

The short-lived fertility upturn among Polish emigrants to the Netherlands

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The European Union enlargements of the early 2000s were accompanied by intense emigration from the new member states. This was followed by an apparent increase in emigrants' fertility, well above the levels in the countries of origin. Using the case of Polish women in the Netherlands, Agnieszka Fihel, Nasim Mondal, and Weronika Kloc-Nowak show that this increase was only temporary, and due to earlier postponement of childbearing.

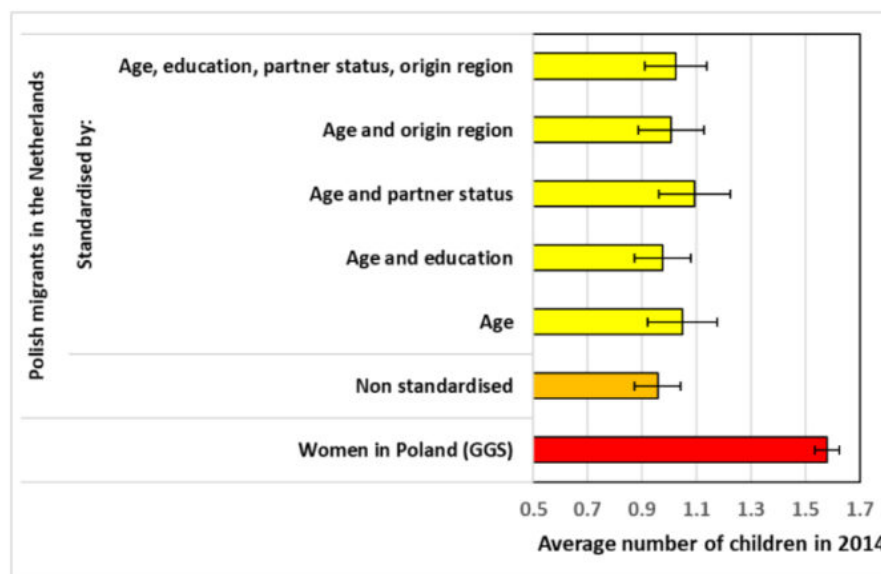
When people move from one country to another, they may wait to have children because of the challenges they face in the new country. On the other hand, they might have their children sooner if they join a partner who has already moved there. The decision to have a child may also be brought forward if the destination country offers more favourable conditions for families. This last mechanism is what we could expect in the case of Polish migrants who moved to the Netherlands in search of better work and education opportunities. Large-scale arrivals started in 2007, when the Dutch labour market became fully accessible to nationals of the new EU member states. In the early 2020s, Poles became the largest immigrant group in the Netherlands, with nearly 200,000 persons registered as residents (Statistics Netherlands, 2024).

Why do the childbearing behaviours of people who move to another country differ from those who stay behind? To address this question, migrants must be compared with people who stay, but this is rarely possible due to data limitations. Sometimes, however, these can be circumvented: the Dutch survey *Families of Poles in the Netherlands* (FPN), conducted in 2014 (Karpinska, et al., 2016), used the same methodology as the *Generations and Gender Survey* (GGs, wave 2014-2015) in Poland (Gauthier et al., 2018), giving us a unique opportunity to investigate the fertility of both migrants and stayers (Mondal et al., 2025).

A temporary fertility increase

A simple comparison of two groups indicates that, after controlling for differences in age, education, partnership status, and region of origin, the Polish who migrated to the Netherlands had fewer children, on average, than those who did not leave Poland (Figure 1). The migrants differed from the staying population in terms of sociodemographic characteristics: for instance, they were younger, on average, and more likely to have a low or intermediate level of education, but taking these characteristics into account does not explain the differences in fertility.

Figure 1: Average number of children of Polish women in the Netherlands and in the home country around 2014, standardised and non-standardised (95% CI)



Source: Own calculations based on the GGS (Gauthier et al., 2018) and the FPN (Karpinska, et al., 2016).

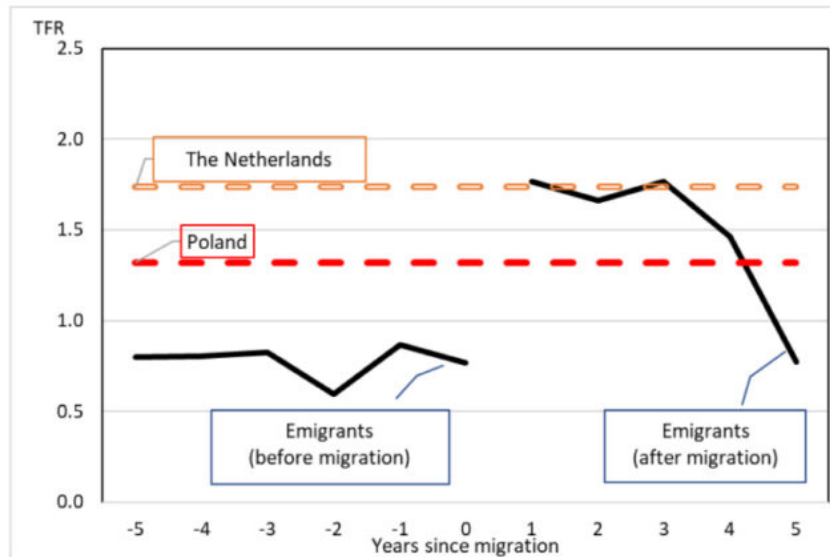
If the change in childbearing is due to migration itself, rather than migrant selectivity, looking at the timing of the migration can provide more insights. In the years preceding migration, the total fertility rate (TFR) calculated for Polish migrants was extremely low, at around 0.9 children per woman, much lower than the Polish average in the same period (1.3) (Figure 2). But within the first year of arrival, the migrants' TFR increased considerably and remained at a similar level to the Dutch TFR for three consecutive years, before dropping below both the Dutch and the Polish levels in the fifth year after migration. Changes were particularly pronounced for migrants who moved for family reasons, which suggests a strong interrelation between childbearing and migration. Namely, Polish female migrants postponed their childbearing decisions around the time of migration, only to catch up during the first three to four years after arriving in the Netherlands.

How will this story end?

To see if Polish migrants will end up with fewer children than the other groups (Polish stayers and Dutch), we would need to wait until they all reach the end of their reproductive lives at age 49. However, we can obtain some pointers by looking at the children already born. In our study, migrants born in the 1960s, who mostly had their children before moving, had an average number of children similar to their peers who stayed in Poland. Conversely, among

females born in the 1970s and the early 1980s, who migrated at the age of most intense fertility, the average number of children was considerably lower than that of their peers who did not migrate. However, this effect disappears for the youngest generations, born in the late 1980s, whose fertility exceeds that of stayers in Poland. This leads us to a mixed conclusion: while not all Polish migrants will end up with fewer children, those who migrated in their late 20s and early 30s most likely will.

Figure 2: TFR in Poland and the Netherlands (average 2004–2014) and for migrants from Poland to the Netherlands, by year since migration



Notes: TFR averages for years 2004–2014.

Source: Own calculations based on FPN (Karpinska, et al., 2016) and Eurostat (2024).

The case of Polish migrants is special. Their migration took the form of an abrupt, but short-lived wave, and this increase in the migrant population raised the number of births in destination countries. But there was an additional mechanism at play: migrants experienced increased fertility in the first years after arrival, compensating for childbearing decisions they had previously postponed. Studies on Polish migration to other destinations provide similar evidence (Tønnessen & Mussino, 2020). This sparked public debate in Poland about why emigrants have high fertility abroad, and successive Polish governments were blamed for creating adverse socio-economic conditions for young families (Janta, 2013). However, time has shown that the relatively high fertility of Polish emigrants was short-lived.

What this study means for demographic analysis

This study suggests that, even with very good data, which are extremely rare for international migrants, appropriate measures must be used to investigate the evolution of fertility. First, migrants must be compared with the sending population to determine whether a particular group is more prone to both migrate and exhibit a distinct fertility pattern. Second, the total fertility rate describes changes in migrants' fertility on an ongoing basis, but is subject to tempo fluctuations as family formation depends on mobility (Gołata, 2016; Robards & Berrington, 2016). For this very reason, assessing migrant fertility based on the TFR may be misleading. Third, the average number of children in a generation can only be approximated by the number of offspring born so far. This study found that Polish women who settled in the Netherlands in their late 20s and early 30s have had fewer children than their peers in Poland;

they are unlikely to make up for this shortfall over their reproductive lifetime.

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