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Migrant Women Professionals in European Labour Markets

An explanatory framework for the free movement of skilled and highly skilled migrant women requires a discussion of the role of, and obstacles to, migrant women in EU labour markets. What are the barriers for EU migrant women in the access to jobs? What are the obstacles to adjustment to, and integration in, EU labour markets, and in career progression? How do such difficulties influence migrant women’s employment position and experience? Establishing the consequences of migration on employment position and integration into foreign labour markets requires an analysis of a number of factors, both before and after migration. These factors include migrants’ marital status and obligations, type of location, cultural context, reasons for migration, length of stay, preparation for migration, employment aspirations, training and qualifications, organization of work, and personnel policies and practices (Tienda and Booth 1991). Thus, the factors that influence the employment position and integration experiences of migrants in the host country are highly diverse. This chapter looks at the potential outcomes of migration on women’s employment situations and careers. It first considers theoretical perspectives on employment and work organization. This is followed by a discussion of literature on women’s position in labour markets and developments in personnel policies and practices. Assumptions on the obstacles facing EU migrants in the labour markets of member states are based on women’s situation in the labour market generally. Conclusions are also drawn from studies on skilled and highly skilled migrant women in advanced economies outside Europe. This approach is necessary and useful for the comparative analysis of migrants’ occupational integration abroad because existing literature on skilled and highly skilled migrant women working in European countries is very scarce.
Theoretical perspectives

Employment theories

A number of competing employment theories claim to shed light on the position of various groups in the labour market. For the purpose of this book, three schools of thought are of particular relevance: neoclassical, structural and dual systems theories. Neoclassical models include, among others, the human capital theory (Mincer and Polacheck 1974; Polacheck 1979; Smith 1979) and the statistical discrimination theory (Arrow 1973; Aigner and Cain 1977). A common feature of these models is that they explain differences in labour market status by human capital variables. The basic assumption is that, in a perfectly competitive labour market, individuals with equal productivity receive equal wages and status. According to this model, occupational and wage differentials emerge because of differential productivity among groups. Workers’ productivity, that is, their value to employers, depends on the level of education, training and experience. Human capital theorists argue that women’s position in the family precludes them from acquiring the same amount of qualifications and experience as men. Consequently, women have less human capital to sell to employers than men. The theory emphasizes freedom of choice in individuals’ decisions to invest in human capital. Individuals make rational choices about their intellectual abilities, employment and earning opportunities, and invest in their education accordingly. Differentials in the labour market are the result of these rational choices rather than discrimination against certain groups. The statistical discrimination model claims that recruitment decisions of employers are based on perceptions about the group to which applicants belong. Since strategies to establish job commitment of applicants are expensive, profit-maximizing employers reserve jobs with high replacement costs for groups with greater expected productivity. Even if applicants have equal abilities, risk-averse employers will discriminate against certain groups on the basis of their perceptions. However, the model suggests that employers’ beliefs will not survive in the long-term because of labour market competition.

An alternative to neoclassical models is provided by structural theories. Their focus is on the structural operation of the labour market and its impact on the occupational division of labour. According to these models, boundaries are set by institutional rules rather than by individual preferences. These models include theories that propose a dual structure of primary and secondary labour markets (Doeringer and