

BOOK REVIEWS

Eva Duda-Mikulin, *EU Migrant Workers, Brexit and Precarity: Polish Women's Perspectives from Inside the UK*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2019, ISBN 978-1-4473-5162-7, 122 pages

Review by Piotr TEODOROWSKI

The 2016 Brexit referendum can be described as a political earthquake in Britain and created an uncertain future for over three million European Union (EU) citizens living in the United Kingdom (UK). To contribute to the understanding of the consequences of Brexit and its impact on EU citizens in the UK, Eva Duda-Mikulin captures the experiences of Polish migrant women at a specific time of the process in her recent book titled 'EU Migrant Workers, Brexit and Precarity: Polish Women's Perspectives from Inside the UK'. This book's publication is undoubtedly timely as the full picture of experiences and views of EU citizens are not yet known. The book is based on qualitative repeated interviews with Polish women which took place before and after Brexit. These research methods make this work unique as there is a limited comparative data available to explore experiences of the same migrants before and after the referendum (e.g. Rzepnikowska (2018)).

Duda-Mikulin is a Lecturer in Inclusion and Diversity at the University of Bradford. In the past, she was involved in the third sector and worked with marginalised communities such as migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. This extensive experience is visible as she smoothly moves between discussion of her research findings and the implications for the policymakers. As a Polish migrant herself, the author assumes both the role of a researcher (outsider) and Polish migrant woman living in the UK (insider). Her background was utilised to build rapport with participants as she shared details from her personal life during interviews.



'[M]y researching Polish migrant women as 'one of them' proved to be challenging at times. Unsurprisingly, I found myself emotionally involved in the research. Thus, I cared about the end results not only because I wished to carry out rigorous research but because I was concerned about how Polish women are portrayed since I am one of them.' (p14)

In migration studies, a 'migrant' is seen as a 'male pioneer' who can be later followed by their partners and families. Throughout her research, Duda-Mukulin aims to add gendered experiences to migration theories. Thus, this book is based on a qualitative study of 40 interviews with migrant Polish women. Some of these interviewees were spoken to twice: before and after the referendum. Polish are the largest post-2004 migration group in the UK. Thus, the author claims that it is a '*distinctive case of large-scale economic migration to the UK*' (p. 25).

The book consists of six chapters — each devoted to one aspect of Brexit or migration: the history of Polish migration to the UK (chapter 2), the labour force and its characteristics in the UK (chapter 3), the process of Brexit (chapter 4), the theoretical debate on the notion of precarity (chapter 5) and finally all findings are brought together to discuss broader implications of Brexit (chapter 6). Statistical data and discussions are supported by qualitative accounts from Polish women who live in the UK.

The initial chapters set up a scene for discussion. Firstly, Polish migration to the UK is discussed from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Polish have migrated to the UK since the Second World War. However, the large migration wave took place after the 2004 Poland's accession to the EU when Polish nationals started to enjoy the freedom of movement and could migrate to other EU states without visa permits. The EU migration is set in contrast with ongoing political discourse in Britain in which migration became one of the most contentious issues – impacting the results of the Brexit vote. Secondly, demographic and statistical data around migration was presented. Focus is on the economy and workforce to show the types of employment EU citizens are engaged in- these are mostly jobs which the British workforce are unwilling to perform. Duda-Mukulin argues that the UK needs migration to fill gaps in its ageing workforce. One of the consequences of Brexit could be labour shortages in the UK. Later, she adds that in the case of an ageing society, losing migrant women could lead to lower birth and fertility rates, as migrants are usually younger than indigenous population. Reasons for initial migration to the UK are shown based on data from the interviews and statistics. The latter showed high

unemployment levels in Poland in the 2000s. However, in the UK, many of participants work in jobs for which they are overqualified. One of the Polish participants says that she keeps hearing of her friends returning to Poland. Nowadays, the unemployment levels in the UK and Poland are both around 4.5 % which as Duda-Mikulín points out may encourage more Polish to return.

The fourth chapter explores the process of Brexit, referendum results and voters' preferences. Migrants experiences and what the outcome of the referendum means to them are presented here. Readers should be aware that this chapter could be outdated as the Brexit process was still ongoing at the time of writing the book as well as this review. The women's views were genuinely diverse, as some are well informed of the Brexit process and follow it. Others are worried about their future but expect no real changes. The last group was not even aware that their legal status is under threat. In the context of launching a new compulsory registration scheme (called the settled status) for EU citizens, Duda-Mikulín could consider revisiting her interviewees again to investigate awareness of and willingness to apply for the new status.

The findings are assessed within the notion of 'precarity'. This book contributes to theory by discussing whether *'the process of migration always brings some elements of uncertainty and thus, whether precarity and migration are synonyms'* (p. 77). Here, one of the most significant contributions of this book to the academic debate is presented – that is, the comparison of participants experiences before and after the 2016 referendum to outline how their lives were affected by Brexit. Participants spoke about the lack of certainty and guarantees regarding the future right of EU citizens in the UK. Some of the participants felt *'betrayed and angry with the British government for the lack of protection, assurance, or care about the future of EU citizens'* (p. 86). Some of the media already announced *Brexodus* (the return of EU citizens to their countries of origin). Duda-Mikulín picks up this discussion and looks at what could be potential barriers for some migrant subgroups to prove their residence and obtain legal status. She notes that this may be especially challenging to achieve for staying at home partners who may lack necessary documentation. She concludes this chapter with the argument that Brexit causes uncertainty, which is a new form of precarity.

The political situation in the UK changes almost every day, and some of the information presented in the book has aged quickly. The author merely mentions the UK government plans to introduce the settled status scheme and discussed with



participants only the permanent residence application. The latter is still available, but the former is obligatory to apply for to ensure that one has a right to remain in the post- Brexit UK. Despite these drawbacks, this book provides a comprehensive introduction to the reader on how the Polish community in the UK perceives and is impacted by Brexit. It is worth a read not only by social science students but also by policymakers. Duda-Mikulín presents why and how Brexit as a political situation impacted the lives of EU citizens, so it is of relevance to stakeholders both in the UK (as the British population ages and requires the young workforce to remain) and migrants' countries of origin (whose well-educated young people emigrate). The book finishes with a call to the British policymakers to '*recognise the vital roles migrants, and women migrants in particular play in the British economy*' (p. 97). At the same time, the Polish government is encouraged to challenge the perception of Poland as '*a comparatively less attractive country*' (ibid) with limited and underdeveloped family support.

'EU Migrant Workers, Brexit and Precarity: Polish Women's Perspectives from Inside the UK' remains a significant contribution to the debate on the impact of Brexit and experiences of women's migrants. It is hard to read this book and not ponder what the political discourse in the UK will bring next to its migrant population in the years to come.

References

- Rzepnikowska, Alina. 2018. "Racism and xenophobia experienced by Polish migrants in the UK before and after Brexit vote." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*:1-17. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2018.1451308.