

STUDENT MOBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION – RESEARCH OF STUDENT ACCESS TO EXCHANGE PROGRAMS IN EAST GEORGIA FROM A GENDER POINT OF VIEW



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Introduction

Since 2005, when Georgia joined the Bologna Process, there has been an increase in the number of programs that give students at Georgian HEIs the opportunity to obtain funding for higher education abroad. Consequently, the number of students interested in these opportunities or involved in a mobility process has also increased. However, students face a number of disruptive and hindering circumstances. One of them is gender inequality.

The goal of the present study is to discuss and identify gender issues related to participation in exchange programs abroad. In light of the fact that this issue has never been studied before, the present paper may somewhat complement the gap in literature or build a foundation for research in this field.

The preliminary assumption of the study is that gender stereotypes, cultural aspects and family traditions have a negative impact on students' equal access to student exchange programs in Georgia (the mentioned problem refers mainly to girls, who cannot decide the issue of their participation in exchange programs alone and without their family's involvement in Georgia).

The target group of the study is female and male undergraduate and graduate students at the HEIs of East Georgia. In order to ensure the validity of the study, it was important that the participants should be from different cities of East Georgia. The participants were selected from Tbilisi, Gori and Telavi universities. It was not necessary for the research participants to be part of the exchange program, thus making this important factor an independent variable.

Mobility as an opportunity to internationalize individual students as well as universities

As stated in the 2012 study HIGHER EDUCATION IN GEORGIA (2012, 2017) the vast majority of Georgian students study in the USA, Germany and the UK, followed by other EU countries. The same study shows that programs supporting mobility of Georgian students are mainly financed by international donors (Erasmus Mundus, German Academic Exchange Service – DAAD, British Council, International Research and Exchanges Board – IREB, International Research & Exchanges Board – IREX, Open Society Georgia Foundation – OSGF, United States Agency for International Development – USAID).

The EU grant program Erasmus+ differs from existing programs in Georgia in terms of scale and easy accessibility; its official website (<http://erasmusplus.org.ge/ge/for-students>) says that in 2014-2020, projects will be implemented in the fields of education, training, youth and sports. The program aims to modernize education, increase the level of knowledge and employment, provide training and work with young people in the country.

In addition, within degree mobility, Erasmus scholarships were awarded to 8 Georgian citizens for joint masters programs, 15 in 2016 and 21 in 2017. Erasmus, which De Witt calls the “driver” of

European internationalization (De Wit, 2013. p. 19), aims to become a bridge between education and the labor market.

In 2009, the Ministerial Conference of EHEA member states (EUROSTUDENT 2016) endorsed a policy goal according to which 20 % of graduates from higher education should have experience of studying or training abroad. The mentioned goal is still upheld today (EHEA Mobility Strategy, 2012). Some educational institutions (e.g. Goucher College and St. Mary's College in Maryland, USA) make international education, which also includes international research, a compulsory part of the education and a necessary condition for obtaining a degree (Strout, 2010).

As defined by Orr (2015), a mobile student is a person who has crossed a border and has been enrolled in a foreign university or college for at least 12 months, and the mentioned process is beneficial not only to the mobile student but also to the recipient institution as it ensures the internationalization of the university.

This assumption gives us reason to think that if universities in Georgia improve their ability to create standards-based programs for mobile students in foreign languages, Georgian students will be more likely to develop skills that are characteristic of a multicultural society, to increase their tolerance and, most importantly, to increase their motivation to participate in exchange programs.

Gender participation in exchange programs

Obstacles to access to higher education for women begin with the process of choosing their profession. The UNDP 2013 Report on Gender Equality in Politics and Business Research includes family barriers to academic education, where priority can be given to the education of the son in the family if it is a matter of choice (44%) (p. 75). Other factors, such as early marriage, should also be considered: 17% of Georgian women marry before they turn 18 years old (National Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 2014 p. 19), pregnancy and in general the role of women in Georgia, which mainly focuses on family care (p. 16).

There is less public expectation of career growth for women, which greatly impacts gender segregation trends in Georgia. Here, taking care of the family takes the top spot among the duties of a woman (Gorgadze 2016). According to the survey, 74% of the population consider that the woman's main value should be her family (United Nations Development Fund, 2013).

As in higher education, equality between men and women in exchange programs has long been on the agenda in other countries. Historically, countries have fought to increase women's participation before reaching the point at which female participation exceeds that of men in most European countries. Research shows that women in Germany are slightly more likely to engage in higher education abroad than men, which means that we need to encourage men as well if we want to achieve gender equality (Wächter, Lam, Ferencz, 2012).

A study of Erasmus program participants in 2011-2012 outlines gender imbalances in favor of women and the need to empower men in this regard (Böttcher et al., 2016). The European Commission website says that, in 2012-2013 (EC 2014), 60.6% of Erasmus participants were women and, in 2013-2014, 61% (http://ec.europa.eu/education/resources/statistics_en), just as in 2015-2016.

2014 research on Student Mobility in the European Higher Education Area by the Vienna Research Institute (Grabher, Wejwar, Unger, Terzieva, 2014) found that in almost all countries, women's participation in mobility (credit mobility) is higher than that of men. Student flow is unbalanced (Degree Mobility) in the case of mobility from Eastern European countries, though gender issues are not emphasized there, partly because the same study suggests that access to data collected from Eastern European countries is limited and not qualitative (Grabher et al. 2014).

A 2012 study sponsored by the German Ministry of Education and Research "*What deters students from studying abroad?*" (Netz, Orr, Gwosć, Huß, 2012) says that the major obstacles are socio-demographic

problems, which include age, gender and education level. The current situation tells us that female students are more likely to engage in study abroad, although the impact of age is felt by women as their chances of becoming pregnant increase with age. Consequently, their opportunities to study abroad are diminishing and studying abroad is becoming more and more difficult.

In order for women to reconcile their academic career with their family life, they often subordinate their careers to their partner's, which impedes their academic progress (Uhly, Visser, Zippel, 2017). Several studies show that in addition to marital status and partner's job, parental or guardian involvement may have an effect on the international academic mobility and cooperation of men and women (Ackers, 2008).

The Erasmus Student Network's 2014-2015 Regions Survey states that one of the major impediments is family resistance, and this is related to the age of students. However, it is necessary to find out whether this problem has any connection with gender issues, as various studies (e.g. Gorgadze, 2016) show unjust attitudes towards women in Georgia generally as well as in the field of education. Family as a factor impeding education abroad is particularly common in some regions (Gori: 75%; Zugdidi: 67%) according to the above-mentioned research. This confirms the need to investigate this field and take effective steps to remedy the situation.

Research methodology

This study was undertaken using a mixed methods approach (see Creswell, 2010), using qualitative as well as quantitative methods. In addition, we evaluated numerous documents and statistics.

In the course of the study, three focus group interviews were held with groups of between 6 and 10 students (male and female) respectively (Gori Teaching University, Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University and East European University Tbilisi). Further questionnaires were sent out to the Georgian Technical University, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University as well as Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University.

Aside from this, expert interviews were held with staff (all female) of the Erasmus or international offices of all involved universities. In-depth interviews and focus groups were used, and content analysis (statistical data obtained from the National Statistics Office of Georgia and the HEIs participating in the study) became a source to uncover additional issues.

The study involved male and female, graduate and postgraduate students and administration officials from Tbilisi Ivane Javakhishvili State University, Iliia State University, Georgian Technical University, Gori Teaching University, Telavi Iakob Gogebashvili State University and two private HEIs in Tbilisi: East European University and University of Georgia.

Erasmus+ program selection criteria were used as criteria for participation in the study, i.e. English language skills better than average and high GPA. In addition, research participants must have been students of programs for which the university has announced exchange programs. One of the important factors considered when selecting the participants was their willingness and interest.

The results of the study were analyzed by coding methods. The coding of the obtained data was carried out to account for three issues: exchange programs and gender balance; personal factors for refusal to participate; obstructing external factors.

Research Results

In order to further deepen understanding of gender issues encountered in Georgia in relation to exchange programs, we sought to find out how well the gender balance between the participants in these programs is maintained and what the stakeholders themselves think about it.

According to Geostat (http://geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=2104&lang=geo), from the 2015-2016 academic year to the 2017-2018 academic year, 1,545 students from Georgia were sent abroad,

out of which 1,221 are female, representing approximately 80% of the total number of students. The participation of women has increased dramatically over the years and especially in the 2016-2017 academic year, while the number of men is only slightly increasing.

The increase in student participation in exchange programs is caused by the increase in the number of exchange programs and improved funding and information dissemination. This is confirmed by interviews with university officials and the Erasmus office. However, we cannot expressly exclude the growing interest of female students, as well as their empowerment and support from parents and the community, as evidenced by talking with the students. Considering the number of men and women by university, based on the public information provided by them, circumstances do not change radically at this stage if we compare it with the current situation. Three sides, university officials, the Erasmus office and students agree on one issue: that gender balance among exchange program participants in Georgia is not maintained in favor of female students. This means that every year more female than male students participate in exchange programs. Only one HEI diverged in this regard, where we were told that gender balance was maintained.

For example, according to the information received from Ivane Javakhishvili State University, since 2015, they have sent 617 students abroad, 454 female and 163 male students. This means that 73% of exchange program participants are women. The number of outgoing students has increased compared to 2015-2016, although participation of men has not changed. As for 2017-2018, the number is almost identical to the number of the previous year (the number of women increased by one point and the number of men decreased by two points).

Full information on only two academic years has been received from Ilia State University. This also shows the increasing tendency of female students (exceeded by 50 participants in 2016-2017 and by 63 in 2017-2018) to participate. That means that in both years, 103 out of 233 participants, i.e. 74%, are women. Gori Teaching University, like other universities mentioned above, is reporting more involvement by female students. The exchange programs have been attended by 35 students since 2015 and the majority of the participants are female. Only 6 out of 35 students are male, which means that about 85% of the participants are women.

An interesting case to consider is that of the Georgian Technical University, where due to the specifics of the faculties and the traditional concept of the so-called “professions of girls and boys”, most of the students are male. Notwithstanding the above, the number of female students participating in the exchange program (34 girls in total) is only slightly lower than the number of male students. In total, of 78 outgoing students from the Georgian Technical University since 2015, 44, i.e. 56%, were men.

Overall, women are overrepresented in higher education mobility, although this is somewhat mitigated by a view of the general gender balance of students: except at the Georgian Technical University, the gender ratio of all students is approximately 65-35; this means that women are strongly overrepresented at HEIs, even though there are considerable variations between individual study courses.

Exchange programs and gender balance

The number of exchange program participants in Georgia is increasing. This is due to the increase in exchange programs and funding, although it should be emphasized that the participation among women is particularly high, while the number of men is slightly increasing. This is in complete synchrony with developments in the EU, where female participation has long exceeded male participation in many countries.

Separate research is needed on why male interest is lacking and what is needed to activate and engage them in different activities. Many HEIs do not keep statistics by gender of applicants, which hindered our investigation to determine whether the low participation of men is due to their low interest or their academic performance; the latter opinion was voiced by an administrator at one of the HEIs.

Personal factors for refusal to participate

During the course of the study, the problem of self-esteem among female participants was clearly identified. They are not sure how they can handle living in a foreign country. Foreign countries are associated

with danger and do not represent a challenge that they would wish to overcome. This can be related to the family tradition of raising girls. Gaps in school textbooks on gender roles and low gender sensitivity among school teachers should also be noted. All of these factors can affect a woman who, from a young age, is determined by what is “appropriate”, how she should behave, what role she plays, and what her family and relatives expect from her.

The research design did not initially identify personal factors that prevent students from participating in exchange programs. However, during the focus group process, some important issues were identified which are worthy of mention.

In the case of men, this is willingness. As the focus groups have shown, they think that “if they wish they can do everything” – but “perhaps this is not the right time for them”. It seems that parental opposition should not be a problem for them when making any decisions. They seem to be more dependent on themselves than on family, parents, etc. However, as we are told in Erasmus office, the number of male students who approach the issue “keenly” and with full responsibility is smaller.

We have to confront the situation of women’s self-esteem, which has to do with the family tradition of raising girls and other factors. In Georgian historical sources, we find that Georgian women have been made responsible for the moral purity of the Georgian people for a long time. They were seen as devoted mothers to their families. “Their (Georgian women) motherhood, dedication to the motherland, honesty combined with physical beauty, high morale were a symbol of the conscience of their homeland.” (Kiknadze, Donadze, 2006, p. 82) “In almost every field of activity, women were left out of decision-making” (p. 85).

The shortcomings in school textbooks may appear exactly in this form, as an analysis of elementary school textbooks from a gender perspective shows (Tabatadze, Gorgadze, 2013). The textbook illustrations and texts were studied according to different criteria, including content of gender stereotypes in portraying male and female natures, activities and roles such as marital status or professional activity (p. 46). The study says that school textbooks are generally characterized by unequal gender representation and reinforce stereotypes in society about the role of men and women in the family (p. 72). To this we must add the extremely low gender sensitivity of teachers, which is a problem in Georgia. Study of Teachers’ Knowledge and Attitudes towards Gender shows that the majority of respondents favor traditional redistribution of male and female roles. Teachers themselves use stereotypes when analyzing the distribution of gender roles: for example, they think that family and motherhood, rather than professional advancement, is important for a woman, and they believe that the man should provide for the family financially (Isakadze, Gvianishvili, 2014, p. 11).

During the focus groups, one could often hear the phrases from women: “will I be able to?”, “I afraid that I will be alone”, or “I don’t want to be far from my homeland”. Hindering factors are “a life far from familiar people, a completely independent life”, a “fear of insecurity”, and “foreignness itself”. These comments clearly show that, for women, leaving the country is sometimes an insurmountable problem. A foreign country is associated with danger, not an opportunity to know the world.

In some cases, the family are no longer a challenge; the students themselves give up and the thought of studying abroad becomes doomed. This would be the reason why university officials cannot prove that their students have any problems with their families in cases where there is no evidence of familial opposition against going abroad.

Obstructing external factors

According to the study, men are less likely to be restricted by their families when they decide to continue their mobility studies abroad. However, women experience a limitation and this limitation can take one of three forms:

- women who already know from past experiences what to expect from their family members and therefore do not express their desire or try their luck;
- women who speak out, although they experience a sharp reaction from family members, but do not or cannot go against their will;

- women who speak out and despite reactions do not give up.

When it comes to restrictions, it should be noted that there are instances in which the problem concerns a female student in the family, but a male student living in the same family enjoys more freedom.

We were interested in the reasons parents give for creating obstacles, and among these reasons are:

- security and terrorism;
- lack of skills needed for their daughter to immerse herself in a foreign environment;
- fear that a European experience may have a negative effect on their daughter.

“My father thinks it is possible to get enough knowledge in one’s home country, in this case in Georgia, and he is against continuing to study abroad.”

As stated by the Erasmus office, the mentioned issues are rarely found in East Georgia, though such cases are common in West Georgia and in regions populated by ethnic minorities.

“We had such cases in Kutaisi, Batumi and Zugdidi... The reason for not being let go by the family may on the one hand be concerns about how secure their virginity will be; this was said in West Georgia and we have heard about such cases, but we have not done any research on this. They don’t even submit an application because they know the parents won’t let them go. This topic has not been raised in East Georgia. To be more precise, such information did not come to us.”

Ethnic minorities are particularly open about their daughters’ so-called “virginity status”, while in Eastern Georgia they do not speak about it so openly and are limited in their means of resistance. As a rule, parents and especially fathers who prevent women from participating in exchange programs also oppose working, leaving home in the evening, etc. “My father won’t let me go to work in Mtatsminda and you think he will send me to another country?”

In conclusion, it should be noted once again that the existence of obstacles for women in today’s Georgia is a reality. Given the above, it is easy to see why universities are no longer aware that there are problems in their families, such as family breakdown and parental resistance.

And finally, as the study covered only Eastern Georgia, these problems have only been identified in Eastern Georgia. However, specialists in the field say the issue is particularly acute in Western Georgia and regions populated by ethnic minorities. This requires additional research and response from both education policy makers and HEIs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

At first glance, the study shows a contradictory result: on the one hand, women are in the majority both absolutely and relatively at all investigated institutions. On the other hand, as the findings of this study show, it is primarily women who face structural disadvantages in opting to study abroad. In particular, stereotyped views of the female gender, which are still being propagated in schools, obstruct the mobility of female students. It must be noted that both genders face socioeconomic barriers, but these can relatively easily be mitigated through specific support measures (bursaries etc.). The described conservative views on gender in many families, however, are much more powerful and ultimately liable to cement gender imbalance.

The following recommendations can be made on the basis of this study:

Conducting, disseminating and promoting research: for the purposes of field development and deeper and more systematic research in this field. It is important that education administrators become more involved in research and support the work of other researchers. The fact that the demand for exchange programs at all HEIs is so high that the participation of women exceeds the participation of men by a very large margin does not mean that the problem can be neglected. If HEIs become more interested in research and subsequently become more aware of research results, they will be able to respond appropriately, plan activities and actively engage students and staff.

Information campaigns and raising awareness: although education administrators are less aware of the problem of female participation around them, they have a common recommendation: planning information campaigns and raising parental awareness that the problem of female participation actually exists. In addition to giving parents full information about exchange programs and their benefits, it is even more important to convince them to start empowering their daughters and developing the skills they need at an early age.

Development of educational programs, internationalization: this recommendation applies not only to higher education institutions but also to those interested in education policy in the country and policy makers. Development and refinement of educational programs will facilitate the internationalization of higher education if more foreign students are led to be interested in Georgia. If higher education institutions in Georgia ensure that their programs are developed so that they are as focused as possible on providing practical knowledge, and if foreign students have the best opportunities to gain knowledge of the subjects and courses taught in Georgia, they will be more interested in Georgian higher education institutions. As we have already discussed, exchange students not only benefit from this process, but also participate in the internationalization of the local community, implying changes in the attitudes of the locals. Attracting foreign students, integrating them into the local student communities and planning and implementing joint activities may in the long run mean eliminating the problems discussed in this paper.

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