

# THE OVERQUALIFICATION OF EASTERN EU MIGRANTS: A GENDERED AND SECTORAL APPROACH

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This study explores the overqualification risks among Eastern European migrants in Western Europe, emphasizing gender disparities and labor market segregation. Utilizing data from the 2018–2019 EU Labour Force Survey, it compares tertiary-educated migrants to the stayer peers in their origin countries. The findings reveal that Eastern EU migrants are more likely to be overqualified than stayers, particularly in sectors with high migrant segregation, such as manufacturing for men or private care for women, as well as transports, accommodation and food for both genders. While female migrants generally face a greater overqualification risks, the gender gap diminishes in sectors where migrants face higher segregation. Contrary to traditional tied-mover theories, Eastern European migrant women tend to act as breadwinners and first-mover, thus their risk of overqualification is similar to migrant men. The research highlights that migration rarely serves as a straightforward pathway to socio-economic mobility for Eastern European graduates, as they are frequently confined to low- and medium-qualified jobs abroad, regardless their occupational and educational credentials. This study underscores the need for nuanced approaches to migrants' integration and labor market policies, addressing structural inequalities to foster opportunities for fair occupational-matching and upward mobility for male and female Eastern Europeans.

Eastern EU migrants; overqualification; gender.

## INTRODUCTION

Migration has long been a subject of intense scholarly inquiry, with significant attention devoted to understanding how migrants compare to the populations in their destination countries. However, comparisons between migrants and their peers who remain in their origin countries (hereafter, stayers) offer a

compelling counterfactual perspective (Lucas, 2013). This approach helps to isolate the impact of migration by examining differences that arise solely from the migration process itself. This paper contributes to this discourse by focusing on Eastern European migrants and stayers, with a particular emphasis on gender differences. The books by Grabowska (2016) and Recchi (2016b) denounced that often the migrants coming from the new EU member states<sup>1</sup> (hereafter, EU13) do not find enough qualified occupations in their main destination countries, corresponding to ‘old’, Western Europe (hereafter, EU15). The present analysis explores how employment sector segregation influences the risk of overqualification for EU13 migrant male and female graduates in Western Europe (EU15).

## **1. COMPARING MIGRANTS TO STAYERS AND OVER GENDER**

Migrants are usually compared to the population of their destination country, which is considered the migrants’ natural benchmark (Kogan 2006; Reyneri and Fullin 2011; Recchi 2016). Among the reasons leading to this choice, not only is there methodological nationalism but also availability of data on migrants, given that these are usually collected by receiving rather than sending countries. Nevertheless, a proper counterfactual argument (Lucas 2013) suggests that the population of peers in the origin country (stayers) is the closest group of comparison to migrants, since they differ in the migration process only. With regards to the comparison among Eastern EU migrants and their stayer peers in EU13 countries, few and recent examples can be found (Grabowska 2016; Kahanec and Zimmermann 2016; Barbulescu et al. 2019; Montanari and Meraviglia 2024; Montanari 2024b).

Regarding gender differences, scholars found that in Western Europe migrant women are more likely to be overqualified as compared to migrant men, experiencing a ‘double penalty’ for being both female and migrant (Birgier and Cantalini 2023; Maiorino and Terzera 2024; Palencia-Esteban and del Río 2024). A complex interplay of structural factors contributes to explain gender differences across destination countries, but also the prevailing composition of migrant population matters, according to their demographic and socio-economic characteristics (Montanari 2024a), their country of origin (and

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<sup>1</sup> The so called ‘New Europe’ or EU13 comprises both EU10 countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovak Republic, and Slovenia) accessed in 2004, and EU3 countries (Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia) accessed in 2007 or 2013. Instead, the ‘Old Europe’ or EU15 includes Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

respective norms), admission class (labour migration, family reunification or asylum) and length of stay (Schultz-Nielsen 2024). As compared to male migrants, migrant women are expected to be more likely tied-movers (Ballarino and Panichella 2018), prioritizing the partner's over their own occupational career when migrating. Furthermore, they risk remaining 'trapped' in the low qualified jobs found at first entry or first search in the destination country, given the huge segregation of migrant women in certain employment sectors, such as private domestic care (Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi 2015).

## **2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

The dataset chosen for the analysis is the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) with its waves 2018 and 2019 pooled together. The period 2018-2019 is after more than a decade since the EU Enlargements to Eastern countries came into force, and it precedes two major events which deeply altered the labour market and migrants' socio-economic conditions in Europe: the exit of the UK (a major destination country) from the European Union, and the Covid-19 disease, which suspended most of the economic activities as well as migration flows. All the 28 countries which were member states of the European Union at the time are included in the sample, where stayers in sending countries (EU13) are confronted to migrants in receiving (EU15) countries. Both migrants and stayers are identified as Eastern EU nationals born in Eastern Europe who reside either in EU13 countries (stayers) or EU15 countries (migrants).

Within the scope of this study, overqualification is operationalized by following the normative approach proposed by the OECD (2007: 156), and subsequently adopted by Eurostat (2021) with reference to graduates only. In particular, Eurostat (2021) defines overqualified individuals as those performing a medium-low qualified job while being tertiary educated. A medium-low level of qualification corresponds to values 400-900 of ISCO-08 1-digit codes (ranging from 'Clerical support workers' to 'Elementary occupations'), while a high educational level corresponds to having attained at least a tertiary degree (values 5-8 of ISCED-11 scale). Therefore, the share of overqualification is computed among a sub-group of the total population, that are the tertiary educated who are employed (as dependent employees or self-employed) at the time of the interview.

## **3. OVERQUALIFICATION RISK AND EMPLOYMENT SECTOR**

Table 1 below presents the relevant demographic and socio-economic

characteristics of the four groups of working-age (15-64) Eastern Europeans at comparison: male migrants, female migrants, male stayers and female stayers. Age is grouped into three values (aged 15-34, 35-49 and 50-64), as well as education (Up to lower secondary, Upper secondary and Tertiary) and the employment status (Employed, Unemployed and Inactive). Moreover, the share of low to medium qualified jobs (as defined above) is shown both among the total working-age employed population and the sub-population of employed graduates belonging to each comparator group. Similarly, the last two rows of Table 1 show the size of the total sample and the size of the graduates' sub-sample by gender and migrant status.

Tab. 1. Descriptive statistics. Source: EU-LFS (2018-2019).

Comparator groups	Migrants		Stayers		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Age					
15-34	42,2%	41,8%	36,8%	35,2%	36,5%
35-49	43,0%	42,2%	34,3%	33,6%	34,7%
50-64	14,8%	16,0%	28,9%	31,2%	28,8%
Educational level					
Up to low secondary	30,1%	26,8%	17,4%	17,5%	18,4%
Upper secondary	50,8%	45,9%	62,8%	54,6%	57,8%
Tertiary	19,2%	27,3%	19,8%	27,9%	23,8%
Employment status					
Employed	81,5%	63,9%	74,0%	59,9%	67,4%
Unemployed	8,6%	10,2%	4,9%	4,0%	4,9%
Inactive	9,9%	25,8%	21,1%	36,1%	27,7%
Low-med qualified jobs					
Tot employed pop	84,3%	77,6%	68,9%	57,4%	65,4%
(Graduates only)	(56,0%)	(52,9%)	(18,5%)	(18,3%)	(21,2%)
Sample size	26.558	35.170	657.231	688.465	1.407.424
Graduates sub-sample	(4.543)	(6.751)	(105.474)	(144.606)	(261.374)

Migrants emerge to be on average younger and lower educated than stayers. Moreover, considering that men are generally more active than women, a comparison within genders reveals that migrants tend to be more active (either employed or unemployed) than stayers, for both men and women. Migrants are also more likely to be employed in low- to medium-qualified jobs than stayers. For all the four comparator groups, the share of low- to medium- qualified jobs diminishes among graduates, and especially among stayers. Conversely, over a half of Eastern EU graduates who migrate to Western Europe (56% for men and 53% for women) perform a low- to medium- qualified job abroad.

Fig. 1. Share of workers by employment sector. Source: EU-LFS (2018-2019).

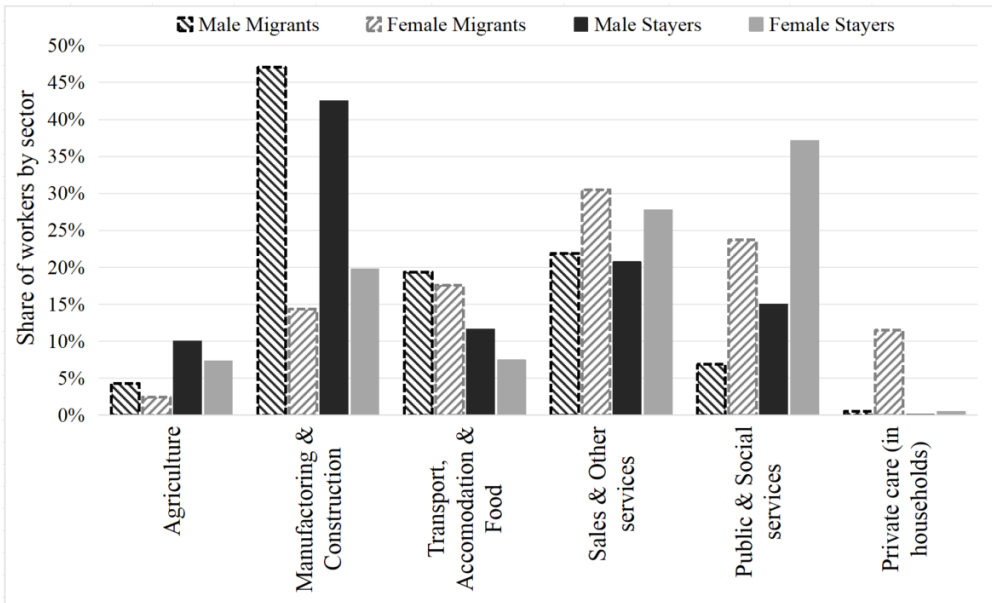


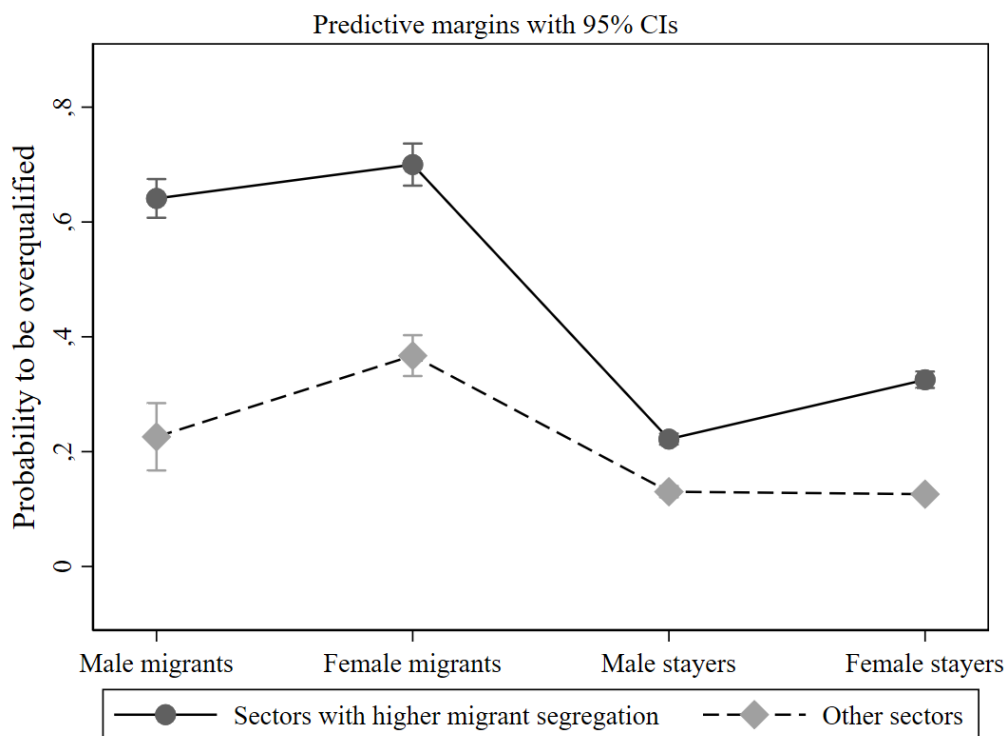
Figure 1 presents the share of workers by employment sector among each of the four comparator groups. ‘Manufacturing and constructions’ for men, ‘Private care (in households)’ for women and ‘Transport, accommodation and food’ for both genders clearly emerge as the sectors where migrants are most concentrated. On the basis of the results of Figure 1, a dummy variable is identify the ‘Sectors with higher migrant segregation’, which are diversified according to gender. This dummy informs on the type of sector and is used in the next step of the analysis.

Figure 2 shows the plot build on the margins of a logistic regression run on the selected sub-sample of employed graduates only, aiming to assess the

probability of Eastern Europeans to be overqualified. Age is included as a control variable, then each comparator group is interacted with the above mentioned dummy on the type of sector, to check whether the overqualification risk varies in sectors with higher migrant segregation. The model equation is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Prob. } \hat{y} \text{ (Overqualification)} = & \\ & \beta_1 \text{ Comparators (male migrants; female migrants; male stayers; female} \\ & \text{stayers)} \\ & + \beta_2 \text{ Age} + \beta_3 \text{ Type of sector (dummy)} \\ & + \beta_1 * \beta_3 \text{ Interaction between Comparators and Type of sector} + \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$

Fig. 2. Probability of graduates to be overqualified per type of employment sector. Source: EU-LFS (2018-2019).



In the sample of Eastern EU graduates, the probability to be overqualified emerges to be significantly higher among migrants, especially for women. Even though such result holds in all types of employment sectors, the migrants-stayers' gap is much wider among the sectors with higher migrant segregation, where the gender differences also lose statistical significance. Interestingly, among both genders, the migrants' overqualification risk in other sectors is similar (overlapping confident intervals) to that of stayers in sector at high

migrant segregation (in the origin countries). This means that migrating for Eastern Europeans always brings a penalty in terms of overqualification, even though the entity of such penalty is much more relevant when the graduate is segregated into employment sectors with higher presence of migrants (not all necessarily graduated) abroad.

## **CONCLUSION**

This analysis provides an overview of the phenomenon of overqualification among Eastern Europeans (EU13), highlighting the significant disparities between migrants and their peers who stay in their countries of origin. Underscoring the complex interplay between migration, gender, and labor market dynamics, this research reveals that the risks of overqualification faced by migrants significantly differs according to the type of employment sector. Among sectors with higher migrant segregation, male and female Eastern EU migrants share the same probability to be overqualified. Such result is in line with the author's previous findings (Montanari 2024b) suggesting that, among Eastern EU migrants, women do not present a higher overqualification risk as compared to men, contrary to the expectations of both tied-movers and gender segregation theories (Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi 2015; Ballarino and Panichella 2018). Indeed, migrant women from Eastern Europe often act as 'breadwinner' and first (single) mover of their household. Nevertheless, among sectors where migrants are not highly segregated, the gender gap is visible and confirms the expected 'double penalty' for migrant women.

This study contributed to enlighten the complex relationship between migration, gender, labour market institutions and social mobility, which often result in migrant segregation into low qualified jobs and gendered access to employment opportunities (Birgier and Cantalini 2024; del Rey Poveda et al. 2024). A certain degree of overqualification attached to migration process is straightforward when, for instance, the qualifications required in some jobs are country-specific or the migration is mainly driven by reasons other than occupational achievement. Overqualification may also be a temporary, stepping-stone mechanism before migrants can access more qualified occupations in the destination country. Nevertheless, whenever migrants are systematically segregated into low qualified occupations abroad, their chances of being overqualified goes beyond the risks attached to the individual migration process. To conclude, at least in the case of Eastern Europeans towards Western Europe, migrating does not emerge to be an easy way to boost one's

own socio-economic status. Indeed, Eastern EU graduates who move abroad, especially women, have far more chances to be employed (and remain segregated) into low- to medium- qualified jobs. By drawing comparisons with stayers, this study also emphasizes the importance of understanding migration in its full context, offering a foundation for future research on the long-term implications of migration for both individuals and societies (Kyriazi and Visconti 2023).

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