largely similar to the Generations and Gender Survey for Poland, providing a unique opportunity to compare the childbearing patterns of Polish migrants and stayers in Poland.

Several studies have investigated Polish migrants arriving in the West of the continent (Pszczółkowska 2024; Van Den Broek 2024; Jancewicz and Markowski 2021; Kloc-Nowak 2018). Historically the Netherlands has not been an important destination for Polish migrants in quantitative terms (Fihel, Kaczmarczyk, and Okólski 2006; Jancewicz and Markowski 2021; Pszczółkowska 2024). In the first years after Poland's accession to the EU, migration to this country was seasonal, mainly for agricultural work (Jennissen et al. 2023; Kaczmarczyk, Lesińska, and Stefańska 2012). Over time, however, and especially since 2007 when the Netherlands granted Polish nationals access to its labour market, some migrants began to settle and the number of Polish nationals recorded in the Dutch population register increased substantially, from around 19,000 in 2007 to 186,000 in 2023, making them the largest immigrant group (Statistics Netherlands 2024). At the same time, the number of births to Polish mothers in this country, which before 2007 did not exceed several hundred annually, increased to 1,887 in 2010 and 3,093 in 2022 (Statistics Netherlands 2023). Compared to Polish migrants who have moved to other EU countries or to the United Kingdom, Polish migrants in the Netherlands are more likely to have a low level of education, to come from rural areas in Poland, and to declare that they moved out of economic necessity (Pszczółkowska 2024).

2. Data and methods

This study is based on two surveys, both using the same sampling method and similar questionnaires. The first is the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) Wave-2, conducted in 2014–2015 on a representative sample of Polish nationals living in Poland (Gauthier, Cabaço, and Emery 2018). The second is the Families of Poles in the Netherlands (FPN) survey, wave 1 (Karpinska, Dykstra, and Fokkema 2016), which was conducted on a representative sample of Polish-born adults in the Dutch population

register in 2014. The Dutch population register was used to obtain a simple random sample offering national coverage of adults born in Poland who had at least one Polish parent and who registered for a stay of at least four months for the first time between January 2004 and August 2014. Questions on family and fertility were based on the 2015 GGS questionnaire. To ensure the representativeness of migrant women in this study we calculated and applied additional weights so that their age structure was identical to the age structure of the first-generation migrant women from Poland obtained from Statistics Netherlands.

Based on the reported childbearing history, we calculated the TFRs by Years Since Migration (YSM), in line with several previous studies (del Rey Poveda and Grande Martín 2017; Mussino and Cantalini 2022; Toulemon and Mazuy 2005). We also analysed the average number of children of migrants and stayers in Poland at the time of the survey, standardised by age, education, partner status, and origin region, and the average number of children of migrants by cohort and type of migration. The study comprised 650 migrant women in the Netherlands and 2,794 stayers in Poland.

3. Results

On average, the migrant women appear to be younger than stayers, less likely to have the lowest or the highest level of education, and more likely to be employed (Table 1). Of the Polish women surveyed in the Netherlands, 78% moved to this country in 2007 or later, and the average length of stay abroad in 2015 was 5.3 years. Compared to women interviewed in Poland, migrants were more often in a partnership, whether cohabiting or not, but they were also childless more often and had fewer children at the time of the surveys: while the average number of biological children was 1.58 for women in Poland, it was only 0.96 for Polish women in the Netherlands (Figure 2). The latter value increases to 1.02 when the migrant group is standardized according to the structure of the women interviewed in Poland: by age at the time of the survey (to the level of single years of birth), education, region of origin in Poland (NUTS2 regions of birth, as no other information was available for migrants), and current partnership status. The migrants differ from the staying population with regard to sociodemographic characteristics, but taking these characteristics into account does not explain the differences in fertility.

Table 1: **Descriptive statistics of Polish female emigrants in the Netherlands and stayers in Poland**

Background characteristics	FPN (Polish migrants)				GGS (stayers in Poland)			
	N	Percentage [a]	[95% CI]		N	Percentage [a]	[95% CI]	
Age during interview								
20–24	57	11.6	9.4	14.3	237	8.6	7.7	9.6
25–29	204	26.8	23.6	30.4	359	12.6	11.5	13.8
30–34	200	25.2	22.0	28.7	510	18.3	17.1	19.7
35–39	109	16.4	13.7	19.5	589	21.2	19.8	22.6
40–44	54	11.5	9.3	14.3	600	21.4	20.1	22.9
45–49	26	8.4	6.5	10.8	499	17.9	16.6	19.2
Mean age (years)	31.9		31.4	32.3	36.4		36.2	36.8
Main economic activity								
Employed	492	74.6	71.1	77.9	1,877	67.8	66.2	69.4
Self-employed	51	8.0	6.1	10.4	307	10.3	9.4	11.4
Unemployed	57	9.5	7.4	12.0	317	11.3	10.3	12.4
Other	50	7.9	6.1	10.3	293	10.5	9.5	11.6
Education level								
Low (ISCED 0–2)	107	19.1	16.2	22.3	169	6.1	5.3	7.0
Intermediate (ISCED 3–4)	413	62.2	58.4	65.9	1,626	58.0	56.5	59.9
High (ISCED 5–6)	130	18.8	15.9	22.0	999	35.7	34.1	37.4
Partner at the time of the survey								
Yes	561	86.2	83.3	88.7	2,168	78.1	76.7	79.5
No	89	13.8	11.3	16.7	626	21.9	20.5	23.3
Childlessness								
Yes	333	51.2	44.9	52.6	638	22.0	76.6	79.4
No	317	48.8	47.4	55.1	2,156	78.0	20.6	23.4
Reasons for migration								
Family	201	31.1	27.6	34.8				
Non-family	449	68.9	65.2	72.4				
Mean length of stay abroad in 2014: 5.3 years								
Percentage of those who left in years:								
2003 and earlier	42	6.5	4.7	8.6				
2004–2006	98	15.1	12.4	18.1				
2007–2009	225	34.6	30.9	38.4				
2010–2012	208	32.0	28.4	35.7				
2013–2014	77	11.8	9.5	14.6				

Notes: [a] Weights were applied to the presented percentage values
Source: Own calculation based on FPN (Karpinska, Dykstra, and Fokkema 2016) and GGS, Wave-2 (Gauthier, Cabaço, and Emery 2018).

Figure 2: **Average number of children at the time of the survey, standardised and non-standardised (95% CI)**
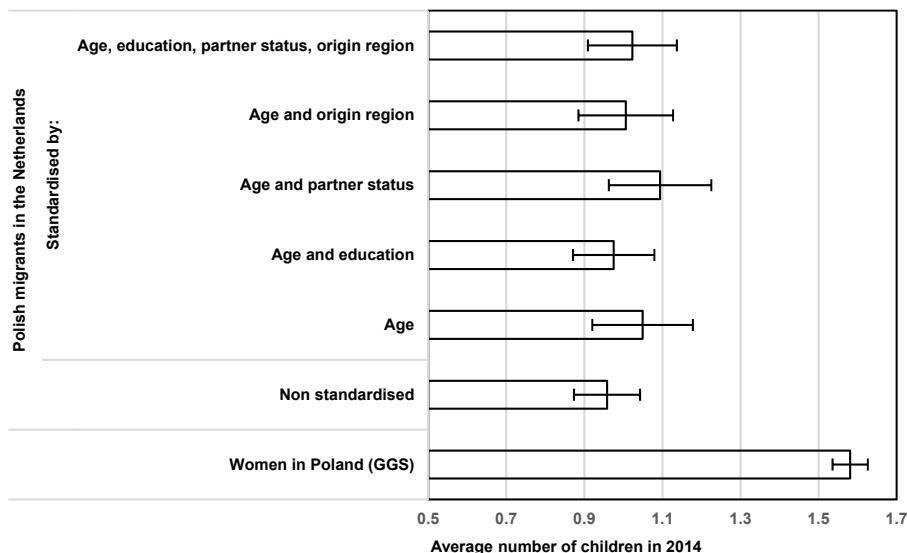
The TFR calculated for Polish female migrants before and in the year of migration to the Netherlands was extremely low, 0.87 or below, which is lower than that of their staying compatriots and the general population of the Netherlands (Figure 3). But already in the first year after migration the migrant TFR rose to 1.76 and remained elevated until the fourth year after migration. This increase was even more considerable for female migrants who declared having moved for family reasons: their fertility increased from 0.63 in the year of migration to 2.32 two years later. However, it was a short-lived change, as by the fifth year after migration the TFR of Polish women living in the Netherlands had dropped below the levels observed in both the Netherlands and Poland. The increase was lower and less sustained for migrants who said they had moved for reasons other than family.

Figure 3: **TFRs for female migrants and corresponding TFRs for the general populations of Poland[a] and the Netherlands,[a] by year since migration**
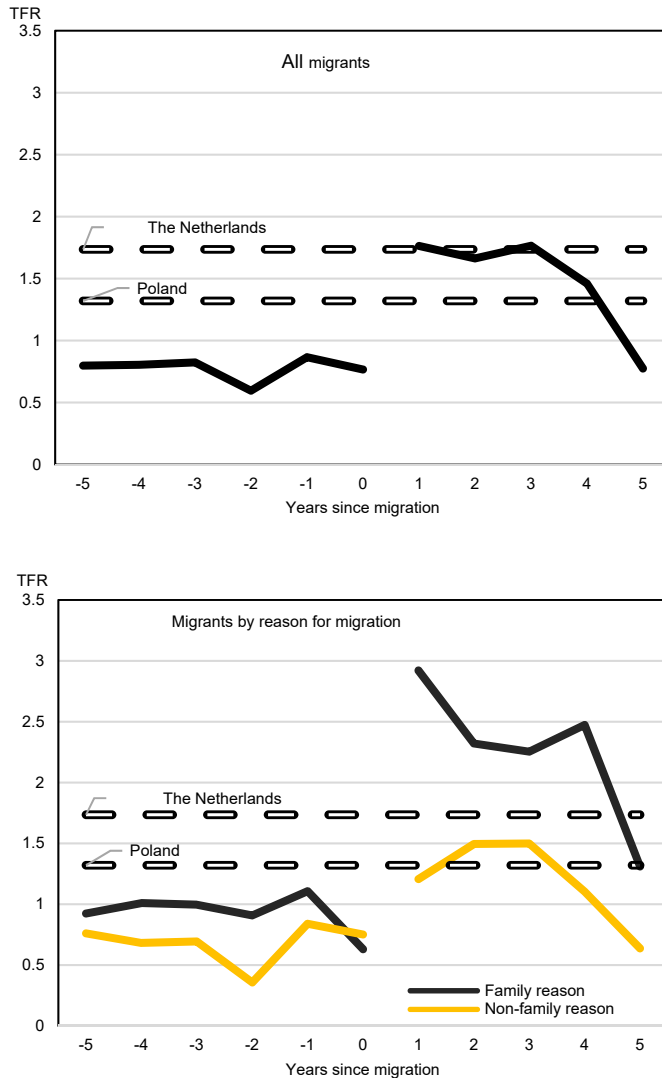
The measure of completed cohort fertility would allow us to verify how international migration affects the lifetime number of children, but as the FPN survey covers relatively recent mobility we investigate the average number of children as of 2015, considering not only women in their late childbearing years but also younger cohorts of women, who predominate in the group of migrants. The results should be interpreted with caution due to the relatively small number of migrants in each age group. Compared to stayers in Poland, the average number of children for migrants was significantly lower in the cohorts born in the 1970s and the 1980s (Figure 4). Compared to stayers, the difference in the average number of children for both migrants who moved for family reasons and those who did not was considerable. For instance, migrants born in 1970–1974 had on average 1.4 children in the case of both family and non-family migration, as compared to 2 children for stayers. For the 1990–1994 cohorts the difference in the number of children as compared to stayers was reversed, while for the 1965–1969 cohorts the differences were negligible. We conclude that these very different results are probably due to generation-specific characteristics. All women born between 1990 and 1994 migrated in their teens to reunite with their parents rather than to establish their own family, meaning that the experience of moving abroad took place before most of their childbearing years. Conversely, all women born between 1965 and 1969 interviewed in the FPN study had migrated to the Netherlands in their 40s, which means that they had almost completed their childbearing years by the time they moved to the Netherlands.

Figure 4: **Average number of children in 2015 (95% CI), decomposed into births before and after migration, unweighted number of respondents (N), and average age at first childbirth,[a] by cohort and migration status**
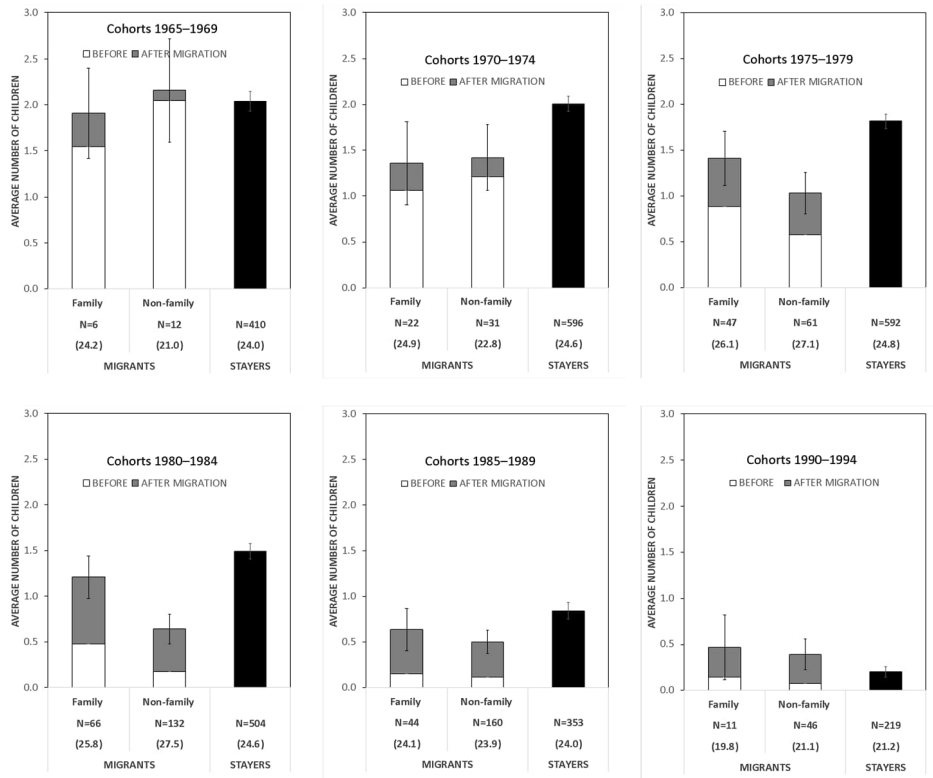
Note: [a] The number of respondents and the average age at first childbirth are given in the descriptions on the horizontal axis.
Source: Own calculation based on FPN (Karpinska, Dykstra, and Fokkema 2016) and GGS, Wave-2 (Gauthier, Cabaço, and Emery 2018).

4. Conclusions and discussion

Unlike previous research on the fertility patterns of CEE migrants conducted from the perspective of receiving countries, this analysis allows a comparison of migrants and stayers. With one exception (Lindström, Mussino, and Oláh 2022), previous studies that address the selectivity of CEE migrants focus on the characteristics that are important for

their social and economic integration (Holland et al. 2011; Sobotka 2008) rather than for their childbearing patterns. In this study, the selectivity of female Polish immigrants in the Netherlands with respect to age, education, region of origin, and partnership status appears to be substantial when compared to the Polish population. However, observable characteristics do not explain the differences between the average number of children born to these migrants and to the Polish population. It may be that other sources of (unobserved) selection explain this difference in fertility, or it may be explained by a range of factors relating to migration and family life after arrival in the Netherlands. As the impact of migrant selection can resemble the evolution of fertility resulting from disruption or adaptation, we recognise the difficulty of distinguishing between the three mechanisms based on non-longitudinal data.

Migration affects the timing of fertility and thus its level: Polish females had an extremely low TFR before migration, which was followed by an increase in fertility that lasted for four years after migration. This finding holds especially true for migrants who declared a move for family reasons, which in their case points to the hypothesis of interrelated events, according to which the migration of Polish women to the Netherlands, in many cases following their partners who had already settled there, was triggered by the desire to fulfil plans for a family. In the case of migrants who declared a move for other reasons, the subsequent increase in fertility was weaker and less sustained, which suggests that fertility disruption could also be the mechanism at work. The weaker and brief increase in the childbearing of migrants in the Netherlands who did not move for family reasons can be interpreted as being due to the costs and difficulties encountered immediately after migration and family separation, as in other studies on Central Eastern Europeans in Italy (Mussino and Cantalini 2022), Norway (Tønnessen and Mussino 2020), and Spain (del Rey Poveda and Grande Martín 2017). In this study, the distinction between migrants who moved for family reasons and those who moved for other reasons should be treated with caution, as we cannot rule out the possibility that respondents determined the reasons for migration ex post, depending on their family status at the time of interview (Hoem and Kreyenfeld 2006).

Polish migration to the Netherlands is relatively recent and no conclusions can be drawn about a possible adjustment of the migrants' fertility pattern (timing and quantity) to that of the natives in the long term (adaptation hypothesis). However, our analysis of the average number of offspring for different cohorts of migrants shows that while women who migrated in their earliest and latest childbearing years had higher numbers of children than women who stayed in Poland, women who migrated during their most intensive childbearing years delayed the start of childbearing and lagged behind their non-migrant counterparts in terms of number of children. A study of Polish migrants in the United Kingdom also shows that they exhibit a later childbearing profile (Waller, Berrington, and Raymer 2014), while other studies applying the longitudinal approach

show that pre-accession migrants from CEE countries appear to have lower completed cohort fertility than both other immigrant groups and natives (Kulu et al. 2017; Puur et al. 2017; Wilson 2020). Whether the cohort fertility of post-accession migrants will reach that of the stayers needs to be investigated in the future, when longitudinal data becomes available. The present analysis provides evidence that the post-accession inflow consisted of generations with very different childbearing patterns and that despite an increase in fertility levels shortly after migration, the completed fertility of cohorts that migrated during their intensive childbearing years is likely to be lower than that of stayers in Poland.

An obvious limitation of this study is that it ignores Polish migrants who had left the Netherlands by the time of the FPN survey. A similar shortcoming has been encountered in other studies (Wilson 2020), and while the selectivity of certain socioeconomic groups towards return or re-emigration cannot be ruled out, Andersson and Sobolev (2013) have shown that excluding those who left has negligible effects on fertility measures. In addition, the presented results refer to a very narrow period in migrants' lives. Apparently, such an approach is not resistant to the tempo distortions of age-specific fertility rates that occur when women at different ages simultaneously accelerate their childbearing, resulting in inflated TFRs up to four years after migration. A similar effect has been observed for Polish migrants in the United Kingdom (Gołata 2016; Lübke 2015; Robards and Berrington 2016) and other CEE migrants in Sweden (Mussino, Wilson, and Andersson 2021). In the case of migrations taking the form of a wave, i.e., highly concentrated in calendar years and involving young cohorts, as in the present study, migrant TFRs are temporarily inflated, and a comparison of migrants and stayers allows the identification of timing distortions. Longitudinal data should be used to determine and explain the true, long-term impact of migration on fertility, as in the study by Lindström, Mussino, and Oláh (2022) for Sweden. Therefore, it will be instructive to conduct future studies comparing our results with the cohort fertility of Polish women who settled in the Netherlands.

5. Declarations

5.1 Funding

5.2 Competing interests

The second author of this study, Dr. Agnieszka Fihel, is a Deputy Editor of Demographic Research.

5.3 Acknowledgements

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