

Article

Reflecting on international academic mobility through feminist lenses: moving beyond the obvious

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Abstract. Academic mobility has always been a reality in academia, however nowadays it has gained new meanings and features. On the one hand, it brings benefits such as knowledge circulation, international network promotion, and reduction in experimental costs. On the other hand however, it reproduces old social hierarchies and power asymmetries. Gender is an important marker of difference that shape academic mobility experiences unevenly, therefore women face more obstacles than men to develop their academic career. This paper analyses academic mobility through a feminist perspective aiming to reinforce the importance of taking gender differences in account in this dynamics.

Keywords. academic mobility, feminist studies, gender, knowledge production

Resumen. La movilidad académica siempre fue una realidad en la academia, pero en la actualidad ha ganado nuevos significados y características. Por un lado, aporta beneficios como circulación del conocimiento, promoción de redes internacionales y reducción de los costos de experimentos. Sin embargo, por otro lado, la movilidad académica reproduce viejas jerarquías sociales y asimetrías de poderes. La literatura ha mostrado que el género, es un importante marcador de diferencia que modela de forma desigual la experiencia de movilidad académica, resultando que las mujeres enfrentan más obstáculos que los hombres para desarrollar sus carreras académicas. Este artículo analiza la movilidad académica desde una perspectiva feminista, ambicionando reforzar la importancia de considerar las diferencias de género en esas dinámicas.

Palabras clave. Movilidad académica, estudios feministas, género y producción del conocimiento.

1. Introduction

The literature on academic mobility has highlighted its many benefits, which can be assessed at the macro and the micro level. Some of these advantages at the macro or institutional level include the strengthening of international networks, cognitive integration of scientific fields across borders, promotion of cooperation agreements, increase of the number of international publications and reduction in experimental costs (Regets, 2007). Also, it is one of the main indicators used for assessing the process of internationalization of higher education. At the micro or personal level, it is possible to mention career

development, acquisition of new skills and contacts with different cultures as some of the positive aspects.

The way that international academic mobility has been constructed mainly as a advantageous phenomenon with great potential to advance science, develop technologies and foster knowledge circulation and production, makes it very difficult to detect some of its biases and shortcomings. Thus, it is fundamental to investigate and interpret academic mobility with critical eyes and using innovative theoretical and analytical frameworks to assess aspects that have gone unnoticed in revealing hierarchical and asymmetrical power dynamics embedded in academic environments.

Feminist studies have been denouncing hidden and embedded inequalities in society, claiming the need for changes to compensate such unbalances. Shedding some light in women's experiences in different situations – labour market, health and education systems, political and scientific spheres – and pointing out practices that hinder their life changes for being androcentric, Eurocentric, racist and/or sexist have been some of their contribution to knowledge production and in promoting a more equal society.

This paper uses a feminist perspective to analyze international academic mobility, hoping to unveil the hidden gender inequalities dynamics that negatively influence women's academic career development and advancement.

2. Academic Mobility - Overview

International academic mobility has been largely celebrated as an innovative aspect of academic career advancement, even if it has been part of academic life for many centuries. Along the late 19th and 20th Century different forms of mobility became common, such as the fleeing of European scholars from absolutist regimes, the exchange of students and scholars among countries promoted by imperial and colonial regimes, the intense flow of Jewish scholars to the United States during World War II, the exile of Latin American intellectuals as a result of authoritarian regimes and the run away of Eastern European scientists during the cold war and with the fall of the Berlin Wall (Scott, 2015). More recently, new directions have emerged mainly South-South mobility, within and across continents (França & Padilla, 2016), as is the case within the countries of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) or the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) or even the North-South mobility registered with the departure of many European young scholars towards opportunities in other geographic contexts due to the economic crisis, as is the case of Spanish academics who moved South to occupy positions in Ecuadorian universities (Pedone & Alfaro, 2015).

In addition, the advancement of globalization processes has brought many changes, experienced in many different spheres of society: political, economics, technological, cultural and also in science and education. Information and knowledge access are essential to the prospects of economic growth, confirming that the current historical period is recognized as a knowledge-based society (Hardt and Negri (2005). More than manufacture in the old times, knowledge production and circulation have become key elements of a country for attaining economic and political development and progress. Therefore, academic mobility cannot be analysed as an isolated and self-contained phenomenon. Rather, research on this topic should consider a wider context that contemplates its historical

dimension, the impact of globalization and the dominant ideologies and political interests that underpin it.

Starting in the 1980s, the international dimensions of developing an academic career became more and more important (Kim, 2009; Morano-Foadi, 2005). If before it was seen mainly as a personal choice to improve one's career, to acquire new research methods and techniques skills, to learn new analytical and theoretical frameworks and to get in touch with different cultures, nowadays to participate in international exchange programs – short or long term – transnational networks, associations and events are seen as both natural and fundamental to attain prestige and recognition in the academic sector¹.

Simultaneously, employment trends and characteristics have been changing worldwide, and the Academia is not an exception. Thus permanent positions as full researchers or full professors are becoming rarer, and temporary contracts - either to lecture or join research teams – have become more frequent, and many times, unavailable in the home country. Under these circumstances, scholars cannot afford to pursue jobs solely in their country of origin and have broadened their search horizons. Therefore, limited academic job opportunities together with the increasing importance given to international experiences to developing an academic career, has pushed scholars to look for alternatives at a worldwide scale.

Some of the most common requisites to take part in academic mobility schemes are to possess a high-qualified Curriculum Vitae (which may include previous academic mobility, mastering of different languages, outstanding academic performance in terms of publications and research), academic networks abroad, contacts with a professor in the international hosting institution and economic resources (public or private sponsor institution, fellowships or personal funding). Other implicit requisites, not necessarily listed in open calls, involve personal availability – motivation, engagement, age, family arrangements, – and job flexibility.

The current popularity of international academic mobility is pressing everyone to take part, yet the opportunities to be involved are not for everyone. Markers of difference such as gender, race, social class, nationality, and age as well as geopolitical asymmetries unequally shape access to these experiences. Social hierarchies and power asymmetries are reproduced in academic mobility just like in any other social sphere. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse international mobility beyond its contribution to academic and scientific knowledge, taking into consideration its obstacles and challenges.

3. Reading academia and science through a feminist perspective

Feminist studies have largely shown how gender hierarchies are a structural feature in the organization of society, and how social phenomena are shaped and reproduce these same inequalities. Further on, feminist scholars have proven that to analyse a social phenomena with gender lenses is much more complex than presenting numbers comparing

¹ In the context of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action, the European Commission's Horizon 2020 research and innovative programme defines academic sector as public or private higher education establishments awarding academic degrees, public or private non-profit research organisations whose primary mission is to pursue research (EC, 2015).

men and women's performances. Thus, it is fundamental to investigate why and how these performances' differ and to discuss their impact on men and women's lives and in society overall, because feminist "desire to challenge multiple hierarchies of inequalities within social life" (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006, p. 437). Hence, to conduct a feminist study implies bringing to the forefront existing asymmetric power dynamics, which in most cases place women in less advantageous positions.

Following this understanding, feminist studies have revealed the patriarchal, sexist and androcentric characteristics embedded in academia and science. Some of their main critiques are:

1. Women are not recognized as a subject of science and knowledge. Until today, many research projects and studies consider men and women's experience as if they were equal, disregarding how gender differences shape men's and women's experience unevenly. In most cases, universe of study or samples are formed only by men and when they include women, they do not analyse the differences between their experiences nor the reasons that cause them. Moreover most studies focus on subjects that are mainly men's interests, neglecting relevant topics for women. Lastly, research carried out about women's experiences tend to follow "malestream methods" (Bernard, 1975; Oakley, 1974; Stanley & Wise, 1993; Westmarland, 2001). Until today, in many studies, gender is merely a quantitative variable presented without any further analyses or questioning. Moreover, topics regarding women as subjects – women's biology, gender violence, labour market inequalities, and sexualities – are also less studied, being restricted mainly to women scholars.
2. The modern academic ideal model is mainly associated with men, therefore women are not considered suitable agents of scientific knowledge. Due to the existence of gender stereotypes, men are seen as objective, impartial, hard working, focused and career oriented while women are perceived as emotional, passionate, family centered and sensitive (Carli, Alawa, Lee, Zhao, & Kim, 2016). Thus men would be more suitable to pursue academic and scientific careers as they are more appropriated to produce valid and rigorous knowledge. Feminist studies have struggled to be recognized in academia and science as a valid scientific field. Even nowadays, their strong political activism has been pointed out as a weakness that does not allow to be considered scientific knowledge. However, what feminist studies have proved is that all knowledge production is a political and ideological choice therefore "objective, neutral and impartial" scholars cannot possibly exist, as one's biography will always be present in their work and the attempts to fulfil this requirements may end up excluding important facts and variables that should be taken into account to pursue a more valid understanding of a phenomenon (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991).
3. The development of academic and scientific careers reproduces gender inequalities existing in other spheres of labour markets. Glass ceilings, gender pay gap, lack of female role models, sexual harassment, gender segregation and exclusionary dynamics have been found in the academic and scientific sector (Bailyn, 2003; Baker, 2010; Barrett & Barrett, 2010; Curtis, 2013). Furthermore, academic career is based on a male model, which follows a linear career path without interruptions, with full dedication and little interference from family issues (Santos, 2015). However, female scientists,

just like most women in or out of the labour market, are still mainly responsible for family duties (child bearing and rearing, food shopping and preparation, cleaning, house chores, etc.) (Ackers, 2004, 2010; Jons, 2011; Leemann, 2010). The long hours and dedication requested to be an academic are incompatible with women's domestic shifts. The lack of policies and practices that promote gender balance and work and family conciliation within the scientific sector are implicit obstacles that hinder women in the advancement of their careers.

Based on these previous findings, it becomes clear that analysing academia and science from a feminist perspective is important to identify hidden elements that impact women's academic careers advancement. It is important to deconstruct relevant assumptions about women as scholars. For example questioning about their limited dedication to their scientific career as an undeniable fact, justified with indicators of (less) productivity, measured in numbers of publications and international conference attendance, hide strong structural asymmetries based on gender inequalities. To disclose and denounce double-standards and hierarchies embedded in these dynamics is one main the commitment of feminist studies for achieving a more democratic and equal science and academia.

4. Objectives and Feminist Analytical Approach

According to the discussion presented above, this paper intends to reflect, from a feminist perspective, how gender differences affect women's experiences of academic mobility. By reviewing the feminist literature on academic mobility, our purpose is to bring to light gender inequalities, power asymmetries and hierarchies present in academic mobility dynamics, which overall penalise women's career development and interfere with an equal gender knowledge production. Its final objective is to cross feminist theories with studies on academic mobility, highlighting the obstacles arising in women's academic career advancement. In the end, we hope to lay the foundations of a feminist discussion about this topic. Even if the article is a reflection, it relies on previous work carried by the authors on an ongoing investigation on international academic mobility in Portugal (França & Padilla, Forthcoming, 2013; Padilla & França, 2015)

5. Academic mobility from a feminist perspective

Recent literature on academic mobility (Ackers, 2004; Jons, 2011; Kulis & Sicotte, 2002; Shauman & Xie, 1996) has shown how the statement that women are less internationally mobile than their male colleagues, is biased if context is not considered. From a feminist point of view, it is necessary to analyse why this happens, and if existing gender inequalities in academia and in international academic mobility schemes negatively impact the advancement of women's career.

International academic mobility is expected to be performed by early career researchers, during their doctoral training or right after (Ackers, 2010; BuLa, 2013; Leemann, 2010). In most of these cases, timing is an issue as it corresponds to the period in the life cycle when women and men are in their mature adulthood, grooming relationships

towards stable commitments and making plans to have children in the near future, or in some cases with young children. According to Giorgi and Raffini (2015) the consequences and the impact of international academic mobility in scholars private lives are generally overlooked in the literature and in public policy.

The way in which international academic mobility programs are designed does not offer enough support for a well succeed family move. Many factors contribute to this: regular academic working culture – long shifts, overwork, high level of pressure, frequent meetings at odd hours and travelling; institutional assistance for accommodation or family support is minimal if available; family-work balance programs are almost non-existent and work contracts tend to be fixed term offering low wages with limited or no benefits (Ackers, 2004). In addition, the majority of the international academic mobility schemes do not consider spouse hiring, creating problems among academic couples, leading to the development of the career of one of them, usually the male counterpart, and the “sacrifice” of the other, usually the female, assuming most family’s responsibilities and putting their careers on hold. França & Padilla (2013) highlighted that this is the reality that most scholars who moved to Portugal under academic mobility schemes face in most research facilities.

In this context, implicitly, lives centre around the family are not seen appropriate for who aspire to develop an academic career. Thus, due to sexist and patriarchal social arrangements and conventional model of the division of labour, women are more prejudiced than men. As a result of the female caregiver and male breadwinner gender roles stereotype still prevalent in our society, it is expected that women² dedicate themselves to the family more than to their careers, while men do the opposite.

Men tend to have career centred lives, as usually their wives sacrifice their own professional trajectory to take care of the house and family duties. Furthermore, the effects of academic mobility in fatherhood experiences are much more reduced, because it is more likely they will have their female partners taking responsibilities for the care of their children while they move around. Whereas women, even when they have a career, are impelled to have a more family centred life, as households continue to be under their wing, and their career occupies a secondary role (Santos, 2015). This includes giving up or pausing their career to follow their husbands in international mobility; solely taking care of the children, elderly parents and other family’s responsibilities if the partner moved alone; or not accepting an opportunity abroad in order to not “abandon” the family because men tend to not accompany their wives during their academic mobility (Deborah A. O’Neil & Diana Bilimoria, 2005; França, 2012; Hochschild & Machung, 2003). Even in situations where both partners have a job in academia and pursue a career, families’ obligations are still mainly women’s concerns (Ackers, 2004; Carvalho & Santiago, 2010)³.

² The reflections brought here concerning family arrangements and academic mobility and career refer exclusively to heterosexual couples, as in our observations no same-sex couples were found as well as the reviewed literature discuss mainly this case. However, we highlight here the importance to investigate how this dynamics occurs with same-sex couples or any other family configuration.

³ It is true that not all women desire to be mothers or be engaged in relationships, thus not having children or a partner may not be a dilemma for their career development. However, recent studies (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; González Ramos & Vergés Bosch, 2011; Henz, 2010; Johnson & Lo Sasso, 2006; Szinovacz & Davey, 2008) recent studies have shown how women tend to sacrifice their career to be in charge of their elderly parents or relatives when they need care and attention.

Thus, women are highly exposed to experience a deskilling or running behind in their career, as they cannot properly dedicate themselves to it.

Ackers (2004) and Giorgi and Raffini (2015) pinpointed the importance of considering not only the impact of motherhood on academic women's mobility performance, but also having a partner⁴, as this variable also needs to be largely negotiated. It is true that when a couple does not have children, it is easier for both members to be internationally mobile. However, it still demands great effort to manage a long distance relationship and an academic career. According to Ackers (2004) and Viry and Vincent-Geslin (2015), even in this situation gender inequalities tend to raise in the disadvantage of women's career because it is expected that women would take more responsibility (and time) over the relationship wellbeing and thus are more likely they would quit their jobs to join their partners.

A relevant issue resulting from this situation is that the more women give up their academic mobility opportunities, the less chance they have to improve their academic careers. As the experience of staying in institutions abroad becomes an essential step for academic career development, the fact that women face more difficulties to do so, reduces their chances of advancement in their jobs. Thus, besides the challenges resulting from the traditional model of the division of domestic work, stereotype gender roles and other private life demands, the academic career structure itself burdens women's career development (Bailyn, 2003; Baker, 2010; Barrett & Barrett, 2010; Santos, 2004).

Even though the presence of women working in academia and science has increased significantly as well as the number of women holding PhD diplomas, the more a job becomes important and powerful the fewer the number of women performing them (Bailyn, 2003; Curtis, 2013; Williams, 2004). According to Walby (2011), because human and social capital are gendered, women's increasingly high qualification level has not had an equivalent impact on labour market' structure. Therefore, academic culture continues to be dominated by masculine rules, which includes "old boys'" informal networks, recruitment and mentoring processes favouring men and preference in receiving men as guest/visiting students or professors (Carvalho & Santiago, 2010). Even if these institutional practices are not based on written rules, but based mainly on social capital, they are extremely difficult to be formally regulated in order to avoid gender inequality (Walby, 2011). Thus active policies that promote gender equality and ban gender biases are in urgent need. The academic sector in Portugal is a good example of how social capital influence or not the development of a successful academic career. França and Padilla (2013) stressed how in many situations, knowing "the right people" is more important than having a highly qualified curriculum in the academic environment.

Having access to informal networks is fundamental to career development as it allows accessing information that, although should be opened to everyone who want to apply, is not usually easily reachable, examples include call for papers, international scholarship and visiting professorship openings, funding opportunities, job vacancies and co-authoring invitations to publish. As already discussed, due to gender segregation practices in academia, men tend to occupy the highest positions (Bailyn, 2003; Ecklund, Lincoln, & Tansey, 2012; Lee & Won, 2014; Santos, 2004), have more access to these informational resources and circulate them

⁴ Ackers (2004) highlights the importance of considering a broader perspective when analysing the forms of partnership in academic mobility experiences, despite the increase prevalence of cohabitation and same-sex couples.

among themselves. Mentoring is another essential experience as it helps to plan future professional steps, promote important contacts and gives significant psychological support (Deborah A. O'Neil & Diana Bilimoria, 2005; Ibarra, 1993). But, because this expertise is gendered, women are less likely than men to have access to this kind of social and human capital.

The fact that women are frequently shorter of networks social capital than men (Bourdieu, 2000; Walby, 2011) makes them less probable to be chosen as a mentor which simultaneously contributes to having fewer chances and opportunities to participate in academic mobility programs. Furthermore, academic mobility programs usually request that host professors held senior positions – mainly full professors and sometimes associate professors – to sponsor the application process. Thus the reduced number of women in high positions also diminishes the possibility of women being accepted for academic mobility schemes or chosen as advisor. Simultaneously, it may be perceived that accepting men is simpler as family issues are not needed to be considered while in case of females, it is assumed that they will be split between career and family (Bailyn, 2003; Baker, 2010; Barrett & Barrett, 2010).

As in general women have fewer academic mobility experiences because the constraints they face, they are less likely to be known outside their home countries, hence their chances of making contacts in other institutions abroad, build and participate in international networks and working teams, receive publishing and conference invitations are more reduced (Ackers, 2008; Jons, 2011; Leemann, 2010). In sum, these biases and facts altogether jeopardize women's career progress, one reinforcing the other.

However and above all, even if women are able to overcome their private lives impediments (family, motherhood and partner expectations) and dedicate themselves intensively to their academic careers, they will still have to deal with structural obstacles in their academic career, shaped by masculine culture.

Overall, the impact is not only on women's individual careers, but also on women's representation as whole in the academic sector, on their interests and the importance of their involvement in knowledge production. As Harding (1991, 2003) denounced, science rarely recognizes its sexist and androcentric features, denying how gendered structural inequalities impact on the production of knowledge.

Knowledge is always partial and situated, thus dominant groups tend not to question their advantages and privileges, masking the disparities resulting from it. Therefore, it is fundamental that marginalized groups gain space that allows their experience to be analysed, including aspects that in most cases are ignored in research agendas.

In the academic field, women are a marginalized group and in other cases (higher positions and specific fields,) a minority. Thus, the smaller the number of women in academia the least possibility there is for questioning about gender inequalities, discrimination on the base of gender, race and ethnicity and hierarchies to be taken into account. Not considering women's academic experiences in international mobility programs is not only a way to bring bias in the field but diminish the chances of new conceptual and analytical frameworks that are not based in patriarchal, sexist and androcentric ideas to emerge.

6. Final considerations

In present days, academic mobility has become almost mandatory in scholars' career development. However, as a result of gender hierarchies and power asymmetries, it is not

equally accessible to all subjects. Due to gender inequalities, structural and social arrangements prevalent in academia as in any other sector of the labour market, women have struggled more than their male peers in developing their academic careers.

The dubious understanding that women are less mobile than men because of their personal choices is used to loosely justify women's slower academic career advancement. But, in practice this results in a waste of the previous investment made towards women's careers because it does not allow a sufficient and appropriate use of women's potential to knowledge production, resulting in an unfair and unequal penalization for women.

In this sense, it is fundamental to raise awareness about the loss that gender inequality in academic mobility bring not only to women specifically, but also to overall knowledge production. While important issues discussed in academic mobility studies has been brain drain, brain gain and brain circulation dynamics (Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974; Ciomasu, 2010; Meyer, 2001, 2003; Oteiza, 1965, 1998; Regets, 2007), the dynamics of gender in these flows has been neglected. Thus, the analysis of women's experiences in academic mobility schemes indicates that the literature ought to acknowledge gendered brain waste. In this sense, we can safely say that women's potential to contribute to knowledge production is being untapped.

Analyzing international academic mobility from a feminist perspective allows to identify that with current social, institutional and family arrangements, advancing academic careers through international mobility is not necessarily an opportunity but rather one more obstacle for developing, upgrading and advancing their careers. While the benefits brought by academic mobility are undeniable, the fact that its concept, nature and structure is built up on male oriented rules based on unequal gender configurations, turns out to reinforce pre-existing inequalities and power asymmetries, reinforcing further women's exclusion in the academic sector.

7. References

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