



OPINION

How current travel restrictions open up new possibilities for researcher mothers?

Short title	How current travel restrictions open up new possibilities for researcher mothers
Author	Alena Sander
Author affiliation	University of Louvain, Belgium
Author bio	Alena Sander is a mother and a PhD candidate in her last year at UC Louvain in Belgium and part of the research project Resistance to international prescriptions and injunctions in Africa and the Middle East today. She identifies as a feminist researcher and studies power relations and resistance(s) to international women's rights in the context of the international development cooperation in Jordan.
Author social links	Alena Sander:
Date published	23 September 2020
DOI	10.5281/zenodo.4043642
Cite as (APA)	Sander, A. (2020). How current travel restrictions open up new possibilities for researcher mothers. <i>Elephant in the Lab</i> . DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4043642

International mobility is key for a career in academia (Bauder 2020, 2015; Geuna 2015; González Ramos and Bosch 2013; Ivancheva and Gourova 2011; OECD 2008; Bos et al. 2019). Early career researchers who did not study abroad, do not attend international conferences or go on field trips outside of their countries often find it difficult to reach the next step in obtaining tenure (Toader et al. 2016; Ackers and Oliver 2007; Bos et al. 2019).

However, not all scientists are equally mobile. Studies show that one group of researchers in particular are less mobile than others: namely women who are also mothers. Because traditional gender roles remain dominant in academic families too (Cervia and Biancheri 2017), mother researchers are less likely to travel than their childless peers, which includes male researchers who have children (Nikunen and Lempiäinen 2018; Toader and Dahinden 2018; Toader et al. 2016;

Leemann 2010; Kulis and Sicotte 2002). Their relative immobility adds to the reasons why women researchers with children are disadvantaged when it comes to reaching leading scientific positions at universities and research institutions (Bos et al. 2019).

International mobility was the norm for career-ambitious researchers for decades. Not much would have changed, if it were not for the Corona virus which suddenly put an end to international mobility in academia as we knew it. Social researchers have only recently begun to study the impacts of COVID-19 on international mobility in academia (Chan 2020; Rumbley 2020; Euraxess 2020). This blog article is a contribution to these ongoing studies. Written through the eyes of an early career researcher who is also a mother of a two-year old, I attempt to look into how the travel restrictions imposed by the global pandemic might have a positive impact on researcher mothers in particular, especially in terms of their research dissemination and international networking.

As recent studies show, many of the preventative measures taken by most governments to “flatten the curve” have made the combination of being an ambitious researcher and a mother more difficult in many ways (Stadnyk and Black 2020; Andersen et al. 2020; Utoft 2020). This blog article does not intend to play down the pandemic’s negative impacts on women, such as an increase in women’s physical and cognitive care work (Grauer, Sander 2020). It rather wants to shed light on one particular window of opportunity for researcher mothers that the imposed global travel restrictions has pushed wide open. I argue that these seem to be one of the measures that, for once, play into researcher mothers’ hands and may have the potential to have a lasting positive impact on women’s career path in academia.

An internationalized academy under lockdown

As an early career researcher, I am motivated to polish my academic CV with experience abroad even though I often perceive combining my international travels with my family life as a burden (Bos et al. 2019). This is why in February 2020, my year was already filled with six international conferences in five different countries and four weeks of field research in Jordan.

Although the first conference was planned for late May, my husband and I had already started coordinating with our day care, baby sitters and our child’s grandparents to make my travels compatible with my partner’s full-time office job. For the field trip to Jordan, my partner had planned to take his remaining month of parental leave to be able to accompany me with our little one, as he had done for my first [field work](#).

While the research project which I am a part of usually covers travelling expenses for me, it does not do so for my family when they decide to accompany me on longer trips. . Usually for short trips, such as to conferences, my family would therefore stay at home, often supported by an

expensive babysitter or by our parents who come to Belgium from abroad and for whom we pay the train or plane tickets.

I usually rush to conferences abroad, deliver my presentation, do some quick networking, and fly back as soon as possible – often before the official end of the conference. When I arrive back home, I am often jetlagged and sometimes frustrated with the impression of not having enjoyed the conference to its full extent (while having contributed to the destruction of the climate with yet another long-distance flight).

When the whole world went into lockdown several months ago, my field trip to Jordan was cancelled, together with three of my conferences. While I was devastated about the missed opportunities for my trip to Jordan (especially in terms of data collection), I was excited when the organizers of the three remaining conferences announced that they were checking possibilities for moving their events online.

International conferences and networking: from moving around to moving online

In June, I finally participated in my first online conference. Well prepared, the organizers used a fantastic online tool, allowing them to hold a full academic conference with hundreds of participants smoothly, including various panels running live simultaneously, numerous networking possibilities and an online book bazar.

Even though I usually enjoy travelling, and appreciate presenting my research and meeting with people in real life, I was amazed by the experience of not having to plan a whole trip for myself, organizing child care and spending our personal savings on babysitters or train tickets for family members to support my partner. For the first time since I have had a child, I was able to enjoy a conference fully and without any stress – from the keynote to its concluding session.

Because the conference took place with only two hours of time difference, when the conference started, I sat in front of my laptop, a cup of coffee in my hand and a notepad on the table after the morning routine with my family. When it ended in the evening, I had dinner with my family, and then joined one of the evening networking events from my couch. I have never been more relaxed during a conference.

Moreover, I never before been able to get in touch with more fellow participants: Because attendance fees were lowered, and participants did not have to come up with a travelling budget or risk having visas refused, the panels were virtually crowded. Communication was facilitated through personal chats and virtual coffee-break-rooms, and I had the opportunity to talk to researchers and professors I would probably not have been able to meet if the conference had

been held offline. Also, never before have I received that much exchange and feedback after a presentation – this time in the form of emails and private chats. Some of them ended up in bilateral discussions in the aftermath of the conference, and one of them even led to a common publication.

The same experience was repeated for the two other conferences, and I am currently impatiently waiting for two more to take place in October.

Family friendly online conferences may help fix the leaky pipeline

While international mobility may remain necessary in some cases – , for example, for anthropological field research (Chao 2020) or research exchange stays at other universities – it could become less frequent in others – such as for international conferences and networking. As we are currently witnessing, these may also take place online – and still give participants a great conference experience nevertheless.

Online academic conferences are an opportunity for researchers who are less internationally mobile. Among them are researcher mothers in general, and those with young children and single parents in particular.

Online conferences are relatively family-friendly. Because they are easy to access, they open opportunities for researcher mothers (and other less mobile scientists) to participate in international events, disseminate their research and network internationally more intensively. Thus, mother researchers are able to boost their academic CV, which can also help them to reach tenure. Simultaneously, online conferences' are often budget friendly for the participants. For researcher mothers, this may also imply a decrease of financial pressure, as well as lowering both stress and mental charges, since planning trips and organizing and paying for additional child care in advance of international travelling falls away.

Online conferences and networking events are also an opportunity for universities and other research institutions. Because they are more family friendly than the usual offline conferences, they may contribute to preventing women from leaking through the pipeline (Bos et al. 2019). Furthermore, institutions benefit from the increased international dissemination of the research by their less mobile scientists, and may save money reserved for travel expenses which then can be used elsewhere (and why not for creating child care facilities?).

While universities should not forget to keep an eye on and act upon the overwhelmingly negative impact that the pandemic is having on women researchers, they should not miss this opportunity to learn from and extend the potentially positive outcomes of the crisis for women. Among others, institutions should learn from the best practices of online conferences that have already taken place and investigate their researchers' needs for family friendly online conferences. They

should furthermore invest in online conference tools as well as in training their researchers and, if necessary, their IT department staff, on how to use these tools and organize family friendly conferences online.

References

Ackers, Louise; Oliver, Liz (2007): From flexicurity to flexsecquality? The impact of the fixed-term contract provisions on employment in science research. In *International Studies of Management and Organization* 37 (1), pp. 53–79.

Andersen, Jens Peter; Nielsen, Mathias Wullum; Simone, Nicole L.; Lewiss, Resa E.; Jagsi, Reshma (2020): COVID-19 medical papers have fewer women first authors than expected. In *eLife* 9.

Bauder, Harald (2015): The International Mobility of Academics: A Labour Market Perspective. In *International Migration* 53 (1), pp. 83–96.

Bauder, Harald (2020): International Mobility and Social Capital in the Academic Field. In *Minerva* 58 (3), pp. 367–387. DOI: 10.1007/s11024-020-09401-w.

Bos, Angela L.; Sweet-Cushman, Jennie; Schneider, Monica C. (2019): Family-friendly academic conferences: a missing link to fix the “leaky pipeline”? In *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 7 (3), pp. 748–758.

Cervia, Silvia; Biancheri, Rita (2017): Women in science: The persistence of traditional gender roles. A case study on work–life interface. In *European Educational Research Journal* 16 (2-3), pp. 215–229. DOI: 10.1177/1474904116654701.

Chan, Roy Y. (2020): Studying Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Global Higher Education. Evidence for Future Research and Practice.

Chao, Sophie (2020): When Crisis Brings Us Closer: Reflecting on Family, Fieldwork, and Faraway Homes in the COVID-19 Pandemic. In *Somatosphere*. Available online at <http://somatosphere.net/2020/when-crisis-brings-us-closer-reflecting-on-family-fieldwork-and-faraway-homes-in-the-covid-19-pandemic.html/>, checked on 8/3/2020.

Euraxess (2020): Covid-19 will have a huge impact on researcher mobility and the academic world – but how exactly? European Commission. Available online at <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/worldwide/china/hot-topic-covid-19-will-have-huge-impact-r-researcher-mobility-and-academic-world>, updated on 8/3/2020.

Geuna, Aldo (2015): *Global Mobility of Research Scientists. The Economics of Who Goes Where and Why*: Elsevier Science.

González Ramos, Ana M.; Bosch, Núria Vergés (2013): International mobility of women in science and technology careers: shaping plans for personal and professional purposes. In *Gender, Place & Culture* 20 (5), pp. 613–629.

Grauer, Claire; Sander, Alena (2020): Female scientists in crisis. Why women working in academia cannot focus on their research in times of Covid-19 and what might help them. Available online at: <https://mamaisanacademic.wordpress.com/2020/09/03/female-scientists-in-crisis/>.

Ivancheva, Ludmila; Gourova, Elisaveta (2011): Challenges for career and mobility of researchers in Europe. In *Science and Public Policy* 38 (3), pp. 185–198.

Kulis, Stephen; Sicotte, Diane (2002): Women Scientists in Academia. Geographically Constrained to Big Cities, College Clusters, or the Coasts? In *Research in Higher Education* 43 (1), pp. 1–30.

Leemann, Regula Julia (2010): Gender inequalities in transnational academic mobility and the ideal type of academic entrepreneur. In *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 31 (5), pp. 605–625.

Nikunen, Minna; Lempiäinen, Kirsti (2018): Gendered strategies of mobility and academic career. In *Gender and Education* 16 (3), pp. 1–18.

OECD (2008): *The global competition for talent. Mobility of the highly skilled*. Paris: OECD.

Rumbley, Laura E. (2020): *Coping with Covid-19. International Higher Education Europe*. The European Association for International Education (EAIE).

Stadnyk, Tricia; Black, Kerry (2020): Lost ground: Female academics face an uphill battle in post-pandemic world. In *Hydrological Processes* 34 (15), pp. 3400–3402.

Toader, Alice; Dahinden, Janine (2018): Family Configurations and Arrangements in the transnational mobility of early-career academics. Does Gender make twice the Difference? In *Migration Letters* (1), pp. 67–84.

Toader, Alice; Dahinden, Janine; Schaer, Martine (2016): *Locality and Transnational Mobility in the Early Stages of Academic Careers. The Importance of Family and professional Networks*. Maison d'analyse des processus sociaux. Neuchâtel.

Utoft, Ea Høg (2020): 'All the single ladies' as the ideal academic during times of COVID-19? In *Gender Work Organ* 20 (1), p. 1.