

Live on the Move: Intersectional Experiences of Cross-Border Commuting in the Polish-German Border Region

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This study examines cross-border commuting practices in the Polish-German border region, drawing on insights from migration and mobility studies as well as the sociology of work. While freedom of movement is one of the core principles of the European Union, this paper argues that structural inequalities and intersectional dynamics create de facto restrictions on who can effectively benefit from cross-border employment. Based on recurrent fieldwork conducted between May 2023 and August 2024, it explores how cross-border commuters, who traverse borders daily or weekly, “settle in mobility” (Morokvasic 2004) while navigating the demands of the three-shift system in automotive manufacturing and logistics in Brandenburg. While Polish mobile workers strategically use cross-border employment opportunities – such as higher wages or social benefits – to improve or maintain their quality of life at home without permanently migrating, they are also subjected to larger structural constraints of the shift system. Through in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations, this study unpacks the importance of family and social networks, alongside the industrial rhythms of shift work, that shape transborder workers’ everyday lives. The three-shift system places different burdens on women and men at various life stages, disproportionately affecting women who balance transborder work and care responsibilities. These dynamics reveal how mobile labor and shift work are not organized in a gender-neutral way, reinforcing existing inequalities. By bringing together insights from migration/mobility studies and the sociology of work, this paper calls for a critical assessment of how borders, labor organization, and intersectional inequalities interact to shape who truly benefits from “free movement” in contemporary Europe.