



# Women on the Move

## The Gender Dimensions of Academic Mobility

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# Women on the Move:

## The Gender Dimensions of Academic Mobility

Women's enrollment in higher education globally has grown almost twice as fast as the rate of male enrollment in the past four decades, primarily due to increased equity and access, enhanced income potential, and the internationally-recognized imperative to narrow the gender gap at all levels of education.<sup>i</sup> Women now make up the majority of higher education students in 114 countries, while men out-number women in 57 countries. Despite this progress, it has been observed that women's participation at higher academic levels (primarily at the doctoral level) declines and falls behind that of men. When it comes to earning their bachelor's degree, women have reached parity with men; women are also much more likely than men to earn their master's, 56 percent vs. 44 percent. However, this changes at the doctoral level, where in general men are much more likely to earn doctoral degrees (56 percent vs. 44 percent), with some exceptions such as Latin American and the Caribbean.<sup>ii</sup>

As women's enrollment in higher education has increased overall, so has their participation in global academic mobility, albeit at a slow rate: 48 percent of women were pursuing higher education overseas in 2012 as compared with 44 percent in 1999.<sup>iii</sup> While much of the growth has come from greater gender parity across the world, the larger presence of women in international education is also attributable to targeted scholarship and fellowship programs that provide opportunities for women and other under-represented groups to pursue advanced study outside their home countries. Such programs include, among others, the U.S. Department of State's African Women's Entrepreneurship Program and TechWomen Program; the Schlumberger Foundation's Faculty for the Future Program; the Ford Foundation's International Fellowships Program, and the Maternal Health Young Champions Program.

Drawing upon student mobility data from the *Open Doors*<sup>®</sup> project and other secondary data sources<sup>iv</sup>, this research brief examines current trends in the participation of women in international education globally and within the U.S.; push and pull factors that drive the mobility of female international students; and the potential impacts of encouraging women to study abroad.

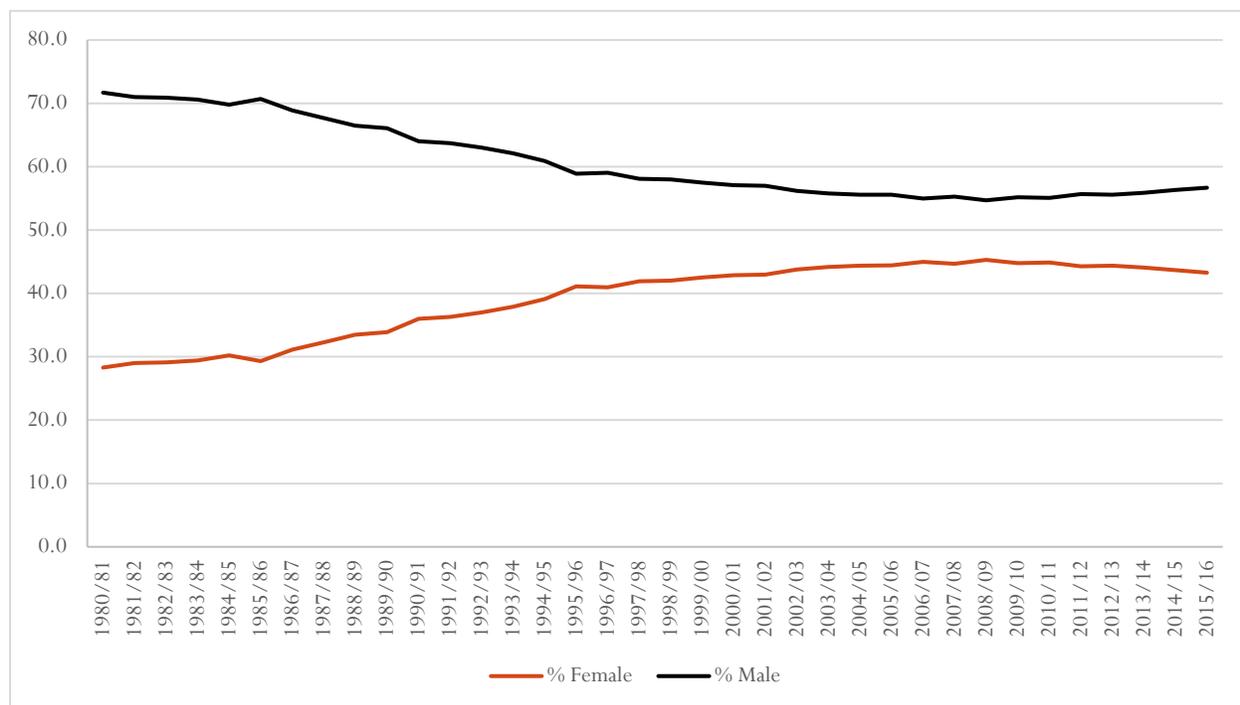
### Global Gender Mobility within Higher Education

Even though women make up a majority of students in higher education, there are some regions where women are much more likely to go abroad than choosing to remain in their country of origin. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, women make up 43 percent of students who go abroad, compared to 36 percent of students that remain in their country of origin to pursue higher education.<sup>v</sup> Similarly, in Central and Eastern Europe, women make up 65 percent of students who go abroad, compared to 55 percent of students that remain home to pursue higher education. Only in the Arab States and South and West Asia do women make up a much smaller proportion of students going abroad (34 percent and 27 percent, respectively) than their participation in home country higher education.

In East Asia, women make up 53 percent of students who go abroad, compared to 49 percent of students that remain in the country of origin to pursue higher education. This rate of women from East Asia studying abroad in part reflects the growing rate of Chinese students in the U.S. Among students from Central Asia just over half of all students abroad (51 percent) are women; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America and Western Europe, women account for more than half of students abroad (52 percent and 54 percent, respectively).<sup>vi</sup>

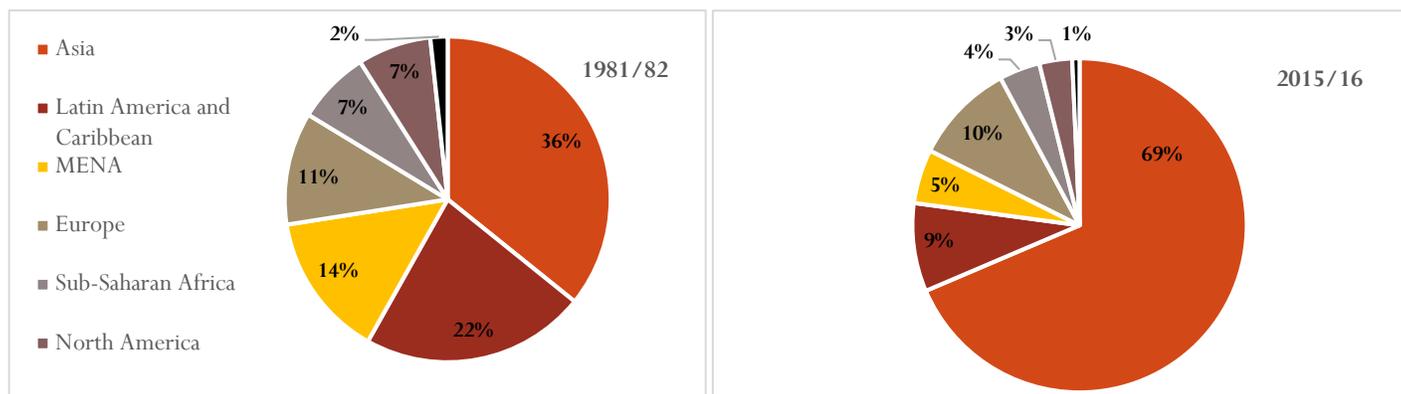
### Female international students in the U.S.

Historically, women have represented a low percentage of international students studying in the U.S., but in recent years their share of U.S. international students has grown. As figure 1 indicates, in 1979/80, women represented only 28 percent of the international students studying in the U.S.; this proportion rose to 44 percent by 2014/15. However, while significant progress has been made over the past several decades, the past two years (2014/15 and 2015/16) have witnessed a slight widening of the gender gap probably due to the rising numbers of international students in STEM fields which typically tend to be dominated by male students. If there are fewer women enrolled in STEM fields to begin with, their presence in global STEM education will also be affected. The sharp growth of students from India and Saudi Arabia also likely affected the overall gender balance, with both countries traditionally sending more men than women to the U.S. for higher education.



**FIGURE 1: PERCENT OF MALE AND FEMALE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT IN THE U.S., 1980-2016**  
 Source: Open Doors, [www.ije.org/opendoors](http://www.ije.org/opendoors)

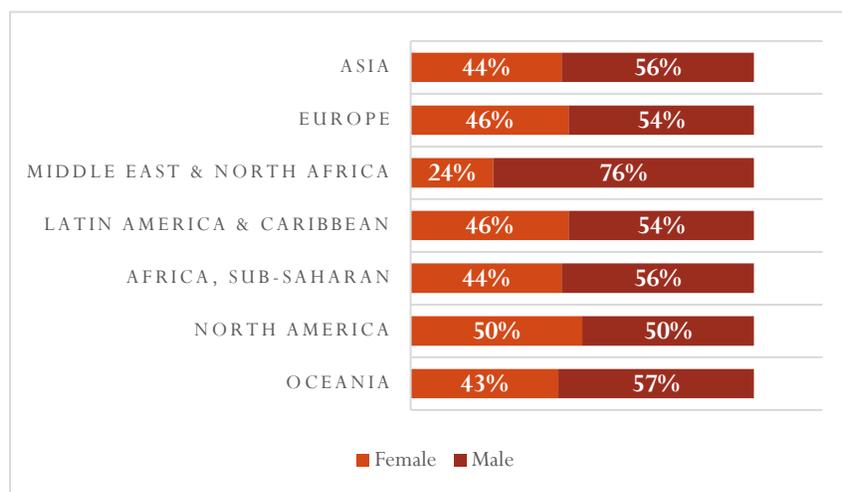
The numbers of women coming to the U.S. from different world regions has shifted over time, with some regions showing more growth than others (figure 2). In 1981/82, female students from Asia made up 36 percent of all female international students in the U.S.; this proportion has grown to almost 70 percent of all female international students in the U.S. in 2015/16, since women now constitute half of all Chinese students in the U.S., and students from China now constitute the largest group of international students in the U.S.



**FIGURE 2: REGIONAL ORIGINS OF FEMALE STUDENTS IN THE U.S., 1981/82 AND 2015/16**

Source: [www.iie.org/opendoors](http://www.iie.org/opendoors); Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), 2015/16

Looking at the gender breakdown of international students from different world regions studying in the U.S., the overall gender imbalance is borne out fairly consistently (figure 3), where men from most world



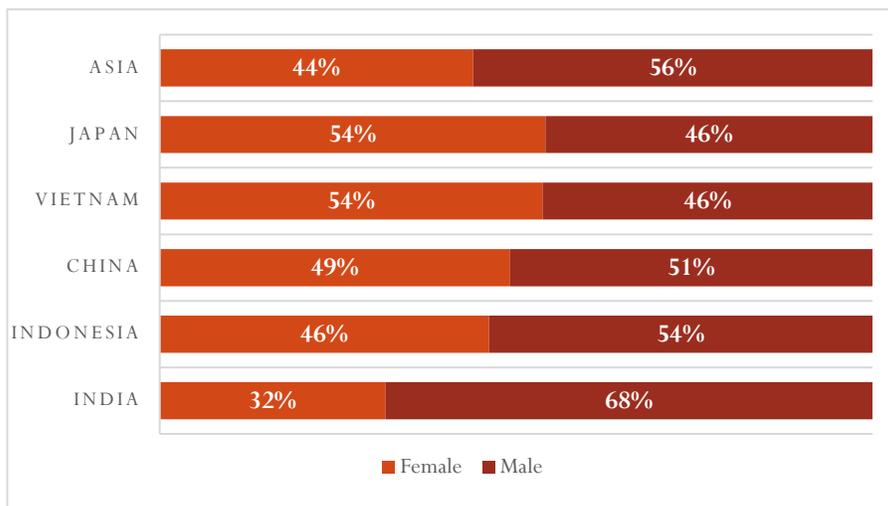
**FIGURE 3: GENDER BREAKDOWN OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE U.S. BY WORLD REGION, 2015/16**

Source: SEVIS, 2015/16

regions outnumber women. For example, among students from Asia, 44 percent are women, with women students coming in highest proportions from Japan and Vietnam.<sup>vii</sup> Similarly, among students from the Latin America and the Caribbean, 46 percent are women with high percentages coming from the Caribbean, namely Jamaica.<sup>viii</sup> For Sub-Saharan Africa, 44 percent of its students in the U.S. are women, which is consistent with global mobility trends.<sup>ix</sup>

The two exceptions to this pattern (at opposite ends of the spectrum) are international students from North America (primarily Canada), where an equal number of men and women study in the U.S. At the other end of the spectrum is the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region from which women represent just 24 percent of international students in the U.S.

Taking a closer look at Asian students in the U.S. (figure 4), 44 percent are women, with high percentages of women coming from Japan (54 percent) and Vietnam (54 percent), but much smaller proportions coming from India (32 percent).<sup>x</sup>



**FIGURE 4: GENDER BREAKDOWN OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS FROM ASIA STUDYING IN THE U.S., 2015/16**  
Source: SEVIS, 2015/16

## Why Women Study Overseas: Push and Pull Factors

Throughout the world, educational levels have risen for women substantially, including increased enrollment within higher education. For example, more girls are gaining higher levels of education in the Caribbean.<sup>xi</sup> This trend translates into more women furthering their education and being more likely to enroll in higher education. At the University of the West Indies, for example, the ratio is 70 percent women.<sup>xii</sup> It is therefore to be expected that an increasing number of women will also seek educational opportunities abroad, and that their reasons for doing so will vary. This section examines some of the factors that drive the educational mobility of women.

- Economic development of middle-income countries:** Economic growth in many middle-income countries, particularly in Asia, has been a strong factor in driving the outbound mobility of students from countries and region, most notably from China and India. Most international students come from rapidly expanding cities in large growth markets. From 2008 to 2012, Seoul, Beijing, Shanghai, Hyderabad, and Riyadh sent the most higher education students to the United States as compared with other larger metropolitan areas.<sup>xiii</sup> This large economic growth has also increased the likelihood of women to continue their education at home, as well as study abroad. One of the largest growths of students abroad has been from China, where women make up almost half of all Chinese students in the U.S.<sup>xiv</sup>
- Better access to educational opportunities abroad:** Women are increasingly likely to seek quality or specialized training outside of their own country. For example, in Iran, women are

discouraged from studying many STEM fields, such as engineering.<sup>xv</sup> As a result more Iranian women may choose to study abroad to gain access to disciplines they are unable to pursue at home.<sup>xvi</sup>

- **Changing cultural dynamics:** Cultures which may not have traditionally educated large numbers of girls and women are now encouraging more women to enroll in higher education and are increasingly sending them abroad for their education. For example, where there are over one million students in Saudi universities, women now account for 58 percent of the domestic tertiary education population.<sup>xvii</sup> In addition, more families are open to their daughters studying abroad. The number of female students from Saudi Arabia in the U.S. has risen from 7 percent in 1981/82 to 21 percent in 2015/16,<sup>xviii</sup> driven also by the King Abdullah Scholarship Program which offers Saudi students—men and women—scholarships to study abroad.<sup>xiv</sup>
- **Gender roles and women’s emancipation:** A shift in culture is also associated with the increasing independence and empowerment of women. Due to China’s economic boom, there were high rates of female education and labor participation domestically and notable trends toward delayed marriage among urban women.<sup>xx</sup> These trends in turn inspired many young women to be more individually-driven and to move away from the familial obligations that have historically defined women’s roles. Many Chinese women now report personal growth; the pursuit of a global experience; and the desire to not be constrained by marriage as key motivators for studying abroad.

## Impact of Mobility Programs that Prioritize Women

Over the past five years, IIE’s Center for Academic Mobility Research and Impact has been conducting research on the long-term trajectories of women in professional fields who were given an opportunity for advanced graduate study abroad in the form of scholarships and fellowships.<sup>xxi</sup> This research indicates that the potential for these programs goes beyond just the individual experience and can have long-term impacts on home communities and academic environments. In societies where women are traditionally underrepresented in certain fields, funding for higher education abroad can significantly swing the gender pendulum and introduce a new presence in professional fields where women’s voices have otherwise been missing. Women often face pressures not only from their family and home environment in their decision to study, but also difficulties in maintaining the work–family balance and integrating into male-dominated professional settings before and after their study experience. This challenge manifests itself in the lower numbers of women who explore opportunities for study abroad.

How do international mobility programs address these challenges? First, they provide an opportunity for equal access to higher education in communities that may traditionally favor men. The Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program (IFP), for example, focused on women as one of several marginalized groups lacking higher education access at home and gave them opportunities for advanced academic study abroad as a means to address social justice inequalities. Today, 85 percent of this program’s alumnae report that IFP empowered them to be social justice leaders.<sup>xxii</sup> Second, programs specifically addressing gaps in women’s education provide a nuanced approach to the unique challenges faced by women. The Schlumberger Foundation’s Faculty for the Future Program provides women academics with health and family benefits as part of the higher education award package. The program also specifically addresses gender barriers to women in scientific fields through forums and professional conferences, creating a community of practitioners who share a common purpose and support network.

International higher education programs for women increase personal agency and improve professional opportunities in ways that may traditionally not be available in their home countries. Further, they expose women to new academic spheres and environments that can stimulate interest and self-confidence in pursuing professional growth. Finally, governments are increasingly aware that to build knowledge economies and strengthen their national work force, they must provide women students with the training needed to contribute to national development along with their male counterparts.

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