

Vulnerability, gender and resistance in transnational academic mobility

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on Tanzanian and Mozambican PhD students funded by Swedish development aid, this article investigates how everyday academic work life is gendered in Sweden and in the students' home academic departments. In particular, it focuses on the role of 'important others', such as international donors, universities, colleagues and family, in enhancing or alleviating vulnerability and how this shifts across spatial contexts. Integral to this is exploring how obstacles are managed and negotiated by PhD students, and how they articulate capability and therefore resist a position as a victim. The results indicate the glonacality of vulnerability as something that stretches over institutional and national boundaries, and how vulnerability can be (re)produced at local university level despite the good intentions of donors and universities operating at a global level. In addition, a translocational and intersectional perspective highlights how situations of vulnerability are gendered and radicalised differently in different academic contexts.

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Introduction

This article aims to make a contribution to research into precarity in higher education by investigating vulnerability, gender and resistance in the context of transnational academic mobility funded by development aid. This focus on vulnerability results from our previous research into PhD training programmes funded by the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (Sida) (Fellsson & Mählck, 2013, 2017; Mählck, 2016; Mählck & Fellsson, 2016). Since the early 1970s, Sida has contributed to building research capacity in the Global South through PhD training programmes where international mobility to Sweden is mandatory. In this context, supporting PhD programmes is seen by the government as a main way of reducing vulnerability. However, our research into Mozambican and Tanzanian students who gained their PhDs through these programmes shows that little has changed in terms of working conditions, career advancement and payment after graduation, thus indicating that vulnerability has remained. The only systematic mapping on this group

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shows that more than 50% of the Mozambican and 39% of the Tanzanian students had experienced discrimination while in Sweden. Experiences of discrimination were reported, with skin colour the main trigger, thus indicating that experiences of racialisation in Sweden have been frequent. What remains to be explored is whether and how these experiences are gendered.

This article deals directly with this issue and investigates how everyday academic work life is gendered, and whether and how this shifts across workplaces in Sweden, Tanzania and Mozambique from the perspective of students. In this context, this article aligns with recent research which suggests holistic approaches to vulnerability are integral to processes of globalisation and precarity as a general condition of being in everyday lives, thus stressing the importance of researching processes of flexibility, adaptability, resilience and capacity (Bankoff, Fereks, & Hilhorst, 2004; Butler, 2015; Lorey, 2015). Focusing on Tanzanian and Mozambican PhD students funded by Swedish development aid, this paper investigates how vulnerability in the context of everyday academic work life is gendered in Sweden and in the students' home academic departments. In particular it focuses on the role of 'important others' (Oleksiyenko, 2015), such as Sida, colleagues and family, in enhancing or alleviating vulnerability and how this shifts across spatial contexts. Integral to this is exploring how these situations are managed and negotiated by the PhD students, and how they articulate capability and therefore resist a position as a victim. An important aim, therefore, is to also make a theoretical contribution to the advancement of the concept of human vulnerability in higher education research.

Gender perspectives on vulnerability: conceptual dimensions

Gender scholars have pointed to the importance of applying a gender perspective to transnational academic mobility (Ackers, 2008). The results reveal that the direction and scope of mobility as well as the possibilities and hindrances for transnational academic mobility are gendered. Here, factors related to partnership, children, dual career constellations and social class all construct differing conditions for women and men to become internationally mobile (Jöns, 2010; Leemann, 2010). In this context, it is worth noting that there is very little research on international academic mobility from a postcolonial gender perspective. Research at student level indicates that the interplay between international students from the Global South and the receiving institutions is both gendered and racialised (Bullen & Kenway, 2003; Kenway & Bullen, 2003).

Research into development aid to research education is an emerging theme in the field of higher education. Here there are important contributions focusing on policy frameworks (Naidoo, 2011) and institutional conditions (Stephens, 2009), teaching and learning (Adriansen, Møller Madsen, & Jensen, 2016; Silfver & Berge, 2016) and the position of epistemologies from the south (Barrett, Crossley, & Fon, 2014; Breidlid, 2012, 2013). From their various locations and perspectives, researchers point to the challenges of constructing equal research partnerships and how inequality is managed and negotiated within development aid-funded doctoral training. In this context, it is worth noting that this research has not applied a specific focus on gender relations, which raises questions as to how they are managed and negotiated in development aid-funded partnership programmes.

In this article, I suggest that the theory of translocational intersectionality (Anthias, 2012), specifically designed to research gender relations in the mobility–migration nexus, adds

important value to building a research framework to enhance understanding of human vulnerability in the context of academic mobility.

Note, however, that a translocational perspective does not imply a view that advocates a clear cut between the national and the transnational. A transnational lens is important to understanding how certain countries are hierarchically situated in relation to each other, and how subjects are positioned hierarchically through these global dimensions of power. Often this includes attributions to the subjects' country of origin – specifically, forms of discrimination on the basis of race or culture. It is in this aspect that the nation cannot be ruled out in transnational studies (Anthias, 2012).

The theory of translocational intersectionality is concerned not only with how people move, but also with how the social configurations of boundaries, particularly their spatial dimensions, emerge. Here the spatial is understood as a 'socially constructed set of configurations, which extends beyond the notion of physical space' (Anthias, 2012, p. 103). From this viewpoint, a translocational perspective goes beyond the notion of a 'transnational' one since 'it refers to dislocations and relocations at a number of different levels, including those of class and gender, for example, instead of merely focusing on movements relating to physical place and their consequences' (Anthias, 2012, p. 103). Here Anthias (2012) adds a spatial dimension to intersectionality. Her theory enables the analysis of complexities of mobility in relation to institutional and geographic borders, and in particular to the complex ways in which subjects' positionalities change across different spatial and social locations, and the dual and contradictory positionalities of privilege and disadvantage that may occur.

Here I suggest that a translocational perspective adds a further dimension to the global heuristic agency model (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). The glonacal heuristic model is used in this paper to analyse how vulnerability, gender and capability in academic work life gets strained or diffused at the global, national and local levels. A translocational gender perspective makes it possible to investigate how gender changes across different spatial and social locations, without assuming that gender relations are represented in identical ways in different academic contexts.

In recent years, vulnerability has emerged as a key concept for understanding uncertainty and instability when humans and non-humans interact (Bankoff et al., 2004). Moving away from a focus which understands vulnerability as something that certain people have, Wisner (2004) suggests a situational perspective for understanding social vulnerability: 'This approach is based upon a view of disasters that sees them not as "exceptional" events; rather, they are perceived as extensions of the problems confronted in "normal" or "daily" life' (2004, p. 186). In this context, Wisner downplays the importance of acknowledging particular groups of people to understanding vulnerability:

The key question is not what kind of group a person or family belongs to, but the nature of their daily life and their actual situation (including the way in which it may have changed recently or may be changing). (Ibid.)

While being sympathetic to the abandoning of the view of vulnerability as something that certain people have, this article nevertheless stresses the importance of recognising that vulnerability is unevenly distributed between, among others, gender and race, thus advocating for a perspective which acknowledges how vulnerability results from the intersection of structural relations and individual dispositions. This paper makes a contribution to research by analysing how the everyday academic work life in Sweden, Tanzania and Mozambique is gendered. This means investigating how women and men talk about

obstacles during their stays in Sweden, Tanzania and Mozambique, and whether and how this talk is gendered. This article is also inspired by research into the role of 'important others' in the social mobility of disadvantaged students in Hong Kong (Oleksiyenko, 2015). This does not mean that I assume that the context for situations of vulnerability are the same as in Hong Kong – in my article, 'important others' are Sida, university stakeholders, colleagues and family.

The study

A survey was sent out to participants and graduates from Sida-supported PhD programmes in Mozambique (1990–2013) and Tanzania (1990–2014). The questionnaire data-set consists of 291 individuals (159 in Mozambique and 132 in Tanzania). The response rate was 52% (82 individuals) in the Mozambican and 48% (63 individuals) in the Tanzanian case. The results from the analysis, some of which have been published (Fellsson & Mählck, 2013, 2017; Mählck, 2016; Mählck & Fellsson, 2016) form the background to this paper. In total, 38 interviews with participants from the programmes were collected; 20 in Mozambique and 18 in Tanzania, with women representing 40% of the interview sample.

The majority of the interviews were conducted with PhD graduates, with a focus on academic work during their doctoral studies and after their graduation. At the time of the interview, the majority of the interviewees were working as university lecturers in Tanzania or Mozambique, though there were also representatives of the ministries in their respective countries in various political fields, and administrative officers of the different universities in the Global North and South.

The focus of this article is on analysing the experiences of participating in PhD programmes for building research capacity – i.e. their experiences of vulnerability as PhD students. The majority began their PhD studies when in their 30s, the women being slightly older than men when they started. The scientific fields represented in the interviews ranged across the social sciences, medicine and technology, with a slight dominance of STEM subjects. In this context, remember that, here, the focus is on PhD students participating in a Swedish-funded programme for research capacity-building in Tanzania and Mozambique. It is thus not possible to generalise across all PhD students in Tanzania and Mozambique, or to compare research conditions for PhD students in general there. Instead the analytical focus is on if and how the students' talk about obstacles during training in Sweden, Tanzania and Mozambique, and if and how this talk is gendered.

Important parts of the interviews have been transcribed and organised into the main analytical themes. By relating these themes to the whole sample and to previous research, new sub-themes have been constructed (see Kvale (1997) for a discussion on a thematic approach to qualitative analysis). Using a multimethod approach, the interview quotations are triangulated against the survey results and our previous research into this student group (Allwood, 2004), allowing for a thick analysis of particular themes at different analytical levels.

Following Tierney's (1992) and Tierney and Venegas (2009) advice on post-structural research design in equality in education, the interviews are presented in a joint 'Findings and Discussion' section. In the conclusion section the main empirical findings are discussed in relation to the theoretical framework and theoretical contributions are presented. Since the majority of interviews were with graduates who had participated in the PhD programme

in various years, there is little point in trying to generalise from an individual perspective, since the possibilities for research in their academic departments and in Sweden have changed over time.

In order to understand vulnerability in the context of development aid-funded PhD training and how academic work life is gendered, we need to look closely into conditions for academic research in the countries concerned. In Mozambique, the higher-education sector has shown rapid growth over recent decades – from four universities in 1995 to 48 in 2014; private institutions account for one third of the student enrolments (Felleson & Mählick, 2013). National and international policy priorities there would seem to favour education for building skilled human resources rather than research capacity and, at present, only 7% of all staff members at higher education institutions have a PhD. In this context gender imbalance remains problematic. Female students made up only 25% of the total enrolment at public institutions, and 27% at private institutions. This gender imbalance is reflected in the admission of females to PhD training programmes (Felleson, 2017; Felleson & Mählick, 2013).

Previous research on students and graduates from the Sida PhD programme (1990–2013) in Mozambique shows that a majority (82%) have remained at the same university and in the same academic position (58%), with little increase in salary after graduation. Among those who report that they still do research after graduating, 57% fund it through consultancies and private savings. Government funding only accounts for 4% and international donors for 11% (Felleson, 2017). Our earlier results show that an overwhelming majority (86%) of PhD candidates and graduates were positive about supervision in Sweden. However, the questionnaire results also revealed that 50% of the students had experienced discrimination during the students' time in Sweden, with the main trigger being on the grounds of skin colour (21%). We also know that experiences of discrimination during training are highly gendered, with women experiencing more discrimination along almost all parameters we tested for (Mählick, 2016; Mählick & Felleson, 2016).

Since 1990, Mozambican PhD students in the programme could choose between going to South Africa for training (because of geographic proximity) or going to Sweden. Figure 1 includes experiences from home university and South Africa and Sweden. The higher levels

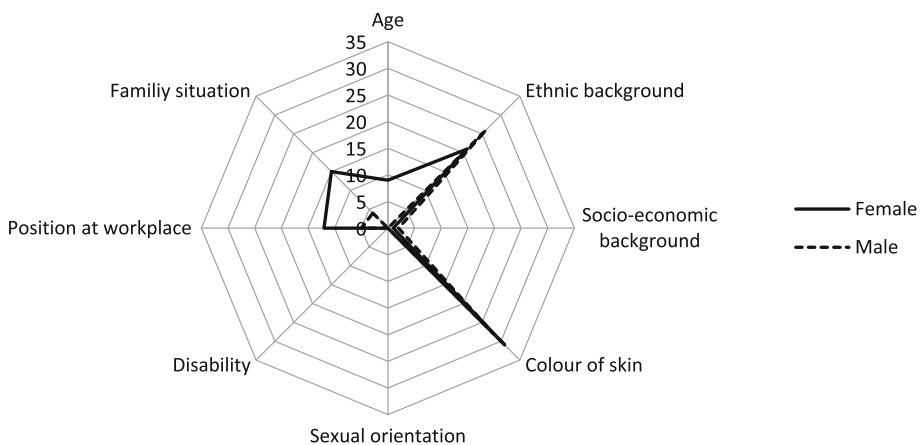


Figure 1. Experiences of discrimination of Mozambican PhD students/graduates during training by gender. Source: Author's compilation.

of experience of discrimination on the grounds of colour of skin displayed in Figure 1 as compared to Figure 2 is most likely explained by the inclusion of South Africa, since in South Africa 45% of students had experienced discrimination on the grounds of colour of skin, as compared to 21% in Sweden (see also Mählck, 2016).

Tanzania has 31 universities (12 public and 19 private) and 38 university colleges, centres and institutes (7 public and 31 private) (Swedish Embassy, Dar es Salaam 2016, cited in Felleson, 2017, p. 39). At the same time, the number of students enrolled in tertiary education has increased from 37,667 in the academic year 2004/2005 to 204,175 in 2014/2015 (Ngirwa, Euwema, Babyegeya, & Stouten, 2014; UNESCO, 2014). As in Mozambique, the majority (65%) of student enrollments are in public institutions (Felleson, 2017). Here women account for 31% to 36% in most institutions, with lower figures in the STEM subjects. In public universities, only 11–35% of staff members are female. As in Mozambique, the majority (86%) of those on the Sida-funded PhD programme (1990–2014) had remained at the same university after graduation, 55% in the same academic position. Again, access to research funding is very difficult after graduation and is primarily funded by consultancy or private savings (44%). Only 6% is government funded and 15% by international donors (Felleson, 2017).

From our previous results (Mählck & Felleson, 2016), we note that 91% of Tanzanian students were very satisfied with supervision in Sweden, although 39% had experienced discrimination, skin colour being the main trigger. New results presented here show that Tanzanian women mirror the patterns of those in Mozambique, reporting higher levels of discrimination along almost all parameters we tested for during training, compared to their male counterparts (see Figure 2).

Findings and discussion

This section deals specifically with the research question comparing how the PhD students talk about obstacles in their everyday academic work when visiting Sweden and in their home academic departments in Tanzania and Mozambique, the role of important others and whether and how this talk is gendered.

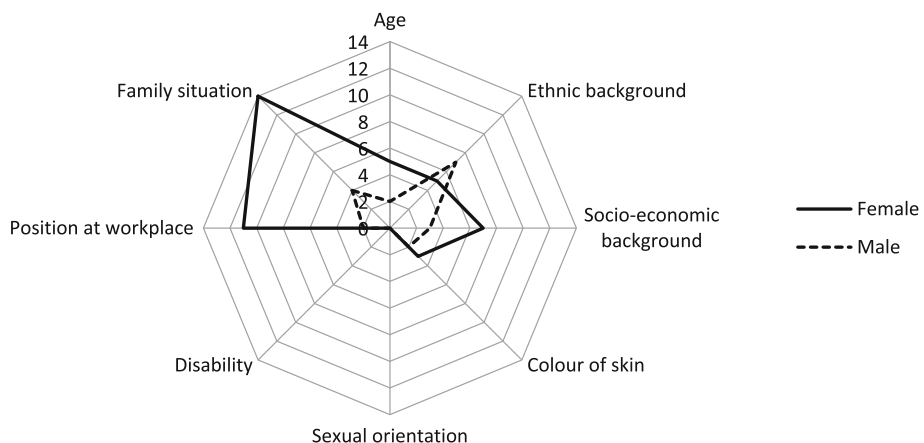


Figure 2. Experiences of discrimination of Tanzanian PhD students/graduates during training by gender. Source: Author's compilation.

Gender inequality in Sweden

The students are employed by their home universities in Tanzania and Mozambique and enrolled in PhD training in Swedish academic departments. Sida tops up their salaries while in Sweden, which probably makes them better off financially compared to many other international students in Sweden under sometimes very constrained economic conditions (Utbildningsdepartementet, Forskningspropositionen, 2016/2017:17:50). As mentioned previously, a vast majority (91% of Tanzanian and 86% of Mozambican) of PhD students are very satisfied with their supervision in Sweden. Many also mentioned the importance of supervisors and fellow students for their wellbeing there. When these ‘important others’ have failed to support them, feelings of discomfort, anger and anxiety have been reported (Mählck, 2016). This finding needs to be related to our previous findings, which show that women (63%) are on average less satisfied with their supervision in Sweden compared to men (80%) (Mählck & Felleson, 2016). The following is a quote from a female researcher in Tanzania who talks about her supervisor in Sweden:

Student: No, my supervision in Sweden didn’t work out. My supervisor – how can I put it? It didn’t work. I think he has problems.

Interviewer: Problems?

Student: Yes, problems. When we sat in the room and he was sitting in the chair next to me, he never looked at me, always talked above my head. He would talk in Swedish with other people. He made me feel very small, invisible – yes, it is always there, you know, with white people, the question of skin colour. I don’t think he was used to working with black people.

From this quotation, it becomes clear that ignoring someone in terms of eye contact and the absence of speech acts are important ways of constructing situations of vulnerability. It also becomes clear how this experience is understood as a process of racialisation, framed within a strong discourse of capability and of resistance: ‘I think he has problems’, ‘I don’t think he was used to working with black people’. This needs to be juxtaposed with interviews showing the importance of supervisors for alleviating vulnerability:

My supervisor in Sweden made sure that I had everything I needed. She gave me all the kinds of support that I needed. She was always there for me and, in terms of the material, the office, computer, I had everything that was necessary for work. (Female lecturer, Mozambique)

Taken together, the survey results and interview quotations suggest that, in this investigation, patterns of gender inequality in supervision in Sweden are intersectionally produced along gendered and racialised lines; an important way of mediating this is through ignoring and silence.

A common pattern in the interviews with Tanzanian and Mozambican students is that both women and men talked of family relations as being the main responsibility for women (this will be further elaborated on below). This had also discouraged younger women with children, in particular, from engaging in the programme. The following quote suggest how family relations are articulated in relation to women’s staying in Sweden:

Yes, if I had been younger, without a family, I would have preferred to stay longer, or to take my family. Yes, I would have preferred that. Why? Because then you are there for a longer period and you can use your time better. (female, Mozambique)

All the interviews point to men staying longer in Sweden; this is highlighted as beneficial for their PhD studies. From a translocational perspective, the previous quotation highlights

the gendered and spatial dimensions of family responsibility, which impacts more on women than on their male counterparts, although both women and men are separated from their families. Importantly, from our previous research we know that women also responded differently to feelings of isolation and being separated from their families; here, women emphasised that they were able to focus on work in Sweden, thus stressing capability (see also Mählck, 2016).

Gender inequality in Tanzania and Mozambique

From the survey and the interviews we know that both women and men faced obstacles relating to research infrastructure upon their return. The gender differences lay in how they talk about their position in their workplace and in relation to family obligations. The quotations below are chosen because they represent a particularly clear example of gender differences during training in Mozambique:

During the period of training in Mozambique you had a lot of lectures and administrative work that take away from the amount of time available for research. Basically it was very hard to focus on the PhD research while in my university in Mozambique. (Male lecturer) (Felleson & Mählck 2013; Mählck & Felleson 2016)

Men get a lot of support ... I know men who got financial support from the university to complete their PhD after their training period was over, something I didn't get ... Men get information, yes, about calls; when the women get the information it is always too late and the deadline is closed ... and sometimes women are not supported by their partners and they have small children. (Female lecturer)

From our policy overview at the beginning of the article, we know that the number of PhD holders are very low and infrastructures for research are very poor in Mozambique, making core support from their own universities for research very unusual. In addition, these quotations also point to the intense workload that these students encounter while back in Mozambique. One important difference is how female and male researchers talk about gender inequality in informal networks at work and in family relations. Both genders suggest that the main obstacle for women is related to family responsibilities. From the total number of interviews with Mozambican students we know that only women suggest that social networks in academia are gendered and contributing to vulnerability for female academics. They indicate that men would talk about women's main responsibility being within families but less about gendered networks in universities.

The following quotations are from a woman and a man in Tanzania, who talk about conditions for research upon their return. The quotations are chosen since they represent a dominant pattern in the interviews with Tanzanian students and – as the analysis will show – because the ways in which these obstacles are talked about are gendered:

I could focus less on research when I was in Tanzania compared to when I was in Sweden. I focused more on my family; we also lack important infrastructure and software in my department, and I had very few people to talk with – most of them are not in my field and my supervisor was in Sweden. (Male, Tanzania)

In my area we are quite a number of researchers with a PhD now; what we lack is an infrastructure and funding for research... of course it is more difficult for women since they have the main responsibility for the family here. (Female lecturer, Tanzania)

In these quotations the researchers mention the lack of infrastructure for research as the main obstacle in Tanzania. In addition, having access to colleagues is also important for

removing or constructing obstacles. Here we note that the female researcher belonged to a field which had received support from Sweden for many years and had established its own local PhD training programme. The man belonged to a different field, where he was among the first in the country to receive his PhD. We can see that academic work life is gendered by the ways in which family relations are talked about. Here the man talks about 'focusing more on family'; whereas the woman emphasises 'women's main responsibility for family'. How are these patterns of gender inequality managed and negotiated?

Gender, capability and resistance

The results from our previous research into this group of sub-Saharan African scholars indicate that there are numerous accounts of how researchers on the continent appropriate the understanding of vulnerability. Often this involves situations of 'reversing the gaze' (Chakrabarty, 2000), in which the visiting researchers from Tanzania and Mozambique decentralise Swedish academics and departments and de-anthropologise themselves, by discussing Swedish academia from an outsider's perspective (Mählick, 2018, forthcoming). Here, I suggest that resistance is visible when the Tanzanian and Mozambican researchers stress capability in situations of vulnerability and how this is a gendered process. This young and very successful Tanzanian female researcher shows a particularly distinct example of how capability is emphasised in a situation of vulnerability during transnational mobility:

I went to Sweden for six months the second year and six months the third year. I had my baby during my first year. She was only eight months old when I left the first time... I missed her the first week, but then it was fine, you got used to it and we used to Skype everyday... being away from my family was the thing which was most difficult in Sweden.

This quotation shows that being separated from her family during her studies in Sweden was very challenging for this female researcher. However, it is framed within a strong discourse of capability. From previous research into this group and from that presented above, we know that issues of parenthood are constructed into individual women's responsibilities rather than as a structural challenge to be shared equally between parents (Fellsson & Mählick, 2013). From this perspective, the strong discourse of capability displayed in the quotation is not surprising; anything else would risk constructing *her* as a problem.

Relating the quotation to the interview with the same woman shows that the only obstacle which is not framed within a capability discourse is the lack of infrastructure for research in her home university – 'We lack research infrastructure here' is often mentioned during the interview. How can we understand this? Here I suggest that this example points to the gendered nature of obstacles which has consequences for how capabilities and responsibilities are articulated. Let me elaborate on this. From the overall sample we know that women are constructed as the main caregivers; therefore, being separate from the family is seen as a highly gendered and individualised obstacle. When women stress capability as regards an obstacle which is gendered and individualised (i.e. being separated from family and particularly small children), and vulnerability as regards a problem which is seen as gender-neutral and structural (i.e. problems with access to infrastructure), resistance is constructed at two levels; women avoid becoming the problem, and the responsibility of institutions – here universities and international donors – is highlighted.

When women, as in the Mozambican sample, stress the gendered dimension of university networks/structures ('men who got financial support from the university', 'men get information'), an additional level of critique, and therefore capability and resistance, is articulated.

Conclusion

The empirical results point to the importance of a situational perspective on vulnerability, with a focus on the general conditions of everyday lives in the context of globalisation. Furthermore, the glonacality of vulnerability is highlighted by the ways in which hierarchically positioned university institutions and one international donor contribute to alleviating or enforcing vulnerability. In particular, they show how vulnerability can be (re)produced at local university level despite the good intentions of donors and universities operating at a global level. For example, in Sweden, access to university infrastructure and financial aid from Sida may be argued to alleviate vulnerability for students while in Sweden; whereas, when the students return to Tanzania and Mozambique, the lack of research infrastructure and funding there is mentioned as the main obstacle in their everyday work. In this context the involvement of supervisors and colleagues in the PhD training programme, and how this impacts on the students' vulnerability and gender equality in daily work life, goes beyond the local context. Here colleagues and supervisors are contributing to and alleviating vulnerability in Sweden as well as in the students' home universities. In this context, gender and race relations are differently articulated in the interviews and differ between workplaces, showing the intersectional and translocational nature of the production of gender inequality in these students' working lives – for example, in Sweden, gender inequality in supervision is intersectionally produced along gendered and racialised lines and represented through ignoring and silence. In Tanzania and Mozambique, racialisation is less pronounced. Instead gender inequality is produced through ascribing the main responsibility for care work to women and through 'old boys' networks', according mainly to women in Mozambique.

Although women's main responsibility for family relations is pronounced in Tanzania and Mozambique, the results shows that this also impacted on the length of their stay in Sweden. This points to the translocational production of gender inequality through the uneven distribution of family responsibility and how this stretches across spatial and institutional boundaries. In particular, women stressed that, although they missed their families while in Sweden, the geographic distance also released them from caring responsibilities and gave them more time for research in Sweden (see also Mählck, 2016). Here I suggest that this shows how the positionality of women as the main care-givers changes when they move across workplaces, and how they occupy positions of privilege and disadvantage either simultaneously or at/in different times or spaces.

The results also add value to gender research, since they show how situations of vulnerability and discourses of capability are gendered. This means that women and men are exposed to different obstacles that shift according to geographic and social locations, and that their response to these obstacles differs and changes as they move. In addition, *obstacles* are gendered, meaning that, while both women and men are exposed to being separated from families, women are expected to take the main responsibility for family relations, which adds an additional layer of complexity to the situation. When women stress their capability – faced with a gendered and individualised obstacle (i.e. separation from family and particularly small children) – and vulnerability (i.e. problems with access to infrastructure), which

is constructed as gender-neutral and structural, resistance is constructed at two levels; women avoid becoming the problem, and the responsibility of institutions – here universities and international donors – is highlighted. When women recount how university networks/structures are gendered, an additional level of critique, and therefore of capability and resistance, is articulated.

Much previous research into inequality based on gender and race in higher education and in mobility is built on examples and theoretical frameworks that are developed from within the Anglo-Saxon canon (i.e. the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia). A translocational perspective on situations of vulnerability in the context of transnational academic mobility between Sweden, Tanzania and Mozambique will contribute important new knowledge from countries outside the Anglo-Saxon research canon.

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