

Agency and Social Relations in the Search for a Better Life: Female Migrant Entrepreneurs in Poland

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Dynamic changes and the increasing diversity of migrant societies support small-scale enclave businesses in Poland. Female migrants from Belarus and Ukraine appear to have found their niche in the beauty and cosmetology sector. Nevertheless, their entrepreneurship goes beyond the enclave market. Specialists provide services to migrant communities and simultaneously target Polish clients to ensure the success of their ventures. This article presents the results of qualitative research based on 13 in-depth interviews with Ukrainian and Belarusian beauty specialists. I focus on these businesswomen's narratives about their entrepreneurial trajectories. My aim is to explore how they use and extend their social relationships in order to acquire entrepreneurial agency. Entrepreneurship can be understood as a socially embedded practice. I apply an intersectionality approach to investigate the complexity of socially constructed identities and the dimensions of individual entrepreneurial agency. Incorporating a mixed embeddedness approach, I examine the impact of structural factors on entrepreneurial activity and the importance of social networks for women's self-realisation as independent beauty specialists.

Keywords: gender, female migrants, migrant entrepreneurship, social networks, beauty sector, agency

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Introduction

The entrepreneurship of female migrants can be a pathway to economic independence, an improvement in their social position and their active participation in the labour market. This article examines female migrant beauty specialists' entrepreneurial activities as an approach to a better life in a new country. The analysis focuses on Ukrainian and Belarusian female migrants and their small-scale enterprises in the beauty sector in Warsaw. I present examples of their business trajectories and how these female migrants used their social networks to acquire individual entrepreneurial agency. Although not a comparative study of the two nationalities, the research captures similarities in their communication processes with clients and the establishment of female-oriented spaces of social integration. I choose the beauty sector as strongly relational, embodied in an intimate social context – hence I consider both beauty treatments and social interactions (Idola 2021; Kryczka 2021). Such an approach allowed me to provide a more-nuanced analysis of the entrepreneurial strategy as a socially embedded practice (Idola 2021; James, Xiong and Anderson 2022; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Romero and Valdez 2016).

Located within the complexity of social, institutional and economic contexts (Kloosterman and Rath 2001), migrant women manifest their agency and challenge the inequalities (Dy 2020; James *et al.* 2022) of power structures and normative discourses of entrepreneurship (Ainsworth and Hardy 2007; Lassalle and Shaw 2021). They elaborate innovative entrepreneurial solutions (Kloosterman and Rath 2001), establish gendered social networks and create a socio-spatial environment for mutual interaction and support. From the micro perspective, they acquire empowerment (Kabeer 2002) and achieve their individual goals in a new country. The analysis privileges a sociological perspective on the agency of migrant women (Andrejuk 2015, 2018; Emmerik and Euwema 2018; Fedjuk 2016; Kindler 2012; Krajewska 2012; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Mahler 2006; Rydzik and Sundari 2020). To capture the intersectional perspective (Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Romero and Valdez 2016), the article focuses on the interplay of multiple dimensions: individual socially constructed features (gender, age, ethno-nationality, migration status, social class), social relations, social resources and how they shape the entrepreneurial path. The Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictions on beauty services in Poland enabled me to include a unique examination of the multifaceted crisis and the remedial actions which female migrants took to secure their businesses. I inquire into the interrelation between the above dimensions through a gender-related perspective. The research contributes to the structuralist angle of understanding female entrepreneurship by applying the perspective of 'purposive action' (Kabeer 2002) and the exploration of how female migrants use and rationalise resources embedded in migrant and mainstream networks in their aim to elaborate successful entrepreneurial strategies (Hunt 2008; Lidola 2014; Rydzik and Sundari 2020). My main research question was: How do female migrant entrepreneurs experience running a business in a new country in times of crisis and pre-crisis? This was followed by two further questions concerning the entrepreneurial process of female migrants and the economic, social and symbolic dimensions of the business: What factors enhance and restrict female migrant entrepreneurial strategies? What is the role of social networks in developing a business and female migrants' entrepreneurship?

This article focuses on the entrepreneurial strategies and business activities of beauty specialists from Belarus and Ukraine as one of the numerically largest and significantly feminised migrant communities in Poland. Inter- and intra-community relationships between the Belarusian and the Ukrainian diasporas, the complexity of migrant networks and their resource infrastructure all frame female migrant entrepreneurship and impact on their business trajectories. In this article I refer to the bonding mechanism of social interactions embodied in the context of the intersectional gendered experiences which interviewees shared with both migrant and non-migrant clients. I first present an overview of migration processes to Poland and refer to some recent statistical data concerning Ukrainian and Belarusian migrant communities in Poland. In the next section,

I refer to theoretical concepts of agency (Andrejuk 2016; Bakewell 2010; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Kabeer 2002), social networks (Brown 2007; Granovetter 1973; Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 1998) and the embeddedness of migrant entrepreneurship (Kloosterman 2010; Kloosterman and Rath 2001; Portes and Yiu 2013) that grounded my research. I also refer to the concepts of integrating space and meaningful interactions (Mayblin, Valentine and Winiarska 2016). After this, I present the results of my empirical research. Here, the interrelation of expectations and experiences in Poland, the business development path and solutions implemented by interviewees constitute the core elements of the analysis. The final section presents a concluding discussion on the role of social networks in the female migrant business process and the strategies which interviewees developed to ensure the success of their ventures and acquire empowerment.

Migration trends and the economic participation of migrants in Poland

Economic and political transformations in Poland, due firstly to the fall of communism and labour-market liberalisation and, later, to the country's accession to the European Union have shaped migration processes into and out of the country. Data from the Office for Foreigners show that, during the last 10 years, Poland has faced constantly increasing rates of immigration; official statistics record that, in 2020, more than 550,000 non-EU citizens had a form of residence permit (temporary residence, permanent residence or an EU long-term residence permit).¹ Besides the quantitative growth of migrant groups, Poland is also undergoing a social transformation as migrant communities become more diverse in terms of nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, education or employment and become active actors in mainstream society. For several years, statistical data on migration have shown that migrants consider Poland as a country of long-term residence related to settlement and community-building processes (Okólski and Wach 2020). Numerically, the major groups of new residents in 2021, according to the administration's statistics, were Ukrainians (366,643) and Belarusians (47,988).² Among EU states, Poland has been a primary destination country for Ukrainians since 2010, with a stable increase in arrivals since 2014 (Dolińska 2017). However, migration from Belarus to Poland remained low for years (Lesińska and Brunarska 2014). Since 2015, these figures have risen, particularly following the 2020 presidential election and in terms of the enclave market and network infrastructure (Petrankova 2022).

The other feature of migration trends to Poland is their progressive feminisation. Women constitute almost half of the migrant population from Ukraine and Belarus: 170,359 Ukrainians and 21,214 Belarusians in 2021. Female migrants participate actively in various labour-market sectors and local social and cultural activities. The gender-oriented perspective is widely described in migration studies by scholars in Poland (Dolińska 2017, 2019; Grabowska-Lusinska and Jazwinska 2009; Praszalowicz 2008; Slany 2009).

The data on applications for health and pension insurance (Social Insurance Institution or ZUS) can be used as a general indicator of the economic activity of migrants in Poland. According to ZUS, there were 725,173 non-Polish citizens registered for health and pension insurance in 2020.³ The largest groups were Ukrainians and Belarusians, with 532,503 and 50,606 migrants respectively. Female migrants made up almost a third (248,155) of all migrants registered for health and pension insurance.

The wide range of literature on the economic participation of female migrants in Poland shows that women follow diverse paths of labour activity, from highly qualified positions and forms of entrepreneurship to unregistered work in the 'shadow economy' (Andrejuk 2015; Dolińska 2019; Fedyuk 2016; Kindler 2012; Krajewska 2012). However, the entrepreneurial practices of female migrants in Poland have been less explored. A significant study of female Ukrainian migrants' experiences as business actors in Poland was provided by Katarzyna Andrejuk, who introduced a typology of female migrant self-employment strategies, defining them as the 'self-realisation strategy', 'survivor strategy' and 'family defender strategy' (Andrejuk 2018). These strategies reflect the remedial practices which female migrants employ to oppose socially

constructed structural impediments in the labour market. Entrepreneurship and self-employment have become widespread solutions among migrants, enabling them to avoid discriminatory practices in the labour market and to rationalise their resources of economic, human and social capital (Andrejuk 2016; Dheer 2018; Fairlie and Meyer 1996; Portes and Yiu 2013).

Migrants' rights to entrepreneurship in Poland are somewhat limited and depend on their legal status. The main normative act that defines the legal conditions of migrant entrepreneurship is the Act of 6 March 2018 on the Terms on which Foreign Entrepreneurs and Other Foreign Persons May Participate in Economic Trade in the Territory of the Republic of Poland. According to this document (Art. 4 point 1), only persons with a residence permit (either temporary or permanent), refugee status, subsidiary protection, temporary protection or a tolerated stay, together with Pole's Card-holders⁴ have the right to register their business venture on the Central Register and Information on Economic Activity (CEIDG) and to exercise business activity according to the general conditions as Polish citizens. The other form, more accessible in formal requirements, is the establishment of a partnership (whether registered, professional, limited or limited joint-stock).⁵ In this case, the primary condition is based on the performance of capital resources, not on the residence status. The Limited Partnership was the legal form preferred among the interviewees of my research. According to the Central Register and Information on Economic Activity (CEIDG), in 2019 there were around 21,000 migrant sole proprietorships registered in Poland.⁶ The main migrant groups who decide on such a form of self-employment are citizens of Ukraine and Belarus.

My research was focused on the beauty sector in Poland and the entrepreneurial activity of female migrants as owners of small-scale ventures. For the last few years, the beauty sector in Poland has constantly been on the increase due to the relatively low costs of entrance to the market and high demand for services (Kryczka 2021). Sole or small-scale (up to five employees) enterprises prevail in the sector, reflecting the main research question – the role of social networks maintained between the entrepreneurs and the client. According to data of 5 May 2022, there were around 95,000 beauty and hair salons in Poland.⁷ Official data did not allow me to estimate the number of enterprises established by migrants.

Another aim of the study was to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on female migrant entrepreneurial strategies, as this health crisis represented a significant challenge for the beauty sector in Poland, affecting the general conditions and business prospects of small-scale and individual entrepreneurs.⁸ Administrative restrictions meant that all beauty, nail and hair salons were temporarily closed between 1 April and 18 May 2020. Thus, the empirical element of my study was conducted after the re-opening of such salons, which allowed me to include the perspective of interviewees' entrepreneurial agency in a context of multifaceted crisis and its structural conditions.

Theoretical background

Agency and entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship can be conceptualised as a manifestation of migrant agency. As one of the main problems which female migrants face in a labour market is discrimination (unequal or precarious conditions of employment) and deskilling (the inability to work according to their education and skills), self-employment improves their likelihood of achieving independence and professional development (Andrejuk 2018; Baycan and Nijkamp 2006; Verduijn *et al.* 2014). Their own business venture allows women to become visible as entrepreneurs and active actors in the labour market and social environment and to achieve individual goals. Although various studies have been done on female migrant entrepreneurship (Andrejuk 2015; Colombelli,

Grinza, Meliciani and Rossi 2020; Dolińska 2019; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Lidola 2014; Ratan 2018; Webster and Haandrikman 2017), still not much is known about female migrants' perspective on solo ventures and the development strategies between enclaves and the mainstream markets. This article provides insights into the social embeddedness of migrant entrepreneurs (Imaobong *et al.* 2021; Kloosterman, Van der Leun and Rath 1999), focusing on individual entrepreneurial strategies and exploring how women utilise social resources to improve their business and personal success.

The concept of agency is widely discussed in sociology and social science (Archer 2010; Bakewell 2010; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Giddens 1984). Various theoretical studies refer to the complexity and interplay between agency and structure (Archer 2010; Bakewell 2010). The notion of the agency–structure nexus finds its explanation in the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (1984). The approach provides two theoretical assumptions used in the current article: firstly, the core features of agency should be defined through the actor's reflexivity and ability to perform and modify action (Bakewell 2010; Giddens 1984; Kabeer 2002). Secondly, agency is manifested in the actor's relation to structural patterns. The structure appears in the academic literature as either an opportunity or an oppression (Kloosterman 2010; Kloosterman *et al.* 1999; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Rydzik and Sundari 2020). In other words, structure determines opportuneness for or constraints on the agent's actions (Hays 1992). In migration studies, the 'agency–structure' approach has been used to define a migrant as an active actor embedded in a complex, heterogeneous context of social relations – also implicated by institutional, socio-cultural and economic patterns in the new place of residence (Andrejuk 2016, 2018; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Lassalle and Shaw 2021). Structuration also provides a framework that can be applied to examine sectors which contain female migrant entrepreneurial activity. Scholars provide an ongoing debate on the emancipatory and oppressive potential of entrepreneurship, defining the category of female migrants as a 'disadvantaged' entity (James *et al.* 2022; Verduijn *et al.* 2014). Migrant women experience multi-dimensional structural disadvantages, which reflect inequalities (Romero and Valdez 2016) and the gendered distribution of roles (Andrejuk 2018; Lassalle and Shaw 2021) within the enclave and mainstream social environments.

In my research, I also consider the complexity of inter-community relations between Ukrainian and Belarusian enclaves and mainstream society. In developing beauty salons, female entrepreneurs navigate in between these structures in their everyday business activities. For the current analysis, an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Romero and Valdez 2016) was also applied to better understand how female migrants mobilise social resources and use them to foster the development of their initiatives. Implementing a gender approach, the analysis of business trajectories allows the conceptualisation of entrepreneurial agency as migrant beauty specialists' response to socially embedded power structures (Rydzik and Sundari 2020) in the enclave and mainstream markets through the diversification of targeted clienteles and the de-ethnicisation of beauty services.

Another dimension of the theoretical concept of agency focuses on its relational character. Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 962) define agency as a 'temporally embedded process of social engagement', such that 'agency shapes social action' (*ibidem*: 963). This theoretical approach constitutes the core element of the conceptualisation of female migrant entrepreneurship in the current article. The parameters of success or failure of the interviewees' business activities depended on their social relations and networking processes. Beauty specialists intentionally create female-oriented networks within their entrepreneurial frameworks to safeguard their business, optimise the necessary resources and to feel like 'recognised' specialists and members of a new society. The interrelations between social structural conditions, the individual positioning of female migrants as entrepreneurs and the gendered social interactions developed within the business activity can be conceptualised according to Nalia Kabeer's theoretical concept of 'purposive action'. Kabeer determines agency as a dimension of empowerment and defines it through the context of a purposive action or an individual ability to 'specify goals and act upon

them' (Kabeer 2002: 443). In my research, I apply Kabeer's concept to the female entrepreneurship context and refer to the positive meaning of agency, understood as a 'capacity to define one's life choices and to pursue one's own goals, even in the face of opposition from others' (Kabeer 2002: 438). Such an approach allows us to find out when and in which circumstances female migrants exercise autonomy and follow individual choices to improve their ventures. The notion of purposive action also defines female migrants' approach to entrepreneurship through a willingness to take risks and apply innovative solutions (Andrejuk 2016; Portes and Yiu 2013) in order to enter and extend beauty services in mainstream market structures while simultaneously functioning in the enclave environment.

Agency, embeddedness, and social networks

Migrant entrepreneurs develop their ventures in a new country of residence through rationalising human, social and economic resources. External conditions define both possible opportunities and impediments impacting on decision-making processes and entrepreneurial strategies. The mixed embeddedness theoretical approach provides an ontological framework in which to conceptualise the phenomenon of structural opportunities and constraints within migrants' business activity (Kloosterman *et al.* 1999). This approach highlights the multidimensional embeddedness of migrants in the social networks of co-ethnic communities and in the wider socioeconomic and political-institutional environment (Colombelli *et al.* 2020). Adapting this theoretical approach to the perspective of female migrants' entrepreneurial strategies leads to the analysis of multilayered relations within enclave (Ukrainian, Belarusian, etc.), inter-enclave and mainstream structures. Empirical research provides evidence of the complex social interrelations which female entrepreneurs develop within both migrant and mainstream markets. The growth of migrant communities in Poland and the extension of virtual reality through online social communities improves social-capital cumulation and its accessibility to its members (Homel 2020). For their adaptation and settlement in a new environment, migrants rationalise and operationalise the available resources by taking advantage of the enclave networks, which become an important source of social support enabling its members to start their new ventures and define market niches within mainstream society (Homel 2020). The complexity of intercommunity infrastructure, resources and network accessibility for Ukrainian and Belarusian entrepreneurs affects their strategies in Poland. On the one hand, migrants develop their ventures depending on the demands of enclaves and migrant markets. On the other, entrepreneurs find themselves in direct and indirect competition in terms of power relations (strategic resources), new identity formation and positioning in the mainstream market. The interrelationship of individual agency and social networks completes our understanding of how migrant network resources are used to improve the entrepreneurial process. This article presents examples of how interviewees operationalise and diversify social resources in order to gain autonomy and create a new social and economic venture situated 'in-between' enclave and mainstream market structures.

The recent literature highlights that migrant women face the complex effects of gender, ethnicity and social status that impact on their experience of migration, integration and patterns of self-agency in a new host country (Baycan and Nijkamp 2006; Colombelli *et al.* 2020; James *et al.* 2022; Romero and Valdez 2016). Intersecting dimensions of age, country of origin, migration status, education, employment and marital status directly impact on networking mechanisms and the role of female migrants as entrepreneurs. Mahler found that gender affects the behavioural attitudes of migrant entrepreneurs more than does ethnicity (Mahler 2001). Structural regimes significantly constrain the opportunities for entrepreneurial activity for female migrants. This also explains why female migrant entrepreneurs are more likely to use informal networks than men (Emmerik and Euwema 2018) and tend to establish networks that provide financial and social support to their members. Studies on female entrepreneurship show a significant advantage of value-added and symbolic

dimensions (such as emotional support, encouragement and solidarity) among female entrepreneurs over males (Idola 2013; Leskinen 2017). As presented in the article, empirical research confirms theoretical assumptions and provides evidence that female migrants rationalise social relations and deepen female-oriented networks on the path to sole entrepreneurship. Within business strategies, women create social bonding mechanisms embedded in the shared aesthetic norms and commonalities of the gendered experience of a daily routine rather than in ethnic identity. Social networks established due to their business activity empowers migrant entrepreneurs due to the restoration of their social status and access to meaningful integration with other women.

Research method

The study is qualitative and based on 13 in-depth interviews with female migrant specialists in the beauty sector who developed their careers in Warsaw (10 Ukrainian and 3 Belarusian). I am aware that this limited number of cases does not allow in-depth comparative analysis of their business trajectories, the complexities of inter-group relations or networking mechanisms. Hence this paper is just a first step in a more profound study on the topic. The research was conducted during the period July–September 2020. All participants were informed about the methodology and goals of the research, their right to refuse answering the question or to withdraw the interview. To ensure anonymity all names used in the article have been changed. Interviewees were asked to describe their expectations of life in Poland, their history of migration and their post-migration experience, focusing on developing their career path, goals and the role of social ties which they use or create to approach their vision of a better life. Interviewees were reached through personal contacts and recommendations from other beauty specialists. Interviews were conducted in either Polish or Russian then transcribed into Polish and I met with each woman in person, either in their salons, their apartments or in cafés. The material was coded and analysed with MAXQDA. At the time of the research, my interviewees had been living in Poland for between 2 and 11 years. They represented different age groups (from 20 to 40 years old), marital status and education levels and two had children. This differentiation allowed me to better understand the individual motivations and structural impediments to female migrants' entrepreneurship.

Of the specialists, 10 owned beauty salons in Warsaw, in which 5 worked individually, 3 had already extended their business and hired a beauty specialist and 2 maintained their business themselves – a mother and daughter who had a massage studio and an esthetician who rented a studio with her friend but offered different beauty treatments. This diversity of business models enabled me to gain more information about factors affecting entrepreneurship and the remedial actions which women took to develop their careers. One interviewee postponed her salon's opening due to Covid-19 while two specialists offered beauty treatments in their private apartments but were considering moving to a salon in the future. All had been specialists in the beauty industry for between 2 and 10 years, including their pre-migration period and any employment in Poland before becoming entrepreneurs. A Ukrainian cosmetologist and a Belarusian manicurist relocated their business to Poland when they migrated. Three cosmetologists graduated from Polish universities and their business was a natural continuation of their education. For all the other participants, their decision to move to Poland was related to the previous migration of their partner or family member but was not necessarily their own choice or idea.

Findings

My interviewees willingly shared their individual stories of the difficulties and successes on their entrepreneurial paths. Deskilling, loneliness, discrimination and dissatisfaction with their social position were the main initial disadvantages which motivated interviewees to undertake the challenge of entrepreneurship. After deciding to settle in Poland, their labour-market activity was restricted due to difficulties in legalising their settlement procedures and the lack of social networks. To better understand the performance of entrepreneurial activities, I examine the intersection between social attributions, age, education, reasons for migrating, length of stay in Poland, previous experience in the beauty sector, previous employment and the structural characteristics of the enclave and mainstream networks. The main characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1. Referring to the multi-layered oppression structure and the intersection of gendered race and class hierarchies within enclave and mainstream networks, my research acknowledges the diversity of migrant women's experiences and the complexity of their entrepreneurial agency.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

	Age	Country of origin	Marital status	Reason for migration	Time in Poland	Time in beauty sector	Own salon	Time owning salon
P1	30s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Work	4 years	8 years	Yes	2 years
P2	20s	Ukraine	With partner, not married	Followed partner	2 years	23 months	Yes	6 months
P3	20s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Education	4 years	4 years	Yes	1 year
P4	20s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Education	8 years	7 years	Yes	1 year
P5	20s	Belarus	Married to co-national	Education	6 years	4 years	Yes	1 year
P6	20s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Education	6 years	4 years	Yes	1 year 3 months
P7	20s	Belarus	Married to Ukrainian	Work	4 years	4 years	Yes	2 years
P8	20s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Education/ work	8 years	6 years	Yes	3 years
P9	20s	Ukraine	Single	Education	10 years	2 years	Yes	2 years
P10	40s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Work	11 years	3 years	Yes	3 years
P11	30s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Followed husband	3 years	2 years 5 months	No	–
P12	20s	Ukraine	Married to co-national	Education	7 years	6 years	No	–
P13	40s	Belarus	Married to co-national	Work	3 years	10 years	No	–

The decision to develop their venture was conditioned by multiple axes of individual, social and institutional factors. The beauty sector was perceived as an attractive niche for individual entrepreneurial activity as it did not require significant investment and could be developed solely by specialists. The demand in mainstream markets and the increasing potential of enclave markets due to ongoing migration processes

were also perceived to be an opportunity to minimise business risks. The interviewees' human capital (previous specialist education, personal experience in beauty services) fostered the decision-making process as it was perceived as a logical continuation of their career.

Interviewees mentioned that, when rationalising their business perspectives, their partners' and friends' support was perceived as the main determinant of success. The majority of the interviewees were married or had partners in Poland. All were in a relationship with a migrant, mostly a compatriot. Beauty specialists admitted that their partners – some of whom were also entrepreneurs – provided them with informational, instrumental and emotional support or were even formally registered as their business partner within their enterprise.

Following previous migration trends, enclave social networks seemed to be a significant strategic resource for beauty specialists, a place where they could gain information and material and social support. Interviewees mentioned that their business advisors, accountants or first clients were primarily compatriots. However, they did not focus on enclave communities as their target market but highlighted the embeddedness of their ventures in broader migrant networks. In their social interactions with clients, overlapping aspects such as the acknowledgement of clients' demands in terms of aesthetical trends, beauty norms and the accessibility of treatments for migrant women in the mainstream market framed their entrepreneurial trajectories. To describe the social complexity of their business, interviewees used terms such as 'our people', 'our girls' and 'Russian-speaking', which allowed them to diversify access to resources and widen their perspectives for business development beyond narrowly defined ethnic enclaves. Conflictual aspects such as power relations over strategic resources and direct/indirect competition also appeared in interviewees' narratives.

This article analyses the business trajectories which these specialists followed, from performing services in private apartments to investing in regular salons. Although the 'informal' period was perceived as risky, as unregulated work might negatively affect their chances of legalisation in Poland, it allowed my interlocutors to generate resources such as sufficient knowledge of the market, clients and finances with a view to further development of their businesses – considered essential for their socialisation and adaptation in a new country.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the temporary closure of the sector affected business prospects and challenged development strategies. A sense of financial instability, the uncertainty about future epidemiological situations and their responsibility to their clients, employees and family members made participants overthink and rationalise their business strategies. It was also a challenge for beauticians as they had to resurrect their business after lockdown and many of their clients had returned to the country of origin or had a reduced income. To counter this, my interviewees extended their online activities, focusing on developing more trusting and personalised relationships with their clients. One such a solution was to combine their business profile on social media with personal blogs. Some women also decided to focus on the mainstream market by extending their advertising in the Polish language. Flexibility and an openness to new challenges were mentioned as important features which the beauticians gained during the health crisis. Intersecting rationalisation (Idola 2021) and the mixed embeddedness of business-venture interviewees simultaneously determined the desirability or undesirability of their structural position in a labour market (Khan 2021). All interviewees referred to their social positioning as limited by the oppressive stereotyping of female migrants' precarious labour-market activity. Destabilising such discriminatory approaches (Idola 2021), they defined their goals as entrepreneurial independence (as 'businesswomen') and gendered empowerment (as 'recognised specialists' and 'successful female migrants').

Expectations, experience, motivations

Different reasons motivated my interviewees to start their own businesses. Nevertheless, they all highlighted the desire to become independent in their decision-making and entrepreneurial choices, to realise their interests and hobbies and to be recognised as respectable specialists. All my Ukrainian interlocutors mentioned that they had experienced everyday racism and stereotyping after migrating to Poland; my Belarusian specialists did not mention this but did highlight the intersectional inequalities they faced post-migration. Disadvantages during the previous months or years, such as low-skilled jobs and precarious work conditions, periods with no professional occupation, discrimination, sexual harassment, a sense of loneliness and the deterioration of their mental state, pushed women to consider sole entrepreneurship as an opportunity for better perspectives. Other research has shown that the difficulties which participants encountered were merely gender-related and resulted from power structures in migrant and mainstream societies (Rydzik and Anitha 2019). Natalia, who experienced sexual harassment at her workplace as a young woman from Ukraine, summed up her story: 'I faced many things here, racism, discrimination... really when I came here, I understood what racism is'. The decision to leave stressful and disadvantaged positions and take a risk in setting up their own enterprise gives evidence of female migrants' agency and subjectivity (Idola 2021). Rationalising her options – such as returning to Ukraine or finding other employment – the niche of beauty services for Natalia became an escape route to safer and more desirable activity: 'And it was tough for me, I was already thinking of leaving... I understood that I shouldn't quit this job. Still, at least I could offer depilation services'. Following this idea, she started treating migrant clients at home before moving to a rented salon in the city centre after a few months.

Two other interviewees had experienced the setting up of beauty enterprises in Belarus and Ukraine. They decided to shut down their businesses in their countries of origin and reopen salons in Poland, taking the risk which the opportunity afforded them. For them, self-promotion within co-ethnic online groups became an immediate solution to gain clients and ensure work from the first days of immigration. Others started their career in Poland from scratch. Two interviewees began their first work in nail salons in shopping malls, while another three found employment in beauty salons owned by other migrants (mainly Ukrainians). Low pay, unfavourable work conditions, the unsatisfactory quality of services performed there and the inability to build social relationships with clients motivated these specialists to leave this employment and follow their own path.

What overruled interviewees' doubts were the structural opportunities in the Polish labour market and the potential profits seen in the high demand for beauty treatments, the low costs of the entrance (financial and legal) requirements and the accessibility of strategic resources through their enclave and inter-community networks. They perceived the emerging beauty market in Poland as an attractive niche for small-scale entrepreneurial activity. As an opportunity factor, participants also perceived the stable growth and feminisation of migrant communities. To improve their resilience, they diversified their social resources; to prevent their dependence on the enclave market they, at least declaratively, planned to expand their offer on the mainstream market. Servicing Polish clients was mentioned as the primary goal or desirable direction in which to take their business.

Entrepreneurship and the role of social networks

Research has shown that female migrants' entrepreneurial strategies were quite informal (Emmerik, Euwema, Geschiere and Schouten 2006) and embedded in extended social-networking processes. Julia summed up her success story with this statement: 'It is essential to have people who will help you'. So what is the role of the

enclave market and migrant communities for migrant start-ups in Poland? Scholars have broadly described the role of the former as an opportunity factor (Kloosterman and Rath 2001). One of the approaches refers to self-sufficiency, as migrant entrepreneurs respond to the demands of co-national communities (Portes and Manning 2006). The change in the immigration trend to Poland from circular migration to more settled and more profound diversification among migrant communities also revealed a wide range of new lifestyle services such as beauty salons, shops and gyms, etc. What was very evident from interviewees' narratives was that the Ukrainian community, as the numerically largest migrant group in Poland, became a significant source through which to develop and secure their beauty salons. The accessibility of resources and the broad social networks also enabled them to minimise the costs and business risks during the Covid-19 lockdown. Migrant entrepreneurs provide members of their communities with a wide range of services and goods which they could not afford on the mainstream market. They thus filled a new market niche through the delivery of new services and their co-nationals and other migrants became the first step for beauty specialists. The lack of a language barrier and the commonalities of aesthetic and beauty values (Idola 2021) facilitated their entrance into the market. Participants admitted that they counted on the growing number of female migrants from Ukraine and Belarus to be a guaranteed clientele safeguarding the continuity of their initiative and ensuring financial benefits. As Anna estimated: 'Probably 90 per cent of them [clients] are our girls – Ukrainian, Belarusian... Most of them are, perhaps, from Ukraine and Lithuania, while some are from Romania, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan...'

Where embeddedness in social networks helped beauticians to develop their salons, a lack of such networks increased the risk of failure on the regular market. Kateryna highlighted the importance of creating a stable client base before opening a salon – she had to start up her business twice, following its failure at the first attempt. She rented a salon, invested in its renovation and purchased equipment but had no clients. Although she was a qualified specialist who had graduated from a Polish university, she lacked clients who could promote her work and recommend her services. To rectify this situation, Kateryna closed the salon and began to work privately from her home, promoting her beauty treatments on social media amongst the migrant community. When, a couple of months later she reopened the salon, it began to prosper.

Besides business reasons, Ukrainian and Belarusian clients also used social networks to replace missed social relationships. Interviewees highlighted that it was a chance for them to get to know other female migrants and overcome the extreme sense of loneliness in Poland. Elena described her first months in Poland, before she started offering manicures, thus: 'I think it was a crucial moment, I missed contacts terribly. I couldn't even talk to anyone, go out for coffee, or a glass of wine... It motivated me to write an advert and offer manicures...'

Female entrepreneurs also developed their social circle to ensure mutual emotional support and self-affirmation. Offering cosmetic and beauty treatments, they created spaces where they interacted daily with other migrant women. Some became close friends with their clients; they spent their free time together and shared the care of their children. As Anna said of her relations with clients:

Most of my clients became my very close friends. I even became a godmother to her child for one of them, so now we are family... I appreciate them [clients] because each girl has her interesting story. And I understand that... they come to me with their problems, we share it, talk about it.

Understanding cultural and beauty norms allowed them to regain the social recognition and authority lost due to migration. Finally, by embedding the venture in social networks and working primarily with women, female migrant entrepreneurs considered their work to be physically safer.

The female-oriented social environment allowed them to minimise negative experiences of sexism, discrimination and xenophobia. As mentioned earlier, my interlocutors highlighted the importance of also

serving clients on the mainstream market. Nevertheless, the extension of intra-communal social ties revealed further structural impediments – the acknowledgment/undermining of education and professionalism, the language barrier, the lack of social contacts and the perceived ‘otherness’ (Khan 2021). Expanding their services to a broader target group required interviewees’ readiness to develop direct contact with Poles. The fear of misunderstanding, the differences in standards of beauty and treatments and the continuous stereotyping demotivated my interlocutors from developing the social environment of their ventures more broadly.

The role of informal social networks for migrant entrepreneurship also came to light in the context of the Covid-19 health crisis and the temporary closure of beauty salons – causing interviewees to lose their regular income and forcing them to focus on online communication to maintain client contact. Elena and Svetlana combined their business profiles with personal blogs in which they shared advice about skin care at home, promoted beauty products and spoke of their daily routine during lockdown. Elena translated her blog into Polish in order to reach new clients and promote the business:

To be honest, it was during quarantine when I started to develop [my business]. More advertisements, Instagram, additional discounts and gifts for clients. I wanted to expand because I thought ‘I’m in Poland. Our girls who live here, from Ukraine or Belarus, they also speak Polish so they can read it’. And I decided to change it. From that day, everything I published was in Polish.

None of participants who ran salons before the health crisis had to resign from their activity, despite the hardships posed by lockdown and restrictions. An openness to risk, the flexibility of their business strategies and their embeddedness in informal networks all strengthened their individual agency over multifaceted structural impediments.

The development path

All interviewees underwent different personal experiences while developing their careers; however, similar patterns appeared on their development paths. Their business trajectories reflected the tendency to diversify their social resources and navigate between the enclave and the mainstream markets. Here, I broaden the discussion about the intersection of gendered entrepreneurial agency and the mixed embeddedness of their ventures. The proposed concepts allow me to focus on the patterns of inequality during the start-up period that emerged as a result of my interlocutors’ interactions with institutional factors, social networks and individual features. Insufficient knowledge of the Polish language and the long-drawn-out legalisation and administration procedures were the main barriers to launching a business. Interviewees faced double disadvantages as women and migrants involved in the gendered sector of care and beauty treatments.

To turn structural impediments into opportunity resources, participants developed business strategies and rationalised their decisions (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen 2009) as I describe later. In the beauty and care sectors, social embeddedness and the informality of social contacts played a significant role in female migrant business activity. When developing their ventures, my research participants diversified and rationalised their social environments by merging emotional and professional ties with both migrant and mainstream clients. Each step required access to resources embedded in social networks, which highlights the relational character of the entrepreneurship process. The correlation of business steps with social resources is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Business steps and social resources

Business steps	Social resources
Step 1 – Informal work in private apartments/ employment	Access to migrant networks and strategic resources (information, finances, specialists)
Step 2 – Decision to develop their own business	Access to female migrant networks (clients, advisors, friends) to safeguard the client base
Step 3 – Opening their own salon	Access to the mainstream market (Polish clients, new communication strategies)
Step 4 – Further development and transition into the mainstream market	The establishment of an integrating ‘feminised social space’

Beauty salon in a private apartment

As mentioned earlier, interviewees gradually developed their careers, expanding their migrant niche to the mainstream market. The scholarly literature defines the role of the enclave market for migrant entrepreneurs as a niche for development and for accessing sufficient social, economic and material resources (Andersson 2021; Portes and Manning 2006). Among interviewees, the majority started off by working from their private apartments, strengthening trustworthy social contacts and attracting new clients. Olga described her networking mechanisms thus: ‘When the client came to me, and she liked it [manicure], she came back, recommended my contact to her friends, mother, aunt. Each girl brought two or three close friends to me’.

This period was also perceived as a time when interviewees focused on themselves, developing a business that satisfied their interests and was meaningful for them. They maximised the positive effects of enclave-oriented business activity and confronted the structural disadvantages that affected their entrance into the mainstream market. Specialists also became acquainted with market trends and institutional requirements, learned the Polish language and attended cosmetology training. This approach to self-development and professionalisation revealed their subjective formation as an entrepreneur and how they dealt with disadvantages.

Natalia and other participants also perceived their first period as an important time for adaptation and ‘finding their place’ in Poland: ‘Finally I have realised that I do what I want, I have my friends and close people around. The decision to move to Poland was a good decision’. Communication with other female migrants gave participants a sense of self-confidence and helped them to overcome the lack of female contacts. The other breakthrough element that reflected the passage between the enclave and the mainstream markets was the re-negotiation of ‘otherness’ (James *et al.* 2022), developing the social and spatial environments beyond the migrant community by reference to generalised beauty norms and body care practices. During the ‘apartment’ period, interviewees met their first Polish clients and extended their professional relations. Anna described this difference: ‘They [Polish clients] have an attitude towards you more like that to a specialist, that you are a specialist for them. And our [migrant] girls come to me as friends’. Such experience allowed women to overcome the uncertainties related to the language barrier and social or cultural differences and get used to working with Polish clients.

Referring to the relational feature of the beauty sector, it is possible to conclude that the initial period of responses to the women’s business career served as an essential step in the operationalisation of social relations and the strengthening of the individual’s position as a trustworthy specialist within the enclave and mainstream social contexts. Due to the varied channels, beauty specialists created and extended their female networks. However, the structurally disadvantaged feminised sector appeared to become an empowering niche for

entrepreneurship. Beauty specialists utilised their entrepreneurial agency to establish a meaningful social environment (Mayblin *et al.* 2016), confronting either normative (Lassalle and Shaw 2021) or ethnic (Khan 2021) discourses of entrepreneurship.

The decision to open the salon

'I felt sure to move on', commented Viktoria on her decision to start her beauty salon. The confidence of having a sufficient clientele and access to a social network supported the risk-taking decision to expand. The formalisation of business activity was linked to the need to fulfill institutional requirements and possess financial resources. Although the administrative procedures to register the venture were perceived as relatively uncomplicated, various barriers related to migration status and lack of social contacts limited the opportunities for developing their own business. Natalia also highlighted the difficulties of taking out a loan or leasing to purchase the necessary equipment. During the research period, three interviewees continued offering treatments in their private apartments. They perceived this as a temporary arrangement, as the main difficulties were related to external barriers such as the extended legalisation procedure and the lack of financial resources.

When dealing with administrative and economic requirements, participants simultaneously focused on maintaining a female network and developing a socio-spatial environment in which to attract new clients. My interlocutors concentrated on the quality of services and socio-spatial features such as communication and advertising strategies on social media, the visualisation of the interior and the development of diversified offers of cosmetic treatments. All participants perceived the opening of their salon as a significant step in their career. The main change was related to the decision to attract more Polish clients. Extended contact with the local clientele was perceived as a business success, the acceptance of professionalisation and proof and recognition of being equal actors in the market. To ensure the inclusivity of beauty salons, interviewees referred to generalised norms of beauty practices and rejected visible features of 'otherness' and ethnicity. The notion of 'female space' also appeared in their narratives. As Daria said: 'I want my clients to feel comfortable. They come to me not only for beautiful nails but also to talk about their problems, partners, female staff'. Significant attention was also paid to discussing with clients their beauty and health treatments and the mundane context of female well-being and self-affirmation practices. Explaining the social aspects of her work, Anna mentioned the positive attitude of her clients: '...as I finish their nails and they say: "God, I feel like a queen!", it is so nice that they like it [the manicure], they feel better, more confident and I say that it is not just a matter of nails'. Conversations like this encouraged Anna to continue her work and strengthened her sense of self-esteem. From individual and meso analyses, the transition from the private (apartment) to the public (salon) space emancipated specialists as social actors and affected their social positioning, evolving from disadvantaged to successful entrepreneurs.

Business strategy: enclave, mainstream market or in-between?

While their definition of a successful business evolved around independent beauty salons or clinics, my interviewees highlighted the importance of serving both migrant and non-migrant clients. Such an approach allowed them to diversify their access to resources, extend their services and minimise business risks. Social support available in the migrant community was used to fill the gaps where social contacts were missing in mainstream society. Diversification of the client group was reflected in participants' communication and management strategies. Most women said they used native languages in the workplace, although formal conversions on social media were provided only in Polish. Besides language, they also standardised the design of the salons – no ethnic or cultural attributes were used or manifested in shared spaces. Interesting examples

of how beauty specialists elaborated solutions to balance the conditions imposed by enclave and mainstream markets were their price strategies. Running a regular salon required higher expenses, which obliged entrepreneurs increase their prices. Nevertheless, my interviewees tried to keep costs lower than in the mainstream market to make them available and attractive for both migrant and Polish women. Some, like Viktoria, offered discounts and gifts for less-wealthy clients: ‘I raised the prices but, for our girls, it was costly. I know how much they earn. Some of them work for 10–12 zlotys [2–3 euros] per hour... I always try to get some discounts or presents for them’. Table 3 offers some solutions to the balance between the enclave and the mainstream market.

Table 3. Solutions to the balance between the enclave and the mainstream market

Enclave market	Mainstream market
Clients ‘trusted’ = migrant women	Clients ‘preferred’ = Polish women
Specialists (cosmetologists, hairdressers) rather than co-national	Specialists (accountants, social media, marketing manager) rather than Polish
Language of internal communication = Ukrainian, Russian	Language for communication with clients and social media = Polish
Prices ‘rather high’ for migrant clients – additional discounts and gifts attract migrant clients	Prices lower than in the mainstream market to attract Polish clients

Generally, in the beauty sector, female migrant entrepreneurs do not undergo a simple transition from the enclave to the mainstream market but develop new socially and economically embedded ventures ‘in-between’ both markets in order to make their business competitive and profitable. From an agency-oriented research perspective, such an approach explains how interviewees purposefully manage their communication and entrepreneurial strategies anchored in trust-building processes with both Polish and migrant clients. I find that beauty specialists create spaces for more-inclusive female interaction through their business activity, establishing places of encounter and social integration for women from different social environments. Such a shift did not appear in the case of entrepreneurship oriented solely towards the enclave market or fully towards the mainstream market. An intersectionality lens allowed me to take a more in-depth look at how interviewees embedded their ventures in the landscape of multicultural consumption (Idola 2021).

The beauty salon: a space of meaningful encounter

The last aspect that I refer to in this article is entrepreneurship as an ‘emancipatory activity’ (Rindova *et al.* 2009). Research findings support the idea that female entrepreneurship is more related to informal networking and emphasises the notion of ‘places of encounter’ (Mayblin *et al.* 2016). Although the initial purpose of the interviewees was to gain financial benefits and economic autonomy, the non-economic, symbolic meaning of gendered commonalities and trustful relations contributed to their sense of success and well-being. Female entrepreneurs elaborated and strengthened social relations beyond merely economic activity (Verduijn *et al.* 2014). From an individual perspective, contact with female clients mitigated structural difficulties and inequalities. Positive encounters enhanced their self-confidence as ‘approved’ entrepreneurs in a new country of residence and their determination to further develop their salon. Svetlana and Natalia planned to move to new and more spacious salons, while Elena planned to employ new specialists. Financial stability also affected other aspects of my interviewees’ lives. Anna said that she would be able to invest in education and enroll in workshops abroad. Olga made a decision to buy her apartment. The ability to support other migrant women appeared to be one of the essential values of business. As Julia commented: ‘I always tell my girls “You can

do more, just believe in yourself'. And I try to show through my example that I, an ordinary girl from Ukraine, I can do my job and motivate someone else'. Interviewees' beauty salons became places not only of 'good service' but of 'meaningful contact' (Mayblin *et al.* 2016: 3), where interactions are based on common recognition, respect and trust. The research shows that 'purposeful' communication and interaction strategies elaborated by female migrants reflected the emancipatory aspects of entrepreneurs and challenged structural modes of domination and inequality.

Conclusion

Changes in migration trends to Poland from circular to long-term or even permanent settlement reflect the diversification of economic activity and the increase of small-scale enterprises and services within the migrant community. Favourable labour-market conditions allowed the development and formalisation of migrant businesses. For female migrants, the increased demand for beauty and cosmetology services by migrants and local Polish clients alike created a niche for entrepreneurial activity. Belarusian and Ukrainian specialists contributed to the development of the sector by establishing a varied range of beauty salons. They became active actors in the enclave and mainstream markets, challenging the normative gendered discourse of successful entrepreneurship.

My research has shown that, during the development stage of their business activity, female migrants mobilised resources from the migrant network, created and diversified social ties within their social networks and rationalised business strategies to ensure services for both migrant and mainstream clients. Belarusian and Ukrainian entrepreneurs purposively modified their business strategies to turn 'disadvantages' (the prolongation of legalisation procedures, language barriers, financial costs, etc.) into assets (Imaobong *et al.* 2021). Understanding the interplay and interaction between migrant mainstream structures and the variations in participants' business strategies adds essential dimensions to the conceptualisation of migrant agency.

The exploration of female migrant entrepreneurship showed that their business strategies were based on informal networking and the shared non-economic values of beauty practices and gendered experience. The female-oriented approach defines a plan to develop, secure and extend the self-owned venture. A reliance on social ties with other female migrants became a core pattern of the initial stage of the development path – while working in their apartments, advertising on social media and then opening regular salons. The social embeddedness of the venture also enabled women to safeguard their businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic. When extending the venture into the mainstream market, the importance of support-oriented relations based on everyday migration experiences decreased, giving space for a more general social interaction. Social relationships developed by a specialist with their clients, either with a migration background or non-migrants, gave an insight into the balancing act between the ethnic and the mainstream market.

On the one hand, female migrants obtained benefits such as the restoration of their social status and relations lost due to migration to Poland, independence, self-confidence, financial security and general well-being, all of which impacted on their plans to extend their business. On the other hand, they created a social space for meaningful encounters and intra-community integration. Analysis of the overlapping and conflictual aspects of social relations between diasporas will also be important for future research.

The main aim of my research was to examine how migrant women acquire entrepreneurial agency through their business activity and the role of social relations along the entrepreneurial path. I am aware that the study was limited in scale and comes with limitations that should be considered in further research. Any future empirical study should be designed to provide a more nuanced look at the interrelation between enclave, inter-community and mainstream market structures from the perspective of female business actors. It should be undertaken on a larger scale, to include a comparison between particular migrant groups – female Belarusian

and Ukrainian entrepreneurs – and to examine their strategies, the social aspects of their business activities and the dynamics of their inter-community relationships. Finally, the recent impact of Russian aggression in Ukraine, which has increased migration and the further feminisation of migrant communities in Poland, may significantly affect female migrant entrepreneurship. Further research should also be undertaken to examine the impact of war on the intersecting identities of female migrants and to conceptualise agency through the lens of migrant businesswomen’s responses to multifaceted crises.

Notes

1. Office for Foreigners: Actual documents: residence permit 2020, <https://migracje.gov.pl/statystyki/zakres/polska> (accessed 20 February 2022).
2. The data indicate holders of one of the residence permits in 2021, according to the Office for Foreigners, <https://migracje.gov.pl/statystyki/zakres/polska/> (accessed 20 February 2022).
3. Report on Foreigners in the Polish Social Insurance System 2020, https://www.zus.pl/documents/10182/2322024/Cudzoziemcy+w+polskim+systemie+ubezpieczeń+społecznych+-+wydanie+2021_v2.pdf/235779ba-d43e-6dcf-4540-6352eeef697f (accessed 20 February 2022).
4. The ‘Pole’s Card’ – a document regulated by the act of 7 September 2007 on Pole’s Card (Journal of Laws 2019, item 1598, with further novelisations). According to the law, the person who can prove their belonging to the Polish nation and meets specific requirements regulated in the act can benefit from a range of facilities such as the right to apply for a national visa / permanent residence / citizenship free of charge, grants them open and equal access to education, the labour market and health care in urgent situations.
5. Art. 4 point 3 of the Act of 6 March 2018 on the Terms on which Foreign Entrepreneurs and Other Foreign Persons May Participate in Economic Trade in the Territory of the Republic of Poland (Journal of Laws 2022, item 470). Types of economic activity in Poland, <https://www.biznes.gov.pl/en/firma/doing-business-in-poland/types-of-economic-activity-in-poland> (accessed 11 June 2022).
6. ‘Poland’s Migration Policy – Diagnosis of the Initial State’, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, <https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/polityka-migracyjna-polski--diagnoza-stanowiwyjsciowego> (accessed 11 June 2022).
7. Database of enterprises and institutions recorded on the CEIDG, REGON and KRS registers, for which the code of the predominant type of activity according to the Polish Classification of Activities 2007 is 96.02.Z (Hairdressing and other beauty treatments), <https://www.bnf.pl/katalog/baza/baza-fryzjerow-i-kosmetyczek> (accessed 11 June 2022).
8. See ‘The beauty sector during the pandemic. Cosmetics services market research’, at https://www.beauty-forum.com.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/BEAUTY_FORUM/Badanie_ryнку.pdf (accessed 31 August 2022).

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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<p>How to cite this article: Homel K. (2022). Agency and Social Relations in the Search for a Better Life: Female Migrant Entrepreneurs in Poland. <i>Central and Eastern European Migration Review</i> 11(2): 33–52.</p>
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