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The Passports They Carry: Passport Inequality and Visa Barriers to Global South Scholars' Mobility

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Abstract:
Passport inequality is more than a simple logistical inconvenience; it is a fundamental injustice that undermines the principles of equality and fairness upon which academia should be built. Scholars from the Global South often face daunting challenges when obtaining visas for research and conference travel. Lengthy and arduous visa application processes, exorbitant fees, and arbitrary rejection decisions are just a few hurdles they must navigate simply to participate in academic conferences or conduct research abroad. These barriers not only impede individual academic endeavors but also perpetuate systemic inequalities within the global academic community. Drawing from our own personal experiences, we discuss mobility barriers, exposing their structural, institutional, and personal dimensions. We call for a reflexive approach in IR to counteract apathy and the illusory sense of equality in academic practices and offer policy solutions to promote a more inclusive and equitable academic community.

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MOBILE – Center of Excellence for Global Mobility Law – focuses on systematically studying the legal infrastructures of human mobility across geographies, social divides, travel patterns and time.

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Introduction

Academia today requires researchers to be "highly mobile," setting up professional networks across countries and continents and attending international conferences. Yet, existing structural inequalities present barriers for *some* academics without privileges, including sufficient funding, institutional support, and passports that can benefit from visa waiver programs. In fact, international academic mobility is intrinsically related to (global) mobility inequalities (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017). In this regard, global passport and visa regimes are a source of privilege and inequality, deepening existing structural disparities and creating invisible hierarchies among scholars. This is especially problematic for the contemporary International Relations (IR) discipline, which aims to foster (at least nominally) global conversations beyond Global North countries, institutions, and academic circles.

As IR scholars coming from countries in the semi-periphery and periphery, our international mobility rights are affected by international mobility policies. For example, while Trump's 'Muslim Ban' can restrict an Iranian researcher's access to the job market (Asgarilaleh, 2023), Türkiye's passport confiscations against Academics for Peace initiative can disable international mobility rights of critical scholars opposing state violence (Vatansever, 2020). Therefore, how international mobility rights are shaped by the global surge of authoritarianism, strained foreign relations, and xenophobia in the Global North and South is not merely a topic of study in International Relations but also transnational dynamics that we experience, study, and challenge.

Against this backdrop, this forum piece is a call to reflect upon an overlooked question: how can IR reflexively study and challenge academic mobility restrictions mediated through passports and visa regimes? We problematize the mobility barriers by looking at their (a) structural (i.e., international passport and visa policies), (b) institutional (i.e., unequal distribution of academic resources like funding, job opportunities, and events), and (c) personal dimensions (i.e., financial, social, and emotional consequences. We consider these three dimensions as interrelated processes that mutually feed into each other, deepening existing inequalities within academia. In particular, structural and institutional disparities (i.e., visa regimes as well as policies of academic institutions and associations) shape personal experiences by creating systemic obstacles that limit access and opportunities for Global South scholars.[1] This, in turn, perpetuates existing structural and institutional asymmetries.

[1] Global South refers to the "regions outside of Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized" (Dados & Connell, 2012, p. 12). We acknowledge this is a broad concept and, as a result, what we call Global South scholars is a rather heterogeneous group with different degrees of social and institutional support and privilege. However, when it comes to facing visa barriers, it still matters a great deal *where they are from* and *which passport they carry.* Hence, while institutional conditions may mediate Global South scholars' overall personal experiences, it is the structural conditions that determine whether they are able to fully participate in the global academic community.

Table 1: Threefold analytical framework and their data sources

	Structural	**Institutional**	**Personal**
Objective	Identifying global challenges limiting Global South scholars' academic mobility	Identifying organizational barriers that researchers from the Global South face	Identifying financial, social, and emotional effects of visa burden
Data sources	Information about visa regimes and visa statistics for main Global North destinations	Geographical distribution of key International IR conferences	Authors' personal stories

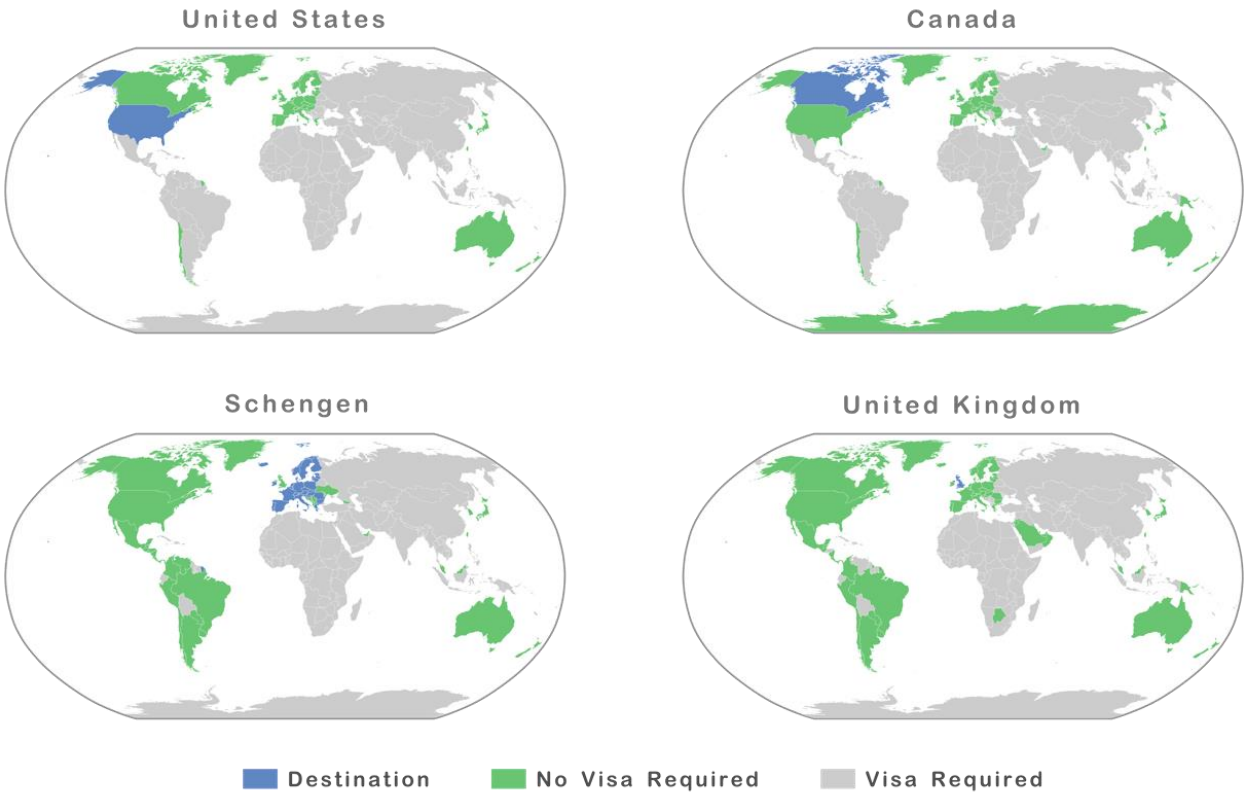
By establishing this threefold framework, we provide contributors with an analytical tool to structure their experiences and reflections. These analyses highlight how inequality dynamics shape our knowledge production in academia and our engagement with international politics as IR scholars. Building on these insights, we conclude by proposing policy solutions that suggest a way forward. Overall, our aim is to show how passport problems are not individualized; they are rather collective experiences that systematically disfavor certain groups. We also argue that, beyond being a logistical inconvenience, passport barriers have a bearing on whose ideas are heard and how knowledge is produced in the field of IR. This is, therefore, a political issue that has repercussions on personal experiences and academia in general.

Framing mobility barriers of scholars from the Global South: Structural, Institutional and Personal Dynamics

Structural: Today, there is a "global mobility divide" between Global North and South countries, which selectively immobilizes nationals from the Global South, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating existing hierarchies (Mau et al., 2015). Since the 1970s, the widespread imposition of visa regimes on Global South countries has effectively immobilized individuals, including researchers, from these regions. Visa maps of key Global North destinations—where most academic resources (i.e., institutions, financial opportunities, and events) are aggregated—illustrate this structural immobilization on a global scale (see Figure 1). The following four maps

depict the four main visa regimes in the Global North, namely the US,[2] Canada,[3] and Schengen (the European Union's common regime which covers 25 EU member states as well as four non-EU states, namely Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland),[4] and the UK.[5]

Figure 1: Four Global North visa regimes



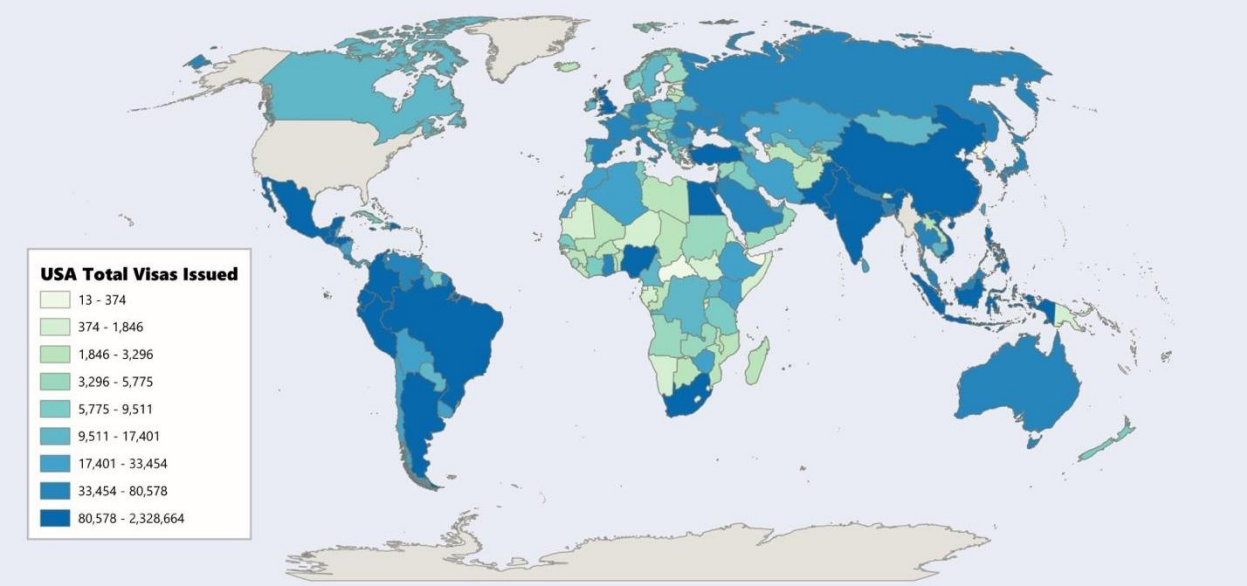
The four maps collectively reveal that certain regions, specifically Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, are broadly excluded from the main visa regimes of the Global North—namely those of the US, Canada, the Schengen Area, and the UK. While nationals from most Latin American countries can travel to EU countries and the UK without a visa, they encounter significant restrictions when attempting to enter the US or Canada. This differential access underscores the varying degrees of hierarchy and exclusion faced by nationals from different Global South countries. The maps highlight a stark disparity: regions like Africa, Asia, and the Middle East are disproportionately

[2] https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/tourism-visit/visa-waiver-program.html
[3] https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/visit-canada/entry-requirements-country.html
[4] EU countries that accepted the Schengen Agreement: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. This list does not include EU members Ireland and Cyprus that do not participate in the Schengen Agreement. For more information concerning the visa regime, see https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa/visa-policy_en.
[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-visa-requirements-list-for-carriers/uk-visa-requirements-for-international-carriers.

disadvantaged in terms of academic mobility. This inequity not only restricts opportunities for researchers from these regions but also reflects a broader pattern of global academic exclusion.

For this analysis, we will focus specifically on US and Schengen visa statistics. While Schengen visa data is presented in aggregate form, a closer examination of US visa statistics—particularly F1 (student) and J1 (exchange) visas—provides more detailed insights into academic mobility.[6] Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of US visas across various countries, while Figure 3 highlights the distribution of J1 and F1 visas. [7]

Figure 2: Global US visa distribution (total numbers)



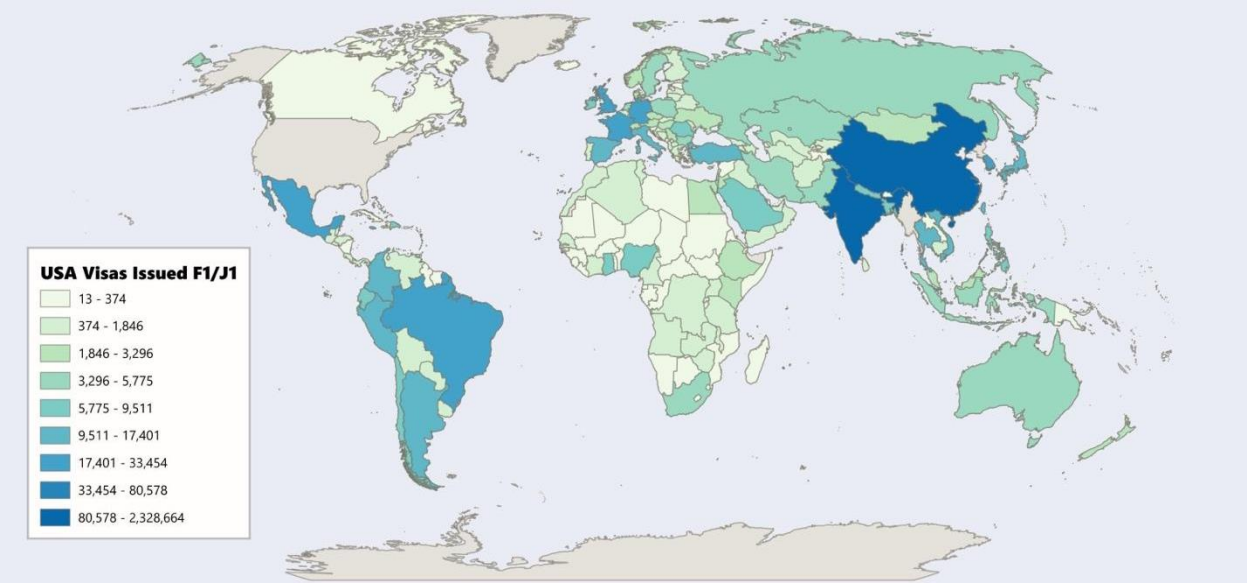
The map above illustrates that the majority of US visas (across all categories) are issued to countries in Asia and Latin America. In contrast, most African countries, including South Africa, Egypt, and Nigeria, either rarely apply for or do not receive US visas.[8] This trend is further reflected in the subsequent figure, which focuses specifically on F1 and J1 visas for students and academic visitors.

[6] Academics who travel to the US to attend conferences usually obtain B1/B2 (tourist/business visa). However, since this category also covers applications other than academic purposes, we purposefully excluded this category from our analysis.

[7] Numbers are obtained from this website: https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics/nonimmigrant-visa-statistics.html

[8] Here we see countries that can normally benefit from visa waivers such as Canada or European countries listed. This is because this map also includes working and study permits and other visa types that are not in the visa waiver program.

Figure 3: Global distribution of F1 and J1 visas

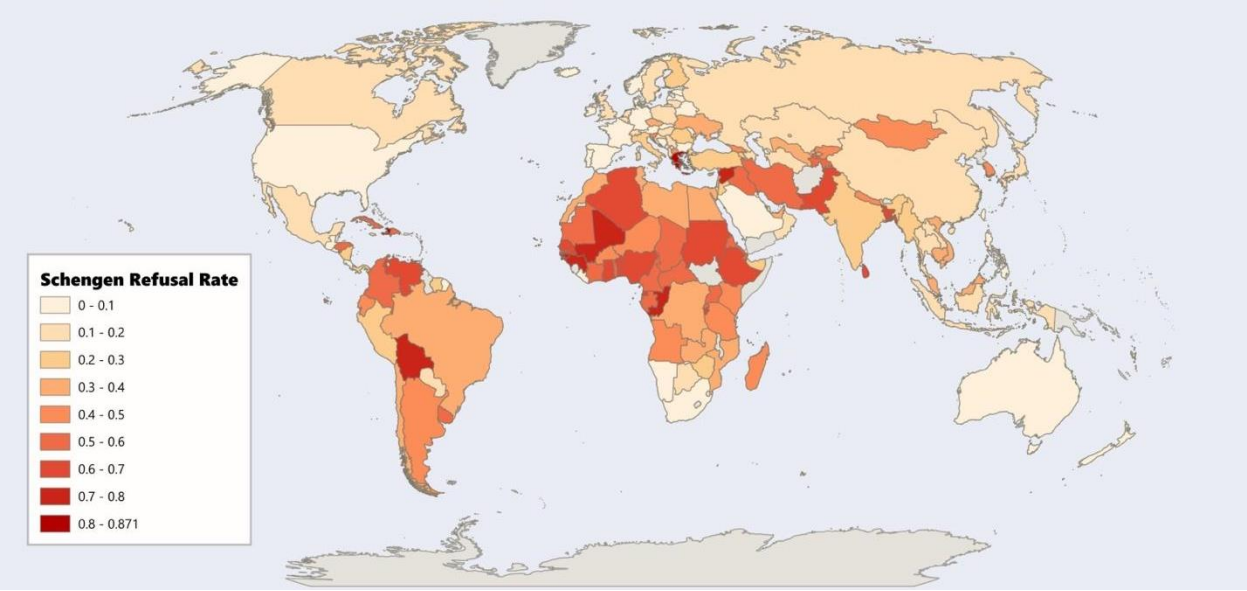


Western European countries (Europe), China and India (Asia), Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, and Peru (Latin America) receive the most F1 and J1 visas issued. In contrast, most African countries either do not apply for or receive fewer visas, with the notable exceptions of Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa.

Information on visa rejection rates complements this picture. Visa regimes in the Global North have become increasingly exclusionary since consulates have begun rejecting more applicants. For example, global Schengen visa rejection rates have tripled in less than a decade since 2015.[9] While in 2014, only 5% of all applications were rejected, in 2022, this number increased to 17.4%.[10] The map below shows the 2023 numbers for Schengen refusal rates based on the country where the consulate that issued the rejection is located.[11]

[9] Please note that these data are not stratified across visa types (i.e. tourism, business or academic mobility) and does not reveal exactly how many researchers are affected by recent exclusionary shifts in visa issuance practices.
[10] https://statistics.schengenvisainfo.com/2023-schengen-visa-statistics-by-third-country/
[11] Numbers are obtained from the following website: https://statistics.schengenvisainfo.com/2023-schengen-visa-statistics-by-third-country/

Figure 4: Schengen refusal rates for 2023



The map above shows that higher rejection rates are clustered in Africa and the Middle East. Additionally, several countries in Latin America, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela, also experience higher rejection rates. These are countries that do not benefit from the visa waiver program.[12]

As for the US numbers, there are no disaggregated refusal decisions for F1 and J1 visas.[13] Table 1 below shows that J1 rejection rates are consistently lower than F1 rejection rates. However, even under this category, there has been a notable increase in J1 rejections in recent years, especially in 2023. F1 visa applications face even higher rejection rates, reaching 36.2% in 2023. Overall, the patterns indicate a more stringent approach and increasingly higher rejection rates for both the F1 and J1 visa categories.

Table 2: US visa statistics for F1 and J1 visas (2019-2023)

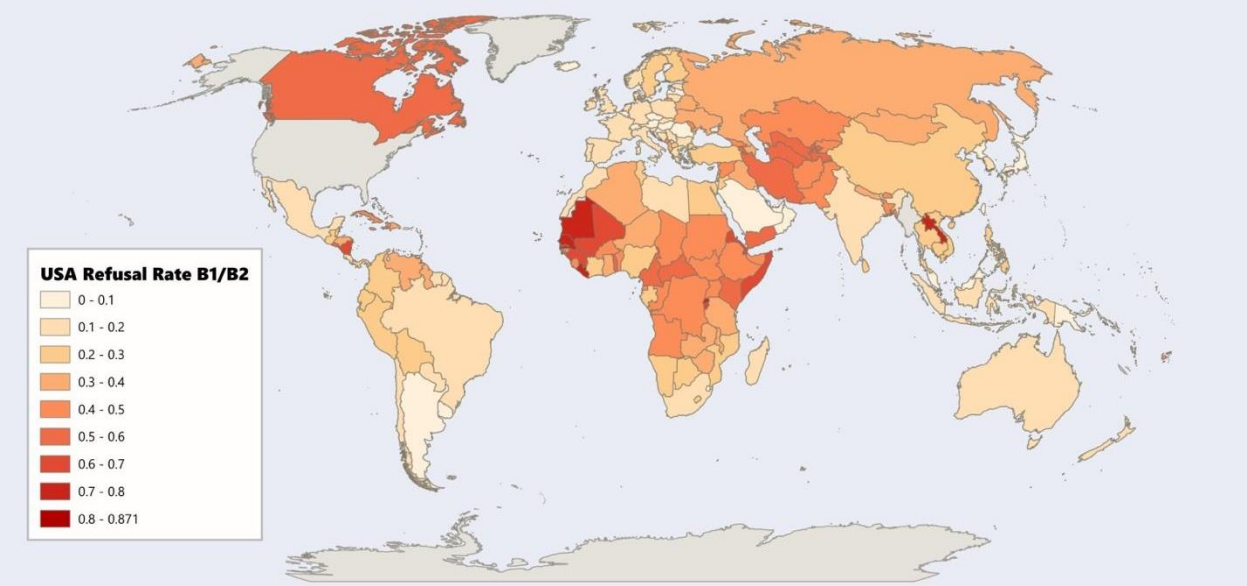
		F1			**J1**	
Years	*Issued*	*Refused*	*Refusal rate*	*Issued*	*Refused*	*Refused rate*
2023	445,418	253,355	**36.2**	316,693	40,961	**11.4**
2022	411,131	220,676	34.9	284,486	35,561	11.1
2021	357,839	88,583	19.8	129,662	11,849	8.3
2020	111,387	50,490	31.1	108,510	11,914	9.8
2019	364,204	123,871	25.3	353,279	31,535	8.1

[12] Here, Greece is an interesting outlier since it is one of the countries painted in red despite being a part of the Schengen visa regime. We expect that this is because these applications are submitted by non-Greek citizens residing in Greece, including those who wish to use Greece as a transit to reach other countries in Global North.

[13] US visa statistics about F1, J1, B1/B2 visas are obtained from the following website: https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics/nonimmigrant-visa-statistics.html

However, the US decisions for B1/B2 visas (tourism and business visa type), which most academic conference participants apply for, are more disaggregated. Unlike the Schengen map above, the map below shows the refusal rate based on nationality.

Figure 5: US visa refusal rates for B1/B2 visas



Visa refusals are clustered in countries in Africa as well as Western and Central Asia. Specifically, countries such as Mauritania, Mali, Guinea, Liberia, Eritrea, and Somalia receive the highest rates of refusals for their B1/B2 applications. In Western and Central Asia, countries such as Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan face higher rejection rates.

These visa rejections, coupled with longer waiting times and increased paperwork, directly affect and visibly restrict student and academic mobility. These trends signal an increasingly restricted space for academic mobility (see, for example, (Bilgen & Uluğ, 2022)) and highlight how passport and visa regimes structurally shape academic experiences and knowledge production.

Institutional: Institutional policies that do not recognize the reality of passport privilege (and lack thereof) and attempt to correct the structural inequalities related to academic immobility exacerbate this problem. After all, many highly regarded IR institutions, resources, and events are situated or organized in the Global North countries. This unequal geographic distribution of institutions (re-)produces existing epistemic hierarchies within academia to the detriment of academics from the Global South due to discriminatory mobility regimes. For example, annual conferences of the International Studies Association, a professional organization that represents IR scholars, were only held in the US and Canada.[14] Similar observations can be made for other valued 'international' conferences, such as the European International Studies Association

[14] See: https://www.isanet.org/Conferences/Archive

(EISA),[15] the American Political Science Association (APSA),[16] and the International Political Science Association (IPSA)[17] (see Table 4).

Table 3: Location of main International Relations/Political Science association conferences

Years	Conferences	Locations
2024	ISA	Chicago, IL, USA
2024	APSA	Philadelphia, PA, USA
2024	IPSA	Lisbon, Portugal
2024	EISA	Lille, France
2023	ISA	Montreal, Canada
2023	APSA	Los Angeles, USA
2023	IPSA	*Buenos Aires, Argentina*
2023	EISA	Potsdam, Germany
2022	ISA	Nashville, TN, USA
2022	APSA	Montreal, Canada
2022	IPSA	Montreal, Canada
2022	EISA	Athens, Greece

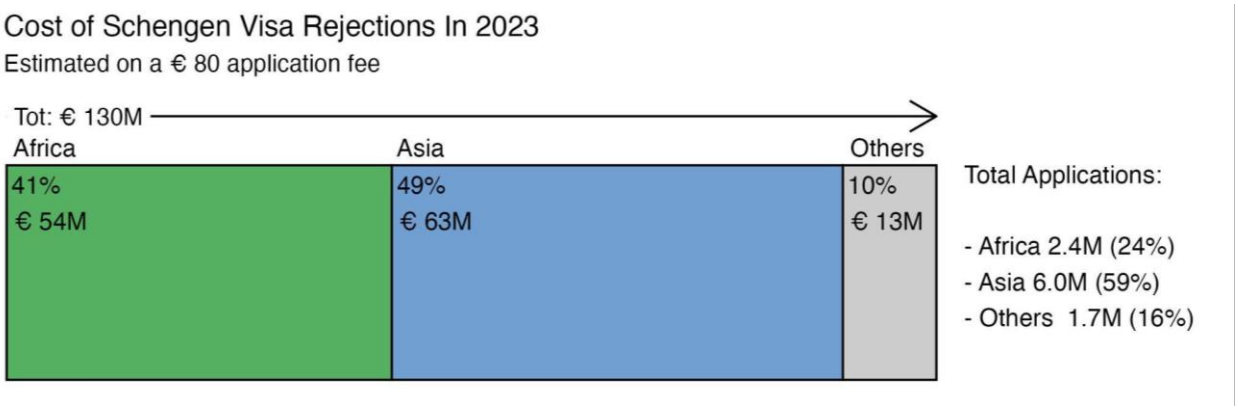
While conferences in 2020 and 2021 were either canceled or held virtually, those organized in the post-pandemic period have often been clustered in the same few cities in North America and Europe. IPSA is the only professional association that occasionally hosts conferences outside of Global North countries, with the 2023 conference being held in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Similar to the structural asymmetry in mobility rights between the Global North and South countries, there exists a pronounced institutional divide between academic institutions situated in the core (i.e., Global North) and periphery (i.e., Global South) countries.[18] Restricting conference locations to Global North countries with stringent visa regimes without extending institutional support effectively means that Global South scholars have to bear the burden of *repeatedly* obtaining visas to be able to attend these conferences. Furthermore, mobility influences job opportunities and scientific collaborations and is sometimes a requirement for grant applications, in addition to helping expand one's professional network.[19]

[15] https://eisa-net.org/past-events/
[16] https://apsanet.org/events/upcoming-apsa-conferences/past-apsa-conferences/
[17] https://www.ipsa.org/events/ipsa/list-past-ipsa-events
[18] This distinction is inspired by Wallerstein's world systems analysis (Wallerstein, 2004)
[19] See for example, eligibility requirements for certain grants such as the European Research Council (ERC) Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) grant, the Swiss National Science Foundation's mobility grants or the Fulbright Program.

Combined with the structural barriers, institutional dynamics severely restrict the professional opportunities available to Global South scholars, negatively affecting their academic records and ability to establish and sustain academic networks. These limitations can impact their professional financial situations and career paths, barring them from certain opportunities and achievements, such as being elected to serve in professional organizations or receiving the best paper awards presented at previous conferences. Since academia is inherently a social profession rather than an individualized activity, these negative consequences should not be disregarded as a micro-scale problem or dismissed as solely affecting individuals. The 'global mobility divide' across nationalities and the 'institutional divide' across academic institutions, exacerbated by visa restrictions and rejections, impose significant financial burdens on researchers who are often employed under precarious conditions.

Personal: We identify three main personal consequences of international academic mobility barriers: financial, social, and affective. The most straightforward way to estimate this burden is by examining visa application fees. Each application, regardless of its outcome, incurs a fee—such as the 80 Euro fee for a Schengen visa. According to one study, the cost of Schengen visa rejections rose to 130 million Euros (up from 105 million Euros in 2022) (Fox, 2024). This figure solely reflects the application fees and excludes additional costs, such as travel expenses to embassies or application centers and fees paid to legal or private agencies that facilitate visa applications. The same study finds that African and Asian countries bear 90% of the total cost of rejected Schengen visa applications. The figure below provides a breakdown of this number:

Figure 6: Regions bearing the burden of rejected Schengen visa applications[20]



As illustrated in Figure 6, in 2023, applications from Africa accounted for 24% of all Schengen visa applications, with 41% of these being rejected. The total cost of rejected applications from Africa amounted to 54 million Euros. In contrast, applications from Asia represented 59% of all submissions, with a rejection rate of 49%. The overall cost of rejected Schengen applications from Asia was 63 million Euros. This data highlights the severe impact of visa rejection costs,

[20] This image is obtained from LAGO Collective and shared via https://x.com/martaforesti/status/1798683693831352461/photo/4

particularly in Africa and Asia, where academic institutions often operate with limited financial resources, exacerbating their already precarious conditions.

Apart from financial impacts, the passport burden's procedural and affective aspects also shape scholars' academic identities within academia. Endless documentation requirements, limited availability of application appointments, and prolonged visa decision-making add further temporal burdens for scholars (Asgarilaleh, 2023; Dixit, 2021). Given the opaque and often arbitrary nature of visa processes, scholars endure these Kafkaesque waiting periods with feelings of anxiety, alienation, loneliness, and non-belonging (Dixit, 2021). Okwenje (2019) describes this process as an "emotional tax":

> The tax we pay is emotional of having to prove we are worthy and deserving of this privilege. And we have to prove it at every point: in collating all the documentation required for the visa; engaging with immigration at the port of arrival; interacting with the people who we have traveled to experience feeling a need of justification. Then there is the toll of a possible rejection – a rejection which will affect every subsequent visa application for the rest of your life, because whether you have previously been denied a visa is a specific question on applications. This rejection becomes yet another obstacle to overcome, another area for you to prove that you are indeed worthy of travel and of being in a country that is not your own.

Why does the discipline of IR need this conversation?

The complex landscape of mobility barriers and its seemingly procedural nature obscures the profound personal and professional challenges it imposes on scholars from the Global South. To shed light on these hidden or overlooked realities, we advocate for the aggregation of these experiences to collectively address their detrimental effects on individuals, the discipline, and the international as a whole. This not only does justice to the collectivity of Global South scholars' experience but also offers corrective lenses to see the global inequalities entrenched within academia. Such an aggregation aligns with the ethos of our discipline and our commitment to be *international*. Without the contribution of stateless researchers on state, migrant academics' analysis on integration policies, and POC academics' examinations of citizenship, our claims in IR will be self-referential at the expense of reflexive and inclusive interventions. In this regard, we view our intervention as not only exposing the existing barriers faced by Global South scholars in accessing international academic resources but also as a means of challenging apathy and the illusory sense of equality in academic knowledge production practices.

This forum piece is motivated by three main reasons. First, passports and visa regimes are intrinsically related to the discipline of IR, as they are expressions of (unequal) international relations regulating the movement of people. IR's concern with the *international* should ideally make the discipline more sensitive to studying how global inequalities and hierarchies are integral to passport privilege (Altan-Olcay & Balta, 2020; Harpaz, 2021; van Houtum & van Uden, 2021). IR discipline's foundational concepts, such as modern statehood, sovereignty, or territory, are

inherently connected to passport privilege, and they are reproduced through visa regimes. We take the impact of passport power and visa barriers seriously and bring together our experiences to discuss how this seemingly administrative inconvenience is related to other key IR themes, such as state(lessness), subjectification, discrimination, racism, or colonialism.

Second, we believe the discipline of IR needs a serious reflection on how passport and visa regimes shape the discipline and the way knowledge is produced therein. Academic research does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, our knowledge production significantly relies on our encounters with colleagues having different ontological, epistemological, and methodological backgrounds. Therefore, we call for a reflexive engagement to think carefully about the conditions under which we produce knowledge. We believe this matters a great deal in improving state-of-the-art IR or at least in shedding light on knowledge gaps, exclusion, and silences we long have ignored.

Third, as researchers, we are not mere knowledge producers, uncritical of the systems within which we operate (be they the administrative structures of the universities we work at or countries we reside in). In a similar spirit, serious critical reflection on our profession also requires us to study the reasons and consequences of Global South scholars' mobility barriers and think of ways to express solidarity with colleagues. While even an acknowledgment of this hardship is already an improvement, we also hope that this forum piece will generate a fruitful discussion to consider policy proposals to mitigate this hardship and its negative effects.

In short, we consider studying academic mobility barriers as critical sites to investigate power, knowledge, and inequalities in the contemporary world. Therefore, a genuine conversation about these barriers, in terms of their epistemological, social, economic, and political implications, is both timely and necessary.

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