



Nihan Albayrak-Aydemir

February 20th, 2020

The hidden costs of being a scholar from the Global South

14 comments | 261 shares

Estimated reading time: 10 minutes



Passport privilege is a thing in academia argues Nihan Albayrak-Aydemir. In this blog post, she counts the costs and missed research and career opportunities for passport-holders from the Global South.

Have you ever:

- applied for the same visa three times in a year because of attending three different conferences?
- felt guilty that your colleagues came to the airport way too early because you wanted to arrive there well in advance in case something goes wrong for you?
- been pulled out at passport control when visiting another country and forced by the local police to wait for three hours without any explanation, while your colleagues passed without any incident?
- had to pay additional fees compared to your colleagues to be able to attend an event?
- applied for a bank loan to attend a research or academic event abroad?
- accumulated savings in your account expressly to prove that you are solvent enough to enter another country?
- been asked to give a copy of your passport for being allowed to teach a course, invigilate an exam, or even [just to be an external examiner](#)?
- calculated and reported the number of hours you work per week to be able to take an additional job to support your living?
- [registered with the police](#) on entering the country where you study, and then updated it every time you move to a different location within the country, when you get married, or change surname?

- unwillingly attended a meeting you are not at all interested in so that you can sign the attendance sheet to prove your existence in the country?

If you did not say yes to any of these questions, then you're lucky! You are one of the scholars who can easily travel or work around the world for academic purposes. I, however, am not. My answer to most of the questions above is a gloomy yes. I have so many friends who are shocked every time I recount my not-so-fun stories related to my 'international' status. So, I decided to write this blog post to inform those who are unfamiliar with the specific struggles of international scholars without passport privilege. Here, I will attempt to illustrate the invisible burden placed on international scholars from the Global South and elucidate how this burden might harm the career trajectories of these scholars. Subsequently, I will offer a number of suggestions on how Western academics with passport privileges can support them.

The invisible burden on career

Possibly the most evident problem international scholars experience is financial. Starting at the studentship level through having to pay more than double the amount of home/EU student fees, the specific monetary struggles of international academics (such as currency exchange rates, more expensive and less frequent flights for home visits, costly visa application procedures) continue to be overlooked in the calculation of scholarships, salaries, and grants in proceeding academic life. In most cases, universities provide the same travel allowances for academics irrespective of their international status and this means that international scholars can attend fewer conferences with the same amount of money other colleagues use to attend many conferences – a classic case of where equality does not result in equity. When this is combined with fewer job opportunities caused by [the limited number of hours being allowed to work per week](#), the situation gets much harder and a monthly stipend doesn't go far, especially for early-career academics like PhD students.



it does not come as a surprise that Global South scholars may look less capable in comparison to their Western counterparts when it comes to job applications



Unfortunately, money is not the only handicap affecting the career development of international academics. Time spent on never-ending formalities might sometimes be more stressful than monetary limitations. For example, every time when planning to attend an event abroad, academics who have to apply for a visa need to undertake an inordinate amount of planning to find out which [specific documents](#) they need to provide, what is the earliest appointment they can get, how much

the visa costs, how much in advance they need to prepare the documents and apply for the visa, what documents they need to prepare to prove they do not intend to seek refuge in the country they are visiting, and so on, This could be one of the most daunting experiences one must endure, **full of potential problems one way or another**. Before all of this, of course, they first need to learn whether their submission is accepted to the conference – which is not usually announced in a timely manner. The worst part is that despite all of this visa preparation and application, there is still the possibility of **missing the event** because the visa may be rejected or not be issued in time. This is unfortunately **not a rare case** for many academics, and also, not the only time they are confronted with visa requirements. Working as a scholar in a foreign country on a visitor visa brings its own endless bureaucratic paperwork procedures, just to be able to do your job.

As a result, compared to those who have passport privileges, international scholars may lack opportunities for building international collaborations, giving invited talks or lectures abroad, attending international events or conferences, and serving on international disciplinary organisations to voice their perspective. In the short-term, missing such opportunities may not seem very damaging even though they, in fact, are. This state of affairs has an impact on the long-term career trajectories of international academics as they encounter penalties for the lack of these experiences on their CV. Subsequently, it does not come as a surprise that Global South scholars may look less capable in comparison to their Western counterparts when it comes to job applications.

The reason why this particular burden on international academics is invisible is because it is not experienced by Western scholars who hold the passports of developed countries – which, of course, does not mean that Western scholars cannot experience **similar issues**, but rather indicates that this is **a typical problem among those without passport privilege**. Due to this invisibility, international academics' career trajectories could appear wanting, and no one may even notice that it is not essentially their fault. In effect, there is a more insidious implication of this burden on Global South scholars, as it stacks the deck against them as it generates opportunities for academics from high-income countries whose passport privilege allows them to easily attain and consolidate important CV-worthy expertise.

Modes of potential support

Although the burden on international scholars is mostly systemic and institutional, there are still several ways to support scholars from the Global South. The first thing academics who enjoy passport privilege can do is to **acknowledge** their situation as well as the hoops those without that privilege must jump through to do the same things Western academics do with no particular difficulty.



For instance, during the opening or closing remarks of an academic conference or event, the chair can explicitly thank those who applied for a visa to attend the event and acknowledge the ones who could not attend due to visa problems. This would not only be appropriately kind and sympathetic to international scholars, but also be helpful for the rest of attendees to recognise the nature of hardships some scholars have to endure in marked difference to their lived experience. Moving beyond acknowledgement, some basic steps can be put in place to minimise the effects of the passport penalty international scholars face. They may include;

- organising events in countries that do not have harsh or cumbersome visa requirements or high currency values
 - booking reasonably-priced venues and activities with a range of accommodation options for various budgets when organising events
 - setting a submission/acceptance timeline that factors in the length of visa application procedures
 - offering online attendance and presentation opportunities to those who cannot travel as well as building more academic platforms and opportunities online
 - increasing the number and amount of grants available for international scholars (e.g. SPSSI International Travel Award)
- creating more opportunities to improve the CV-building skills of those who cannot move around easily
- offering reduced membership or registration fees for those who cannot afford the full amount of the required payment (e.g. EASP membership fee structure)

Not limited to the ones listed above, these steps may appear basic and simple but can mean a lot to those affected. They could be just some of the few standards that can directly improve the accessibility of events or organisations to scholars from the Global South.

In addition, we can work more generally towards increasing awareness of injustice towards and the burden on academics from the Global South. Most higher education institutions do not recognise the challenging situation of underprivileged groups, nor their own role in reinforcing it. They even become part of the problem by creating a hostile environment for international academics. Thus, the way forward is using our voice, position, and privilege to highlight the need for comparable treatments for different academics to create a socially just and equitable system.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, if you are one of the 'lucky' ones, be an ally: talk about these issues and support your colleagues. Share your voice, rather than expecting someone else to talk. Let academics from the Global South tell their own stories and be an active listener. Do not leave your colleague at the airport alone when the flight is delayed for a night, and you can stay at the hotel, but they cannot leave the airport because of their visa restrictions. Instead, speak to the authorities when your friends are not allowed to do so. I'll always be grateful to my friend, Sandra, who refused to leave me when I was pulled out by security at the airport, which made a difference to how the police treated me later when I was alone with them. These small acts of solidarity might not remove the institutional barriers that international scholars face, but they can at least minimise the negative effects of these barriers and show that you are there to offer support in your capacity.

Passport penalty and emotional tax

Not having the right passport and needing to travel as a global scholar results in more than just lost time and career opportunities and mounting expenses. It takes an emotional toll on scholars from the Global South. I recall a colleague discussing how a stint as an ESL (English as Second Language) teacher enabled her to travel the world, an opportunity that was not available to me because of my passport. Or how universities in the US accepted three-year degrees from the UK, but not from India (Indian students had to complete an additional year of postgraduate study to apply for US graduate programmes). Encountering this institutionalised and systemic inequality often fills international scholars with dread and loathing. The former as the system is so heavily stacked against you, and the latter as you encounter the rejection you must steel yourself for at every step of the process.

Bathsheba Okwenje, a researcher-artist, [compares](#) the Ugandan visa application for British passport holders with the British visa application system for Ugandan passport holders in a blog post. The contrast is stark and reinforces the notion of passport privilege. She refers to it as the emotional tax scholars from the Global South pay "to prove that you are indeed worthy of travel and of being in a country that is not your own."

Charity Atukunda, a visual artist, [draws](#) a depressingly Orwellian picture of a UK visa and immigration centre in Uganda: "While they had kind faces they seemed to have mastered the art of detachment as required by their employers." That these unblinking bureaucrats

often no more qualified nor older than the applicants could make such life-changing decisions was something I struggled to reconcile. And while I was advised not to take it personally or to get over it (life is not fair, it was not a life-or-death matter), the injustice of it rankled. Being an upstanding citizen with impeccable credentials, I found it humiliating to be presumed 'guilty' rather than innocent. The unspoken accusation was, as Atukunde puts it, "that we all seek to escape our countries, [yet some of us have no interest in 'escaping' to the 'first world']". (brackets mine)

It's not just early-career scholars who pay the passport penalty. The world-renowned writer and academic, Ngugi wa Thiongo recounts, "It's worse for a third-world passport holder in the west, where one becomes a travelling paradox. ... Three years ago my 17-year-old son, Thiongo Kimathi, and I went to Berlin for the celebration of the German translation of my novel Wizard of the Crow. His American passport got him through without a question. My Kenyan passport had me stopped and questioned. My son intervened with all the authority of his American accent and passport. The official looked at me suspiciously as if I had kidnapped the American boy, flung my Kenyan passport at me, and warned me not to stay one hour beyond the three days prescribed in the visa. I would be treated as an illegal immigrant."

Like the motherhood penalty that affects female academics; the passport penalty disproportionately punishes scholars from the Global South. One difference is that motherhood is a choice in most cases, but the same cannot be said of nationality – it is an accident of birth.

Lee-Ann Sequeira

This post is opinion-based and does not reflect the views of the London School of Economics and Political Science or any of its constituent departments and divisions.

Picture credits

Image 1 (map and bank notes): Photo by [Christine Roy](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Image 2 (passport): Photo by [Agus Dietrich](#) on [Unsplash](#)

About the author



Nihan Albayrak-Aydemir

Nihan Albayrak-Aydemir is a PhD candidate in the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science at the LSE.