The Role of International Mobility Programmes in Developing Gender Equality Understanding, Social Awareness and Activism

Natalya Hanley, Mercedes Crisostomo

University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper explores the role of international mobility programmes in shaping participants' understanding of gender and fostering their commitment to social transformation. Drawing on data from a study involving changemakers from Latin America and Central Asia and guided by transformational learning, agency formation, and social change theories, we investigate how these experiences challenge and expand participants' gender perspectives. Our findings reveal that interactions with colleagues, mentors, host families, and women leaders profoundly influence participants' understanding of gender issues, leading to new practices in teaching, policymaking, and activism upon their return. This integration of gender perspectives into social initiatives contributes to political and socio-economic transformations in their home countries by promoting inclusion and plurality.

Full paper

International mobility programmes are highly valued for their role in the development of international participants, as they provide exposure to diverse cultures and facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and expertise (Gümüş et al., 2020). Several studies have explored how participants might positively impact their home countries by contributing to their organisations, educational settings, and communities upon their return (Atkinson, 2010; Chankseliani, 2018; Zhe Wang et al., 2024). The benefits of international mobility include the development of professional skills, intercultural competencies, knowledge exchange, expansion of professional networks, and enhanced collaboration across various fields, such as academia, medicine, teaching, and the non-profit sector (Bridgwood et al., 2017; Cate et al., 2014). In this paper, we examine the diverse impacts of learning about and being exposed to gender perspectives and gender equity policies as part of the participants' international mobility experiences and how these views and learning shaped the social contributions they implemented back home.

Guided by theories focusing on transformational learning, agency formation, and social change (Archer, 2000; Biesta et al., 2014; Mezirow & Taylor, 2011), we aim to investigate how participants challenge, gain, and expand their understandings of gender and gender equality while participating in international mobility programmes. We focus on the broader experiences of the participants within and outside educational institutions, examining factors shaping their understanding and practice of gender issues. For instance, Biesta (2008) suggested that the socialisation of participants within the international context can shape their understanding and practices regarding gender issues in the current setting. Reflectivity (Archer, 2000) and developmental characteristics like self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) might empower them to promote gender equality and influence participants' behaviour, making them more willing to engage with and integrate gender perspectives into social issues after returning home.

This research synthesised data from interviews conducted in a comprehensive study involving individual changemakers from 70 countries spread across six regions: Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Eurasia, the Middle East and North Africa, South and Central Asia, and the Western Hemisphere. In particular, we focus on participants from the Latin American and Central Asian regions and examine how their diverse learning and perspectives about gender within international and educational experiences shaped them into agents of societal change within their nations. We employed a rigorous methodology consisting of conducting semi-structured interviews with participants from both regions. This approach allowed us to delve deep into their perspectives and experiences, aligning our questions with the study's goals. All interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, ensuring the validity and reliability of our findings.

Our primary findings, after analysing interviews conducted with academics, policymakers, and activists from Latin America and Central Asia, show that their international mobility experiences and new perspectives on gender and gender equality inform, in new and plural ways, their existing and prior teaching and knowledge production, policy initiatives, advocacy, and activism. The findings suggest that international mobility experience provides a space for developing not only a theoretical understanding of gender issues and cultivating certain skills, but also enables the participants to identify the social issues related to gender inequality in their home context, encourage meaningful discussion and shape participants' mindsets and behaviour, influencing their willingness to engage and integrate gender perspectives into social initiatives after returning home. Socialisation with colleagues, mentors, and broader social circles, such as host families and local communities, formed and expanded participants' understanding and practices of gender issues. For instance, meeting various examples of women leaders and engaging in discussions about women's agency and empowerment, gender equality, gender identity, and intersectionality empowered them to reflect and develop their

perspectives on gender. Finally, this paper presents the complexities of the political, economic, and social contexts back home and sheds light on the challenges participants faced in addressing various social issues through advocating for and incorporating their understanding of gender perspectives into their projects.

Our study contributes to the existing literature on international mobility and gender issues by examining the unique role of international mobility experiences in shaping participants' gender perspectives and their subsequent contributions to social changes in their home countries. We specifically focus on how these gender perspectives and understandings were developed during their international mobility programmes and integrated into local societies after they returned home, providing novel perspectives and practices on the impact of international mobility programmes.

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