

NASIM AMIRI GHADI, HANNAH WADLE



FROM ASPIRATIONS TO LONELINESS: WHY FEMALE EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS FROM IRAN CHOOSE TO LEAVE POLISH ACADEMIA

ABSTRACT. Nasim Amiri Ghadi, Hannah Wadle, *From Aspirations to Loneliness: Why Female Early Career Researchers from Iran Choose to Leave Polish Academia*, edited by Sławomir Sztajer, Ewelina Berdowicz, „Człowiek i Społeczeństwo” vol. LX: *Religion and Culture Beyond Tradition: Contemporary Perspectives*, Poznań 2025, pp. 9–30, Adam Mickiewicz University. ISSN 0239-3271, <https://doi.org/10.14746/cis.2025.60.1>.

This article discusses the lived experiences of female Iranian migrant early career researchers in Poland and their reasons for deciding to leave Poland and Polish Higher Education. It is based on biographical interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025. Juxtaposing the migrants' aspirations and their experiences of social exclusions and systemic discriminations, the article portrays what it means to be a “minority minority” researcher in Poland's higher education environment. While the researchers were largely content with the quality of higher education and the opportunities they had in research positions, they experienced a lack of welcoming culture in universities, everyday rejections as foreign nationals in urban life, and financial and legal, visa-related pressures. Commenting on the project of internationalizing research in Poland, the authors urge decisionmakers to take the experiences of Iranian female researchers seriously as a point of departure for re-thinking internationalization. They argue for an intersectional perspective that addresses multiple discriminations, while pointing at the specific responsibilities of universities for international researchers in Poland.

Keywords: internationalisation in higher education, researcher mobility, female educational migration, intersectional discrimination, Poland, Iran

Nasim Amiri Ghadi, Doctoral Candidate at the Department of Humanities at the AGH University of Krakow, e-mail: nghadi@agh.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6262-0988>

Hannah Wadle, Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology, Adam-Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Collegium Historicum Novum, ul. Uniwersytetu Poznańskiego 7, 61-614 Poznań, and University of Barcelona, Faculty of History and Geography, Carrer de Montalegre, 6, Ciutat Vella, 08001 Barcelona, e-mail: hannah.wadle@amu.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5273-539X> (Corresponding Author).

Introduction: internationalization of higher education in Poland

In a global research landscape that is increasingly marked by the paradigm of international researcher mobility, the recruitment, integration and retention of international graduate students and early-career researchers have become core concerns for higher education institutions and in the national migration policies. Questions about gender and race-related positionalities, the challenge of unmaking privilege and rethinking diversity on campus, the lack of employment equity in the light of academic mobility and migration, and strategies to support, integrate and include international faculty are central topics that have been discussed in research on the subject (e.g. Glass, Bista & Lin, 2022; Arday & Mirza, 2018; Basit & Tomlinson, 2012; Ahmed, 2012; Ahmed & Swan, 2006). In the Republic of Poland, the internationalization of the national higher education (HE) sector has become a top priority within university and national politics (cf. Kwiek, 2016; 2019), even if not always an uncontested one.¹ In 2021, NAWA, the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange, launched a campaign and a related website entitled “Research in Poland” that was aimed at making Poland more attractive as a destination for international researchers.

¹ After the so-called “visa affair” that came to light in September 2023, the right-wing conservative PIS-government was exposed for outsourcing student visa procedures for third-country nationals to international companies. Students were exploited and the state lost some control over the policing of student entries into Poland. The scandal happened shortly before the elections and allegedly got the opposition additional votes, as they reproached the coalition their ‘broken promise’ of a harsh anti-immigration policy (https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afera_wizowa, accessed 10.07.2025; see also: Armstrong (16.09.2023)). In 2025, the new government under Donald Tusk changed the laws regarding international students in Poland. First, they made it harder for third-country nationals to obtain student visas (cf. Ustawa z dnia 4 kwietnia 2025 r. o zmianie niektórych ustaw w celu wyeliminowania nieprawidłowości w systemie wizowym Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (Dz.U. [Journal of Laws] 2025 poz. 622). Source: <https://www.gov.pl/web/nauka/komunikat-dla-uczelni-na-temat-wybranych-rozwiazan-przyjetych-w-ustawie-z-dnia-4-kwietnia-2025-r-o-zmianie-niektorych-ustaw-w-celu-wyeliminowania-nieprawidlowosci-w-systemie-wizowym-rzeczypospolitej-polskiej>). Second, they severely restricted the employment rights of third-country nationals for student visas (cf.: *Od 1 czerwca 2025 zmieniają się zasady legalizacji pracy i pobytu cudzoziemców*, <https://www.biznes.gov.pl/pl/portal/005940>).

While the share of international students in Poland doubled during the past decade,² growing from 0,92% in 2013 to 1,95 % in 2022,³ the number of foreign scholars employed in Poland fell from 2019 to 2020, during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the re-election of the right-wing conservative PiS party, and has not recovered since.⁴ This happened notably through a drop in scholars from non-EU affiliated countries.⁵ Apart from the low share among all international scholars, the strong divergence between male and female scholars from this group is striking. In 2023, female lecturers from countries outside Europe with no EU-affiliation⁶ held 9% of all international scholars positions and male lecturers from those countries held 20.9%.⁷ The drop of international talent and the low participation of female scholars from

² International students are not a new phenomenon in Poland. During the socialist era, there existed extensive international exchange programs that were enabled by collateral agreements following the Prague Convention (1972) and the UNESCO Paris Convention (1979) regarding the mutual recognition of degrees. These collateral agreements are the basis for many present international collaborations. In 1984/85, for instance, there were 4273 international students enrolled in Poland, 1116 preparing their doctorates, and Poland hosted 9000 international researchers (Jablonska Skinder, 1987: 61, 64).

³ According to Poland's Central Statistical Office, "107.1 thousand Foreigners, including 52.3 thousand women, studied in Poland, by 1.6% more than in the previous year (this applies to people studying in Poland for at least one academic year). Most of the foreigners came from European countries, primarily from Ukraine (46.2 thousand, 43.1% of all foreigners), Belarus (12.7 thousand – 11.8%) and Türkiye (4.8 thousand – 4.4%). Full-time studies were undertaken by 93.2 thousand foreigners (87.0%). Nearly a third (32.8 thousand) of all foreign students studied at higher education institutions in Mazowieckie Voivodship." Source: <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/education/education/higher-education-in-the-202324-academic-year-preliminary-data,10,10.html>, Higher education in the 2023/24 academic year – preliminary data, p. 2, accessed 9.12.2024.

⁴ In 2023, international researchers filled 2642.27 research faculty positions in Poland, making 2.7% of academic teaching and research positions at Polish universities. RadOn: nauczyciele akademicki cudzoziemcy. Source: https://radon.nauka.gov.pl/raporty/nauczyciele_akademiccy_cudzoziemcy_2023, accessed 29.06.2025.

⁵ From 1088 individuals in 2019 to 588 individuals in 2020; in 2023, with 789 individuals, the number from 2019 had not yet been reached RadOn: nauczyciele akademicki cudzoziemcy. Source: https://radon.nauka.gov.pl/raporty/nauczyciele_akademiccy_cudzoziemcy_2023, accessed 29.06.2025.

⁶ This category is employed in statistics, together with the categories of old EU, new EU, and EU affiliated or candidate states.

⁷ RadOn: nauczyciele akademicki cudzoziemcy. Source: https://radon.nauka.gov.pl/raporty/nauczyciele_akademiccy_cudzoziemcy_2023, accessed 29.06.2025. At the same time, from all international research faculty positions, only 34.49% were covered by female scholars (in comparison to 47–48% female faculty positions overall). And only 26.06%

non-EU affiliated countries in Polish higher education makes the experiences of female non-EU scholars particularly valuable for understanding the “internationalization debate”.

In the Development Strategy of NAWA (2024–2030) from the year 2023, the organization defines a strong need for a “nationwide strategy for the internationalization of science and higher education,” part of which should be to “promote Poland as an attractive country for foreign students and scientists”.⁸ The key questions raised by experts around the “internationalization” of Polish higher education (among those concerning foreign researchers’ presence in the country) debated whether Poland was an attractive place for foreign researchers to work and what could be done for it to become so.⁹ These are questions that are not easy to answer, because the lived experience of international researchers in Poland remains an understudied subject.

This article contributes to closing this research gap and thereby also opens new perspectives on the debate of internationalization of higher education in Poland. Edward Omeni’s work (2016; 2020) on racialization and experiences of violence among international students in Poland has recently opened a more critical conversation regarding this topic. International researcher and student mobilities, like all other migrations in Poland, stand in the shadow of lasting anti-immigrant and Islamophobic political discourses and public opinion (cf. Buchowski, 2020; Main & Kujawa, 2023; Narkowicz, 2018; Omeni, 2016; 2020). It is a factor impacting migrant communities across privileges and life stages in Poland (cf. Moritz-Leśniak, 2024;¹⁰ Jaskulowski

(208.6) of professorship positions (full professor or university professor, total: 800.45) held by international scholars, were covered by female researchers.

⁸ Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (2023). Development Strategy of the Polish Agency for Academic Exchange for 2024–2030. Warsaw: 3. Source: https://nawa.gov.pl/images/2023/strategia/NAWA-Development-Strategy-2024-2030_1.pdf, accessed 10.07.2025.

⁹ Roundtable debate organised by the new service Gazeta Prawna entitled: „Jak robić naukę, to tylko w Polsce – czyli jak możemy przyciągać akademickie talenty z zagranicy?” W dyskusji głos zabrała dr Grażyna Żebrowska, Dyrektor Narodowej Agencji Wymiany Akademickiej oraz goście specjalni: Przemysław Gembiak, zastępca dyrektora, Departament Dyplomacji Publicznej i Kulturalnej, Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych. Source: <https://serwisy.gazetaprawna.pl/edukacja/artykuly/8201254,research-in-poland-w-kierunku-miedzynarodowienia-polskiej-nauki.html>, accessed 28.06.2025.

¹⁰ See for more details: “GOOD BEGINNINGS, PROMISING FUTURES” – Research project on migrant children in Polish schools carried out by the Center for Migration Studies (CeBaM) at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. Source: <https://www.goodbeginnings.blog/the-project>, accessed 28.06.2025.

& Pawlak, 2020). Omeni's work documents experiences of racist violence in everyday life and academia among international, particularly African, male students in Poland and unpacks the different ways in which affected individuals cope with these experiences. In the present article, the authors further the research angle initiated by Omeni, by discussing the lived experiences of female postgraduate students and early career researchers¹¹ from Iran in Poland.

The experience of Iranian female postgraduate and doctoral researchers in Poland stands also, to a degree, for other female educational migrants from the global South with limited access to social and ethnic networks in the destination country of their mobility. Their minority status could be understood as the one of "minority minorities" in Poland (White, 2024: 266–267), individuals, who are minorities in the Polish mainstream society as well as compared to other larger, established minorities. One of those more established minorities are currently for instance Ukrainian citizens in Poland, especially since these tend to be seen as "migrants like us" (White, 2024: 265).¹²

With only 415 individuals in 2023–2024, Iranian students formed a minority group even among international students in Poland.¹³ At the doctoral level, however, Iranian researchers represented a much higher share among international academics in Polish HE. In 2023, looking at only female international members of doctoral schools, Iranian women ranked third in this category, forming 9% of the international female doctoral research cohort with 76 individuals.¹⁴ This suggests that the Iranian female doctoral experience carries some broader statistical relevance within context of the internationalization of Polish academia. In the next career stages of academic

¹¹ One graduate of two MA, five doctoral students (four current, one former), one postdoctoral researcher

¹² This article neither intends to diminish the experiences of discrimination of "majority minorities," nor does it aim to separate the struggles of smaller and larger minorities in Poland. Rather, the authors want to emphasize that the struggle is the same. The goal here is to make visible overlooked and marginalized experiences of some minorities so their perspective can be included in intersectional, anti-racist alliances in higher education strategies.

¹³ Statistics – Poland: Higher education in the 2023/24 academic year – preliminary data. Source: <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/education/education/higher-education-in-the-202324-academic-year-preliminary-data,10,10.html#:~:text=Higher%20education%20in%20the%202023/24%20academic%20year%20%E2%80%93%20preliminary%20data.%20Tables%20in%20XLSX%20format>, accessed 29.06.2025.

¹⁴ And with 100 doctoral students in 2024. Państwa pochodzenia doktorantów cudzoziemców w szkołach doktorskich. Source: https://radon.nauka.gov.pl/raporty/doktoranci_cudzoziemcy_szkoly_doktorskie_mapa_2023, accessed 29.06.2025.

faculty positions, Iranians, again, had a much lower share among international scholars,¹⁵ indicating a clear discontinuity between the doctoral and post-doctoral periods for Iranian scholars, notably women. Here, Iranian scholars held only 2% of international academic staff positions, altogether 65 faculty positions, only 18.2 of which were covered by women.

In light of these numbers, being an Iranian female minority student or researcher in Poland is still a very different experience than in classic educational migration destinations, including Germany, Poland's closest neighbor in the West, where in the year 2020, ca. 18,000 Iranian-born students were enrolled and roughly 19,000 Iranian-born researchers published academic papers (Azadi, Mirramezani & Mesgaran, 2020: 10–11, figs. 4 & 5).

It is important to remember that female global South researchers do not share all disadvantages and intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) pressures equally: others will be additionally discriminated for their skin color (see Omeni, 2016: 12; 2020), or disadvantaged for specific health conditions, sexual orientation, religious affiliation or have stronger financial pressures. And yet, taking seriously the concerns and struggles of Iranian women in Polish academia, means developing a perspective for intersectional struggles in the context of Polish higher education and continuing the debate of internationalization from the female minority minorities researcher perspective.

Higher education internationalization through the eyes of minority researchers: methodology

In the past decade, critical research has increasingly looked behind the facades of internationalization projects and of diversity, inclusivity, and equality agendas initiatives pursued by contemporary universities, notably under the impact of neoliberalism. While the body of literature on this subject has been growing, it tends to focus on more traditional destinations of international researchers and students and on higher education in societies with high diversity, such as the UK (e.g., Rajkhowa, 2024), the US (e.g., George Mwangi, Yao & Perna, 2021), or Canada (e.g., Lin, 2023), where diversity aesthetics, inclusivity schemes and equality monitoring have become part

¹⁵ Distribution of research positions of Iranian female citizens in Polish higher education: 1 x full professor, 2 x university professors, 11,5 x adjunct positions, 1,7 x assistant positions, 3 x other positions. Source: https://radon.nauka.gov.pl/raporty/nauczyciele_akademicy_cudzoziemcy_2023, accessed 29.06.2025.

of university brand and PR packages, and international students “cash cows” (Lin, 2023: 43) for national economies and the neoliberally driven universities. This article contributes to this body of literature by providing critical insights about female minority researcher experiences in Poland, a not-so-typical destination for student and researcher migrations with much less debate and policy traditions around managing diversity. Intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) has become an important pillar for unpacking educational justice and participation in higher education environments (cf. Mayo & Blackburn, 2021; Mitchell, Simmons & Greyerbiehl, 2014; Sibbett, 2020).¹⁶ Especially researching the experiences of university members from different minority groups has been a powerful tool for assembling evidenced critiques of HE systems and advocating for change. This methodological strategy was also chosen in our study. Seeing the Polish HE context and the turn to internationalization through the eyes and experiences of female Iranian early career researchers allowed us present critiques grounded in real-life struggles.

This article is based on in-depth biographical interviews and follow-up conversations with seven Iranian women in their early to mid-thirties who are based in Warsaw and Poznań. The interviews were conducted in person via video-call between 2023 and 2025.¹⁷ Nasim Amiri Ghadi, one of the authors, conducted the interviews in Farsi. At the time, she was an Iranian postgraduate living in Poland.¹⁸ The research questions, interview analysis, and theoretical framework were developed by both authors together. The group of interviewees was assembled thanks to pre-existing personal networks and thanks to a snowball system via Iranian friends and trusted contacts at Polish universities. The vulnerability of the women was managed through informed consent and anonymization, among our research partners none of the women reported having to leave Iran because of political persecution or escaping acute physical abuse.¹⁹

¹⁶ Intersectionality is here understood as multiplication and amplification of marginalizations and vulnerabilities that certain individuals are exposed to because of hateful or demeaning social attitudes towards their (assumed) origin, religion, race, gender, class, or career status.

¹⁷ In addition to those, one Iranian female researcher based in Germany served as a point of comparison in the backdrop of the analysis.

¹⁸ Initially as part of her MA thesis and later as addition to the collected materials preparing for a PhD project. In her MA thesis Nasim Amiri Ghadi also interviewed women from Afghanistan in Poland. Hannah Wadle acted as the supervisor to the project.

¹⁹ There are, unfortunately, too many individuals with such experiences and we cannot also exclude that our interviewees simply decided not to share certain information.

Both authors of this article share experience of being foreign female members of the Polish academic community – however with unequal privilege in Poland and with different career entry points to Polish academia. The biographical interviews and conversations with the women are happening on the backdrops of their own migration histories and experiences in Polish Higher Education.

Locating Iranian female students and researchers in Poland

While in the western image about Iranian women, their systematic and violent oppression as second-class citizens and as dependent family members is not accidentally omnipresent and has been painfully renewed after the women’s protests in the “Women, Life, Freedom”-movement following the death of Jina Mahsa Amini²⁰ on 16th September 2022 through police violence for improperly wearing her hijab²¹ (e.g. Rouhi, 2022), there tends to be little awareness about the high percentage of female students and university graduates in the country, who make over sixty percent of students at Iranian universities.²² The fact that all our female interlocutors already completed their university education on M.A. level, two of them even their PhDs in STEMM²³ subjects in Iran, speaks to this picture. One of the interviewees, Vida,²⁴ had initially come to Poznań to complete another MA degree in Social Sciences. Four interviewees came to enroll as PhD researchers in STEM subjects – Fariba in Poznań, Mahsa, Tina and Shiva in Warsaw. Two of the women, Parisa and Sima, had arrived to start positions as post-doctoral researchers in STEM subjects in Warsaw. The women originated from the educated middle-classes, whose lives in Iran were marked by the systemic discriminations, economic frustrations, and personal longings of a generation of young female Iranians.

Given the weak economic situation of Iran, among others a result of global sanctions, there has been a lasting problem with youth unemployment,

²⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/death-of-Jina-Mahsa-Amini>, accessed: 29.06.2025.

²¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Woman-Life-Freedom>, accessed: 29.06.2025.

²² Islamic Republic News Agency: Iranian female scholars considerably increasing. Source: <https://en.irna.ir/news/85593064/Iranian-female-scholars-considerably-increasing>, accessed 29.06.2025.

²³ Stands for: science, technology, engineering, mathematic, medicine.

²⁴ The names of all research partners have been changed.

concerning women significantly more than men (Kayhan Life Staff, 2023). Young women often face a mismatch of high qualifications and a job market that has not much to offer. This was also mentioned by several of the interviewed women: Mahsa, for instance, a PhD researcher in medical biotechnology in Warsaw, had left Iran after working there for six years, often on unpaid projects and without the professional successes she had been hoping for.

Young to middle-aged highly educated, middle-class Iranians of all sexes, are delaying marriage and parenthood, not only for economic reasons, but also in the light of changing ideals and desires (cf. Babadi, 2021; Keshavarz, Shariati, Ebadi & Karabay, 2018; Khosravi, 2008). Going abroad for higher education and research jobs, has become a way for women, even more than for men, to rethink and reclaim their own adulthood, prioritizing individual preferences and desires rather than giving in to social expectations and pressures and perpetuating the family model of the parents' generations. This is reflected in the narratives of most of our interlocutors. Vida, for instance, recounted that while she had a happy childhood with loving parents, she grew up with the urge to take her own decisions about her life and future. Once she had considered to get married but then got scared of the risk that her husband might want to take all decisions for her, or that he would take custody of their children in the case of divorce. Vida wanted the independence that she knew she could only find abroad.

International migration, specifically student or researcher migration for some known as "brain drain," has for many generations in Iran been a matrix for escaping various hardships – political, social, economic, personal – as well as a means of accumulating social capital in the middle and upper classes, and as a form of imagining and building a better life. (Azadi, Mirramezani & Mesgaran, 2020: 22). In the shared social imaginary of Iranians, the US, Canada and Western European destinations are most strongly present as longed for destinations of educational migration (Zijlstra, 2020: 408). Meanwhile, there are other places that have gained a spot on the imaginary map – such as Turkey and, prior to the war, Ukraine. According to Judith Zijlstra, these places carry importance among young Iranians as alternative educational migration strategies. One strategy is to approach a desired destination, such as the US, one step at a time ("stepwise" migration). Another strategy is to upgrade one's higher education by attending a better quality, affordable institution in a different country ("crosswise" migration) (Zijlstra, 2020: 405, 408). How Poland, an EU country that is at the same time struggling with its peripheral positionality vis-a-vis its "Western" EU neighbours, fits

into this picture and where individuals who chose to migrate there for their studies or research careers locate it on the map of their longings is a question that this article can only begin to answer.

Vida: "I faced too many obstacles" **Structural vulnerability and the transnational continuum of containment**

Leaving Iran for Poland or other parts of the European Union is a difficult, uncertain, nerve-wrecking and costly endeavor, even within the somewhat privileged framework of educational migration, due to regulations in Iran, the European Union, and Poland. In the case of female citizens of Iran, who do not share the same rights and freedoms as male citizens, it begins with the necessary permission of a husband (if married) or a legal guardian, typically a parent (if single). One of our interlocutors, Vida, reports that she had to work much harder than her brother to convince her parents to support her wish to study outside her hometown and even more so abroad. When she was accepted for an M.A. degree in Poznań, Poland, and finally managed to convince her parents to let her go, they agreed only under the condition that her father would initially accompany her to Poland.

As a third-country national, Vida then had to follow a specific, complex visa protocol in order to gain temporary permission to study or work in research in Poland, since her stay would exceed three months.²⁵ This permission was valid for up to three years, depending on the research goals that were defined when it was granted. If the individual wanted to remain in the country, it had to be renewed or replaced by another type of residence permission after it expired. This process was often neither smooth nor successful. In the further course of Vida's migration trajectory, it became a particularly difficult process for her.

After completing her M.A. degree in Poznań, Vida wished to continue her education by enrolling in a PhD program. However, she did not get

²⁵ Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców, Moduł Obsługi Spraw (service of the Polish Immigration Office): "A temporary residence permit for the purpose of conducting scientific research is regulated in the Regulations of Chapter 7. Section V. of the Act of 12 December 2013 on Foreigners (i.e., Journal of Laws of 2024, item 769). The substantive requirements for its granting are set out in Article 151(1) of the said Act." Source: https://mos.cudzoziemcy.gov.pl/en/informacje/prow-bad-nauk/przepisy_EN, accessed 28.06.2025.

accepted for a PhD position. Her alternative plan was to complete another M.A. degree, which enabled her to carry on education in Poland. She enjoyed her studies and considered them enriching her life. After graduating from this course with a second degree, she searched for a job for English-speakers in Poland, unsuccessfully. After a wave of rejections, she decided to hire a small premise in the city centre and to open a small restaurant with Persian specialties there, a business that she had dreamt of before. Due to rising energy and rental prices, Vida had to close the business after a year. To make ends meet, she hired as a platform worker, driving taxis. After a few months of taxi driving, her residence card was due to be renewed. When the renewal took longer than expected (over a year), she was no longer permitted to work and had to stop driving for the taxi provider. Since then, she had been unemployed and could not legally take up any other work. Drained financially to the point, in which she was unable to maintain herself, Vida was left with the insight that she should leave Poland behind and try her luck elsewhere:

After six years of living in Poland, I have learned a lot through my education and added to my experiences. Also, making decisions for my personal life was unlimited. I tried to find a job in the field related to my studies and I tried other side jobs, but according to the reasons mentioned, finally, I faced too many obstacles. Now, at this time, I have decided to migrate to another place, because I need income and financial support to continue my life.

Vida navigated a gradual, structural decentering that she experienced since graduating from her first M.A. degree in Poland. She had been educated in Poland and claimed her freedom, but she did not get the chance to make a living for herself in Poznań or elsewhere in Poland. Closed doors for a PhD, then for employment, and finally for the renewal of her residency card were neither a coincidence nor a neoliberal self-development exercise. Rather, they picture a downward mobility programmed by a system of educational migration and a socio-economic climate that keeps individuals in place, contains their aspirations, and punishes what is perceived as “transgressions” within the system of educational migration. The system fails to value individuals like Vida and create opportunities for them.

Vida’s experiences draw attention to the structural vulnerability that educational migrant women from Iran are facing when their career and personal aspirations “transgress” the tight frameworks they are supposed to fit within, first by the patriarchal rule at home, and then by the anti-migration attitudes and policies in the states they migrated to. In Vida’s case, we can

see an uncanny continuum of gendered and racial control and containment that runs through her experience of adulthood. Her struggles and resilience against it have become normalized parts of her everyday life.

Financial precariousness and the uncertain status of female migrant researchers were two of several concerns Iranian female researchers experienced in Poland. Another source of distress, which will be explored in the next section, stems from contacts with co-workers and fellow research students at the university.

Hurtful silences: navigating microaggressions in the workplace and in the city

Work environments are central to the lives of Ph.D. students and postdoctoral researchers as they tend to have very high workloads and long working hours (Hardy, Carter & Bowden, 2016; Webb et al., 2021; van Tienoven, Glorieux, Minnen & Spruyt, 2024). Being so central, they strongly impact on the well-being, confidence, and sense of belonging of individuals (Riddiford, 2017; Gruber, Crispeels & D’Este, 2023). For women migrating to a different city or abroad for their research job without preexisting social networks or knowledge of the local language, the work environment becomes the most essential source of interpersonal connection.

Tina: “Sometimes I feel very lonely and hurt”

Tina still remembers how she felt when she arrived in her new position as a Ph.D. researcher in Warsaw. She pointed out her distress about the way she was received by her colleagues, especially by her officemate:

From the first year I arrived here, I was very frustrated in terms of communication, especially the first year, for example, with my Polish colleague who I met in a common place every day, we did research work together, she didn’t talk to me and I was always alone and loneliness and silence hurt me.

Initially keeping herself to herself, this colleague opened up only gradually. Eventually, after an entire year, she started talking to Tina, “little by little” and, as Tina recalled. Nevertheless, the long stretches of loneliness and silence that preceded this left marks on her mental health.

People's weak communication is not pleasant for me, and sometimes I feel very lonely and hurt, she noted.

The sense of isolation at work amplified and worsened by Tina's everyday life in the city – while grocery shopping or seeking medical care – where she was often verbally attacked or explicitly ignored for not speaking Polish and trying to communicate in English. In this environment of urban hostility, it would have been essential for her well-being to find the university and her concrete work environment to feel like a safe haven from these hurtful events. Instead, she was faced with silence and blocked off from social connections.

Tina started to look for reasons within her own behavior that might explain this lack of communication, which only added to her stress, anxiety, and pressure. At the same time, she isolated herself more in the city, avoiding shopping at the market and similar social interactions, protecting herself from xenophobic responses. By the time of the interview, she had decided to leave Poland due to her experiences with rejection. Her mental health had suffered a great deal and left her scarred and hurt. She planned to leave Poland and her present social environment as soon as she had completed her studies.

Whereas many studies on intersectional othering, xenophobic discrimination, and racist violence have focused on assaults, verbal attacks, and physical violence, the role of silence and lack of interaction and its damaging potential for the mental health of affected individuals is often overseen and has been understudied. If it is addressed, the discussion tends to concern the silencing of other incidents, or structural silence about inequities. However, it rarely addresses interpersonal silence itself as a form of xenophobic disengagement. At the same time, in the US context, Luan Nguyen (2021:90) has argued that members of the STEMM, especially engineering, academic community tend to adhere to a “culture of disengagement” with matters of racial justice movements. In it, members remain silent in racial justice struggles and thereby become complicit “for silence equates complicity when it comes to racism” (Nguyen, 2021: 88). Nguyen suggests that this mode of disengagement “is linked to the diverse microaggressions that Black students and other minorities experience on a daily basis,” especially female members of underrepresented minorities, both on institutional and interpersonal levels. The accounts of the Iranian interviewees urge us to recognize that performances of silence and refusals of interaction at the workplace cannot be understood as “neutral” behaviors towards new international colleagues, but that they must be reframed as a form of xenophobic microaggressions in the workplace.

Fariba: "I will pursue my goals in another place"

When Fariba enrolled in a Ph.D. program in biology in Poznań, she left behind a fairly content life in Iran, including her job and social circle, to join her husband in Poland, who was also a researcher. Once she started work, she was similarly negatively surprised as Tina.

There was no friendly atmosphere in the work environment and at the same time I felt discrimination among some of my colleagues. For example, when I asked them a question related to the research project, they did not want to talk to me much or spend their time with me, but they behaved differently from how they would have, had a Polish student in the same position asked them.

At other times, the colleagues spoke Polish during work meetings, which was inaccessible to her at the time, as she only learned Polish later. When she asked to be fully included in the meeting, they replied that it would be easier and more understandable to discuss in their language and they would share only the results with her. This response was very uncomfortable to her: "I suffered a lot from it," she said in the conversation, sharing her scarring about this marginalization. One of her strategies for responding to the exclusion that her colleagues expressed towards her, was mirroring the unpleasant behavior of colleagues back to them. A form of resistance that caught the colleague's attention and sparked irritation, moments Fariba recalled as small revenges. But they were not enough to repair the damage. She could not make peace with the rejections she had faced at the university and did not see a future for herself in Poland for that reason:

After four years, as my doctorate course is over, I look back on the past and the challenges I faced, such as not being accepted among colleagues in most cases and being ignored and rejected in some matters, most of which were related to cultural differences. I have concluded that I will pursue my goals in another place, and I have decided not to stay in Poland.

She interpreted the exclusion from social contacts as "cultural differences". Such self-deceptive framing has been shown in other settings to be a common way of dealing with experiences of racism and xenophobic othering (cf. Rapoš Božič, Klvaňová, Jaworsky, 2025). It was shared by some of the other interviewees, who similarly framed the discriminatory, excluding interpersonal contacts in their work environments as "cultural differences," deflecting the (self-assigned) stigma of being assaulted and excluded due to one's origin or perceived otherness. This concerned especially Mahsa

and Parisa, who had just started their research positions and who were trying to come to terms with a difficult situation, in which there was much at stake for them.

Sima: “My colleagues treated [my Iranian male colleague] more respectfully”

Sima was very conscious about and alert to the ways people interacted with her, treating her differently and worse than others around her. Initially glad about the advanced research facilities that Poland offered her, she soon felt the façade crumbling. In her daily life outside of work, when going shopping and run errands, she felt similarly isolated as did Tina: When people noticed she did not speak Polish, they did not want to communicate with her and kept her at a distance. At the same time, her work environment was not a place in which she felt welcome. Unlike some of the other interviewees, Sima was not the only foreigner and not the only Iranian in the research group and could not reason easily with “cultural differences” to explain disrespectful, othering behavior. While there was another Iranian person, a male researcher, in her research team, his presence in the group did not help make her feel safer or more accepted among colleagues. On the contrary, she realized that, as an Iranian female, she was received and treated differently by her Polish colleagues than her male Iranian colleague was:

My colleagues treated [my Iranian male colleague] more respectfully, and while it happened to me several times that one of my colleagues raised his voice against me, he [the Iranian male colleague] was never treated like that. Also, when I consulted [these incidences] with my supervisor, I did not hear a convincing explanation for it.

Having been discriminated against as an Iranian woman and treated with lack of respect by her colleagues, Sima had taken the courage to address the issue with her superiors. Her supervisor had discarded her case, shrugged it off and remained inactive about it.

Adding to the unrecognized discrimination at work, Sima found that the income for postdoctoral researchers in Poland was too low to maintain herself in the Polish capital as a single woman without a local family support network.²⁶ Taking together these experiences as a postdoctoral researcher,

²⁶ Bedroom studio can easily cost the equivalent of 800–1,100 EUR rent per month, and the salary in her position tends to amount to usually only around 1,500 EUR per month for a post-doc or adjunct.

Sima had become fully disenchanted with working in Polish higher education. However, she had not yet given up on Poland and on living there. In the near future, she planned to find a better paid job in Warsaw outside of academia and thereby also change her social environment. Should this plan prove to be impossible, Sima would decide to return back to Iran. Leaving academia was hence a first step that some of the interviewed highly-educated migrant women considered in order to restore their well-being and financial stability after being exposed to discriminatory environments in their research jobs or PhD positions in Poland. As has been shown in other places, toxic work environments can have detrimental effects on health and identity (Ysseldyk et al., 2022) and women were particularly likely to reconsider and abandon their research careers as postdoctoral researchers, because of damaging exposure to such environments. This resonates with our interviewees, whose reason to abandon Polish academia (or Poland altogether) as PhDs or Postdocs was always linked to experiences of marginalization in “white (male) atmospheres” (Hussain & Bagguley, 2024: 19).

Shiva: Speaking Polish did not bring her closer to her colleagues

Shiva, who had come as a Ph.D. student to Poland, had taken the decision to leave academia already: She had quit her Ph.D. studies after three years, in which she had felt left out and badly treated by lecturers and other Ph.D. students, and kept in a constant limbo about her Ph.D. position by the university administration. Shiva subsequently found herself a job in the private sector in Warsaw. She was successful in her new career and gained financial stability. A second measure she had taken was studying Polish language. She specifically wanted to address her feeling of marginalization among her colleagues and believed learning Polish would help her to connect with them. Speaking Polish did, however, not yield the effects she was hoping for: communicating with her colleagues in their native language did not bring her closer to them and she could not establish cordial relations with them and make friends.

Shiva’s experience and her multiple efforts to improve her situation and build a social network suggest that, while the financial situation outside of higher education may, in some cases, be more rewarding for international highly educated migrant women, social practices of othering and marginalizing towards them cannot easily be escaped in societies, in which xenophobic undertones prevail and are legitimized through public discourse – not through a change of environment and not by learning the language of the host society. There is hence a clear limit to the changes that migrants can effect in their

interactions and integrating attempts. Overcoming xenophobic othering in interpersonal contacts can only take place through a broader paradigm shift within a social environment, in which such behavior has been tolerated. Non-migrant individuals have to personally commit to resisting and opposing exclusions on the basis of origin, race, or gender.

This is a particularly important message to an academic environment that aspires to internationalization, while embedded in a socio-political context, in which anti-migrant and anti-Muslim sentiments are actively cultivated, and women's rights issues are being continuously neglected. Any organization that exists in such a context and seeks "internationalization" needs to safeguard its own set of values and demand from their members to consciously create a different, heterotopian and cosmopolitan social space that sets itself apart from the discursive mainstream and creates the conditions for equal participation for all members. Moreover, organizations in such contexts must also make sure to create mechanisms of safeguarding and supporting their members against experiences of discrimination outside their organization in the urban realm.

Discussion, conclusion and recommendations

All interviewed women had embarked to Poland hopeful, motivated, and ambitious to build a life, permanent or temporary, as researchers in the country that had successfully attracted them as a destination for excellent research opportunities. To many of them, their experience of Polish Higher Education and, for some, the corporate job market, had been positive and enriching in terms of academic growth and professional development. They recalled working on interesting projects, being able to travel internationally for research and present at conferences, and advancing their seniority in research. Some also remembered individual colleagues who had supported them. All the same, and without diminishing the positive experiences of the international researchers in Poland, this article focuses specifically on different forms of discrimination that the interviewees had been facing. This was due to the fact that by the time of the interviews, all participating female researchers from Iran, apart from one person, who had only started their PhD in Poland several months prior, had decided to leave Poland or Polish Academia. And this had not been the selection criteria for our study. Unlike what Zijlstra (2020) proposed for Iranian researchers and students in Turkey, the women's reasoning was not one of a strategic

“stepwise migration” to a better imaginary destination, but rather a migratory horizon that emerged from the assertion that, in order to be well, they needed to leave a situation that continued to negatively affect their mental health and came with financial insecurity and that failed to provide positive personal and professional prospects. What, then, can the conversations with the seven Iranian female researchers in Poland contribute to the debate about the internationalization of Polish academia?

Self-determined mobility of female researchers could be called one of the most socially crucial migrations on the planet. It is also one of the significant ways, by which women’s liberation can be advanced, and by which societies and regimes that systematically exercise oppression on women and other vulnerable groups can be threatened and changed. Taking all measures to enable this kind of migration and committing to sincere alliance with the women researchers and their individual aspirations, should thus be indisputable in the higher education systems of states that search for paradigms of meaningful, transformative internationalization. Retracing Iranian women’s experiences as international researchers in Poland, the authors of this article revealed how these women were let down by an academic environment that explicitly strives (and struggles) to attract foreign talent. It shows where this environment neglected its responsibilities to the situational and systemic needs of motivated and highly resilient foreign researchers, leading to severe mental health deterioration and financial precariousness.

The biographies of Iranian female researchers discussed in this article demonstrate that the attractiveness of Polish universities for international research talent cannot be reduced to international rankings and research equipment. Instead, this article argues that the connection between the (low) attractiveness factor of Poland for high-profile international research and the social and systemic discriminations experienced by international scholars in Poland is relevant and comes with consequences. If high-skilled individuals who made the decision to come to Poland as researchers and praise the standards of Polish research still decide to leave the country because they experience forms of discrimination that cost them their mental health, then the priority for internationalization should neither be the next image campaign nor investments into high-tech equipment, as commonly suggested. The priority should be to improve the conditions and perspectives for international scholars in Poland, taking seriously the discrimination they are exposed to on a daily basis and the intersections of identities that amplify those discriminations.

As mentioned before, the challenge to do that is bigger in Poland than in other places with stronger migrant communities. The task is further

complicated by the lasting anti-migration discourse in the country that, most recently, has been mobilized to politicize and restrict student migration. Meaning that Polish universities have less reliable support from urban society and from national politics, and thus have more responsibilities toward international students than universities in other places. This must be openly acknowledged both when formulating strategic goals and when allocating resources to specific programs. This implies that it is not only a matter of implementing ready-to-go internationalization and diversity strategies from Western HE systems that emerge from different local contexts and that, in addition, often reproduce privilege and power inequalities. Rather, if internationalizing research in Poland is meant to build a community of excellent scholars from diverse backgrounds and make contributions that address global challenges, universities need to rethink how to respond to the different realms of discrimination that affect international scholars: How to become safe havens from racism and intersectional discrimination and efficiently act on incidences of psychological and physical harm? How to create interpersonal support networks and a culture of inclusive collegiality and prevent loneliness and isolation? How to support internationals in their professional development and career growth and prevent downward mobility and unemployment? How to design administrative systems that cushion the legal pressures on many international scholars and manage legal limbo? How to develop employment, grant, stipend, or loan schemes that prevent financial precariousness of international scholars in light of their additional financial burdens? The answers to these questions can only be produced by the entire university community together through a university-wide conversation that involves everyone from admin staff to senior scholars, to students, and of course international members of the community. This conversation should take place in diverse forms, including trainings, structural reforms, campaigns on campus, student projects, and continued monitoring. Every single member of the academic community needs to become a partner in this joint effort to make the university a safe haven and “third space” (in the use of Khatun, 2024: 89). Especially the vision of creating an anti-racist, inclusive welcome culture across the university staff members can only be realized if everyone takes full responsibility for it. If universities are complex ecosystems, then successful internationalization of universities will never be less complex than those ecosystems. It will embrace complexity, interdependency, and the sustainability of relations.

The perspective of Iranian female researchers in Poland presented in this article has provided a blueprint of flagged areas that urgently need to be

addressed to enable high-skilled, motivated international researcher from different backgrounds to be content with their work and lives in Poland. In this light, the authors argue that the only socially sustainable approach to the internationalization of Polish higher education is an approach that is intersectional, contextual, and community-driven: one that considers the multiple marginalizations of international researchers, realistically evaluates the specific socio-political conditions universities and migrants are operating in, and engages everyone within the complexity of the academic ecosystem.

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