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Mobility in a globalised world: How countries regulate mobility with passports and visas

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Citizenship has a significant impact on migrants' freedom to travel. While citizens of the Global North can travel without major problems, citizens of the Global South have to queue at consulates to obtain a visa before they can travel. They may have to wait in long queues at the border or at the airport, where they may be subjected to unpleasant interrogations. The aim of this article is to uncover how a passport becomes powerful or weak depending on the country that issues it, and what impact this has on the (geographical and professional) mobility of passport holders. We explore why some countries impose visa restrictions while others allow visa-free travel. We interviewed 32 people who had travelled on a number of occasions for professional reasons or as tourists. The externalities created by visa regulations may lead to an increase in the number of alternative destinations in lockstep, even if countries' policies remain unchanged. This study has critical policy implications for both source and destination countries.

KEYWORDS
international relation, migration, security, strong passports, visa regime

1 | INTRODUCTION

When the body of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach and was snapped by a photographer of a Turkish news agency, the image became a symbol of the migration crisis that had shaken the conscience of the world. Abdullah, Aylan Kurdi's father, was affluent. The money he paid to a human smuggler (4000 euros/£2500/$4460) might have bought air tickets for all of them. If they had the appropriate documents, Aylan Kurdi would not have died that tragic death. It may sound reasonable that the name of the country on the passport decides where people are legally allowed to go and work. However, the standardised visa policy does not spare those who should simply enter the country or who need urgent entry to save lives (Anderson, 2000; Mau et al., 2015; Neumayer, 2006).

The course of a journey is determined by a combination of important documents, including the passport, as well as additional materials such as the purpose of the journey, financial documents, return flight tickets and accommodation reservations. While citizens from wealthier and friendlier countries travel with little to no hassle and pass through immigration controls with fully automated systems such as 'e-gates', people from poor and politically unstable countries, especially from South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa, often require a travel visa and have to wait in long queues at the border to satisfy the immigration officer (Czaika et al., 2018).

Human mobility is one of the critical issues in the globalisation processes and characterising modern society, which has attained great magnitude and complexity (Beckmann, 2004; Chattoraj, 2022b). Urry (2007:8) defines mobilities as 'different types and temporalities of bodily movement […]'All forms of migration involve movement over space, cultural and socioeconomic divides. As a result, the concept of mobility is crucial to our knowledge of the processes and discourses that relate to our movements (Ofer, 2015), as well as an understanding of those experiences (Urry, 2007; Gerharz, 2012; Hannam et al., 2006:10).

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Physical mobility often has a symbolic meaning, as it represents a deviation from established social norms and is perceived as a disruption of the stable and structured boundaries of space, territory and social order (Adey, 2004). Airports in particular have become symbolic sites of mobility, facilitating the transit of millions of people to, from and within nations each year (Cresswell, 1993). These sprawling terminals are carefully designed to facilitate the smooth movement of passengers, baggage and goods to their destinations. Passports and visas act as important instruments in regulating and monitoring these flows, ensuring the security and integrity of the countries traversed.

In passport and visa policies, tourists and business visitors are often favoured over low-skilled or migrant labourers, reflecting societal norms. Adopting a relational perspective on mobility, as proposed by Cresswell (1996), reveals that the meaning of mobility is context-dependent, varying across individuals, places and times. Consequently, the societal welcome extended to a tourist diverges from the reception given to a migrant (Adey, 2004). The most conspicuous manifestations of social distinction lie in the venues through which mobility is regulated. In the foreseeable future, the delineation between desirable and undesirable mobilities will become increasingly evident at borders and airports, where mobility intersects with geographical limits.

However, there is a misconception that skilled and professional workers have an easier time finding overseas jobs and getting visas processed than other groups. Despite legitimate circumstances, incumbents from the Global South face disproportionate hurdles in obtaining visa permits, regardless of skill classification and despite broad disagreement (Lechner & Boli, 2015). While globalisation has expanded opportunities (Lechner & Boli, 2015), obtaining a visa remains a challenge. Many foreign employers assume that potential candidates are unable to attend interviews or accept job offers due to visa issues. Despite the arguments of scholars such as Czaika and De Haas (2014) who attribute migration to globalisation, we emphasise that skills shortages in destination countries drive migration of low and semi-skilled workers to meet demand and supply (Ullah et al., 2019).

Passports and visas are important tools for verifying the identity and background of individuals entering or leaving a country. Countries implement immigration policies and visa regulations to manage the inflow and outflow of foreign workers, students and tourists. These regulations aim to strike a balance between attracting skilled workers, promoting economic growth and protecting the labour market for domestic citizens. However, we argue that strict regulations and controls affect the Global South more than the Global North. We argue that the standardised entry policy and the preference for passports of citizens of the Global North is fundamentally discriminatory and harms those who deserve and need easy entry, such as citizens of the Global South. Because of this standardised visa policy, citizens from poor countries have to spend more time and money on their travel plans. Therefore, we ask a question, how do the regulations and restrictions imposed by global South on mobility through passports and visa regulations impact migration patterns from Global South?

2 | OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The aim of this article is to find out how and why a passport becomes strong or weak and what effects this has on the (geographical and occupational) mobility of passport holders. This means that in visa policy, a distinction is often made between holders of strong and weaker passports. Strong passports allow easier access to travelling, while holders of weaker passports face more obstacles. This discrepancy can exacerbate global inequalities by limiting the opportunities of people from countries with weaker passports. It can perpetuate economic inequalities and hinder intercultural exchange. Simplifying visa procedures and promoting greater equality in travel opportunities could help to alleviate these problems and promote greater global inclusivity and understanding. We interviewed people who have had travelling experiences with different visa procedures in different parts of the world to learn more about the diversity of such passport-based biases.

Visa policies vary based on passport strength, creating inequality. We have examined who benefits and who loses from these restrictions to highlight their unfairness. In doing so, we primarily analysed the existing visa policies of the different countries. A qualitative approach was chosen for this study, using both primary and secondary data. Between December 2019 and November 2022, primary data was collected through structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with 32 respondents from South Asia (12), Southeast Asia (9), Africa (7) and Latin America (4) to understand how existing visa policies impact mobility. Our Internet research (Chattoraj, 2017) yielded a variety of online reports, documents, and newspaper articles, which provided us with valuable secondary data on various aspects of visa and passport policies.

To select our sample, we primarily identified some acquaintances from different continents and had conversations via WhatsApp, Skype and Microsoft Teams about the purpose of the research. We drew up a list of potential interviewees. We then selected them based on their willingness to participate in the study. We tried to match their background with our criteria (e.g., length of stay in the target countries, education and/or skill level, difficulties in obtaining a job and visa, etc.). Most of the interviewees were professionals, academics and students.

To ensure that the answers were in line with the research objectives, in-depth interviews were conducted using a well-developed interview guide. We asked questions about demographics, nationality/citizenship, educational background, occupation, residency status in country of residence and access to resources. We started with some general questions such as age, country of origin, country of residence, nationality, educational and professional background and number of countries visited, which were then followed by some specific questions such as: What is your country of origin? How long have you lived in your current country of residence? How did you come to live here? Did you have difficulty finding a job here? What was the process like compared to a native? How many other countries have you visited? Did you apply for a visa for these countries? (If yes) Can you please explain the visa application process in more detail? Was it

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smooth or were there any problems? Did you have to cancel/postpone your trip because you did not receive your visa in time?

Positionality and social location influenced our study approach in several ways, as personal and social variables such as race, ethnicity, occupation, socioeconomic, cultural and political status affect perspectives and experiences. Respondent data was organised, categorised and analysed using a systematic approach. To analyse our non-numerical data, such as the textual data from the interviews, we used qualitative analysis techniques such as content, thematic and narrative analysis.

This article focuses on the experiences of migrants from the Global South entering the Global North in relation to visas and passports. The article thus paints a picture of the difficulties in obtaining visas/travel permits and travelling with weak passports. Strict measures were taken to ensure the reliability of the research findings. To compensate for the lack of interviews, a triangulation strategy was used, utilising multiple data sources, including official documents and existing literature. Expert opinions from practitioners were sought to gain valuable insights. We recognise the limitations of not being able to conduct direct interviews in the Global North, and we used extensive data collection and rigorous methodological approaches to mitigate this limitation.

3 | CONTEXTUALISING THE GLOBAL NORTH AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

After the end of the Cold War in 1991, the concepts of Global North and Global South were introduced in the comparative study of development between nations (Odeh, 2010). The Global North refers to the developed economies, while the Global South refers to the underdeveloped countries. According to Odeh (2010), there are four main indicators that differentiate between the economies of the Global North and the Global South, including politics, technology, wealth and demographics. The Global North typically exhibits characteristics such as democracy, technological innovation, prosperity and an ageing population with societies whose population growth tends towards zero, while the Global South exhibits the opposite characteristics (Odeh, 2010). The Global North comprises North America, Europe and North Asia. Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Japan and South Korea are usually considered part of the Global North (Braff & Nelson, 2022). In contrast, the Global South includes formerly colonised countries in Africa and Latin America as well as the Middle East, Brazil and South Asia (Braff & Nelson, 2022). The Global North is characterised by great prosperity, democratic governance, peace, stability and continuous human progress. In contrast, the Global South is often characterised by unrest, conflict, poverty, anarchy and tyranny. Furthermore, there is a notable discrepancy between the Global North and the South in terms of institutional structures such as democratic reforms.

When considering the disparity in travel opportunities based on passport strength, it is essential to contextualise the global divide between the Global North and Global South. The Global North, consisting of economically developed regions, often exhibits fewer racial and discriminatory policies regarding travel compared to the Global South, comprising less economically prosperous nations (Smith, 2017). In this context, holders of strong passports from the Global North generally face fewer restrictions and discriminatory practises when travelling, while those with weaker passports from the Global South encounter more obstacles and discriminatory treatment (Johnson, 2019). This imbalance underscores broader issues of systemic inequality and highlights the need for equitable reforms in global travel policies to ensure fair and inclusive access for all individuals, regardless of their nationality or socioeconomic status (Jones & Lee, 2020). Rosenberg (2023) provides insights into the systemic biases inherent in visa policies, reinforcing the notion that discriminatory practises disproportionately impact individuals from marginalised racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, thereby exacerbating global inequalities in travel access (Rosenberg, 2023).

4 | THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: THE VISA REGIME AND THE MOBILITY RESTRICTION

Numerous theories and frameworks have been proposed to analyse and understand passports in the context of international relations and global mobility. State-centred theory emphasises the role of the state in determining the strength of passports (Brabandt & Mau, 2013). It states that states with greater political influence and diplomatic relations are more likely to hold passports that offer greater travel privileges. Hegemony theory states that the strength of a passport is influenced by the dominant power or hegemon in the international system. The theory of bilateral and reciprocal agreements emphasises the importance of bilateral and reciprocal agreements between countries (Dauvergne, 2008). Economic theory focuses on the economic factors that contribute to the strength of a passport. It states that countries with strong economies and extensive global trade relations tend to have passports that allow for greater mobility. Global governance theory examines the role of international organisations and global governance structures in shaping the strength of passports.

A strong passport is typically defined by the degree of freedom and access it offers its holders when travelling internationally. In this article, we define a strong passport by the fact that a strong passport allows its holders to travel to a significant number of countries without the need for a visa or with visa-on-arrival privileges (Dauvergne, 2008). The more countries that can be visited without visa restrictions, the stronger the passport. In addition to visa-free travel, a strong passport can also offer visa facilitation, meaning that applying for a visa to certain countries is relatively simple and straightforward for passport holders. The strength of diplomatic relations between countries, as well as the global reputation and perception of the country, can influence the strength of a passport.

A weak passport typically entails restricted travel privileges and considerable hurdles to the international mobility of its holders. Those with weak passports often face the need for extensive visa

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applications to enter other countries, limiting their access to destinations where visa waivers or visas on arrival are scarce. Applying for a visa with a weak passport can be a cumbersome process involving a lot of paperwork, strict eligibility criteria and long processing times. Passports from countries with political or economic instability can be categorised as weak (den Heijer, 2018). A weak passport may be linked to travel warnings or recommendations from other countries.

The relationship between migration, citizenship and threat is complex, as the perception of migrants as a potential threat to national security influences debates and policies related to citizenship acquisition, border control and immigration regulations, thereby shaping migrants' experiences and opportunities in receiving countries. The perception that migrants from the Global South may pose a threat to national security in the Global North is influenced by various perceptions and theories (Stansfield & Stone, 2018). One perception is that migrants from the Global South, particularly from regions associated with terrorism or extremism, bring these ideologies and activities with them (Ullah et al., 2020). The observation that migrants from the Global South may contribute to an increase in crime rates in destination countries is often based on concerns about undocumented or irregular migration (Tawodzera & Crush, 2023). Another perception is that migrants may have difficulties integrating into the social fabric of the Global North due to cultural or religious differences, sometimes accompanied by fears of cultural clashes, social tensions and challenges related to social cohesion and national identity (Campbell & Crush, 2015).

Some three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, migration controls have resurfaced to varying degrees. President Donald Trump, for example, has advocated the construction of a border wall between the USA and Mexico. The Schengen area seems strained by the challenges posed by the migration crisis. European authorities are working fervently to distinguish between refugees and 'economic migrants', crafting policies that differentiate between those fleeing persecution and those seeking improved livelihoods.

Politically, passports and visa restrictions have slowly emerged as important tools of modern regimes to control human mobility (Salter, 2006; Finotelli & Sciortino, 2013; Czaika & Trauner, 2018; Ullah 2010). Until the twentieth century, authorities were more concerned with preventing people from moving than with managing migration (Torpey, 1998). We recall Samuel Huntington's (1996) seminal assertion that nationalist governments prioritise the interests of their citizens in the name of sovereignty and self-determination at the expense of reducing migration to rich countries (Huntington, 1996).

It is widely believed that citizens of the Global South need a visa (Figure 1) because the Global North considers them an immigration risk. They may overstay their visas or pose a security risk because the number of international migrants has grown exponentially in recent decades (it is now 281 million or 3.6% of the world's population). While Japan, Singapore and South Korea have more freedom to travel at the start of 2022 (O'Hare, 2022) than ever before, the global mobility gap is greater than it has been since the Henley Passport Index (HPI) began collecting this data 17 years ago. Passport holders from

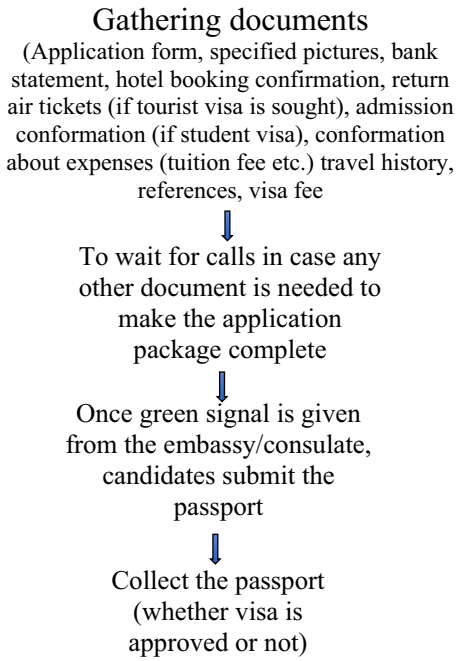

FIGURE 1 A standard flow of visa process.

these three Asian countries could travel visa-free to 193, 192 and 192 destination countries around the world respectively in 2022. This was 166 more than Afghanistan, which is at the bottom of Table 1, excluding the variable and temporary restrictions related to Covid-19. (See Ullah & Chattoraj, 2021; Chattoraj 2022a for more details on Covid-19 and how it affected the migrant population). The emergence of the extremely contagious Omicron variant at the end of 2021 was a flashpoint of the widening gap in international mobility between rich and poor countries; a series of punitive measures were taken, particularly targeting African countries (Ullah & Chattoraj, 2021). The HPI lists all passports in the world according to the number of destinations their holders can visit without a visa. According to the International Air Transport Association, the average passport holder was able to visit 57 countries without a visa in 2006. This figure has since risen to 107, but the gap between developed and developing countries is widening: citizens of countries such as Sweden and the United States can enter more than 185 countries without a visa, while citizens of countries such as Angola, Cameroon and Laos can only enter around 50 countries (TTRW, 2022).

There are considerable differences in mobility between the Global South and the Global North, which are reflected in noticeable discrepancies in costs and inconvenience. People from the Global North may not fully understand the challenges that people in the Global South face when it comes to mobility. Conversely, people from the Global South may underestimate the relative ease of mobility in the Global North. Significant differences in visa categories, such as tourist, student, business and work visas, further exacerbate inequalities between countries. In the United States, for example, immigration law offers foreigners the opportunity to settle permanently or to obtain various temporary visas depending on their country of origin. In

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TABLE 1 A short list of powerful passports.

Strongest passports		Destinations	Weakest passports	Destinations
1	France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Singapore, Spain	194	North Korea	42
2	Finland, South Korea, Sweden	193	Libya	40
3	Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Netherlands	192	Nepal	40
4	Belgium, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, United Kingdom	191	Palestinian territories	44
5	Greece, Malta, Switzerland	190	Somalia	36
6	Australia, Czechia, New Zealand, Poland	189	Yemen	35
7	Canada, Hungary, United States	188	Pakistan	34
8	Estonia, Lithuania	187	Iraq	31
9	Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia	186	Syria	29
10	Iceland	1835	Afghanistan	28

Source: World Economic Forum, 2024 and Srivastav, 2024.

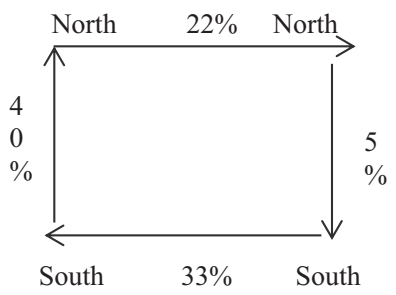

FIGURE 2 Migration pathways. *Source*: Ullah and Haque (2020).

addition, there are different categories of temporary work visas in the United States, which are tailored to skilled workers and each entail different mobility restrictions. In particular, the intra-company transferee visa (L-1) and the specialty worker visa (H-1B) are the most common entry visas (Hunt & Xie, 2019).

Applying for a visa by post can take weeks or months, and applying in person means travelling to the embassy or one of the few consulates and queuing for hours (Figure 1). Of course, the consulate or embassy can reject the application without giving a reason. This seems to reflect a structural imbalance in immigration and travel rights, as citizens of the 'Global South' are more likely to need a visa to travel abroad than citizens of the 'Global North' (Figure 2), who are perceived as a threat to public safety because they may not comply with their visa or apply for asylum (Czaika et al., 2018). Restricting or monitoring entry is the most effective technique for states to avoid making potentially costly commitments to foreigners (Torpey, 1998:252). Passport and visa controls are important procedures to achieve this goal, as they act as a 'first line of defence' against the entry of undesirables (Neumayer, 2006).

The visa requirement enables countries to control the authorised mobility routes (Torpey, 1998). According to Finotelli and Sciortino (2013:97), the aim of various governments is to prevent irregular migration. Over the past four decades, only about one third of all bilateral routes have been visa-free, which means that about three quarters of all bilateral dyads worldwide require a visa. Between 1980 and the mid-1990s, a slightly hump-shaped pattern can be recognised, in which the proportion of dyads with visa requirements increased, but decreased again after 2000 (Czaika et al., 2018).

Visa fees are accepted in cash in some cases and by bank cheque in others. Visa applications are generally not available online, meaning applicants must visit the embassy to obtain an application form. Some countries' consulates are located in countries other than the applicant's home country, so applicants will need to travel to another country to obtain their visa. Visa applications also include a passport, implying that the applicant must present their passport, which will be withheld until the embassy has made a decision. The processing time for a visa decision can range from 1 week to several months.

Requiring visas before entering a country is unmistakably one of 'remote control' (Zolberg, 2006:443), 'pre-emptive mobility governance' (Broeders & Hampshire, 2013) or surveillance (Adey, 2004), in which authorities attempt to prevent people from entering the country without prior permission. Of course, governments have the authority to decide who enters and who does not (Torpey, 1998:240; Rygiel, 2008; Walters, 2006; Ullah et al., 2020; Whyte, 2008).

4.1 | Race and racial discrimination

The debate about the intricate relationship between the visa regime and mobility restrictions brings into the intersectionality of race and racial discrimination within this framework. Drawing on critical race theory and postcolonial perspectives, the article highlights how visa policies often perpetuate and reinforce existing global hierarchies based on race and ethnicity (Aalbers & Williams, 2020). By restricting mobility primarily for citizens from the Global South, these policies not only serve as mechanisms of control and exclusion but also as manifestations of systemic racism in international relations (Aalbers & Williams, 2020).

Rosenberg (2023) highlighted how racial discrimination persists in visa policy and showed that nation states can discriminate against foreign citizens on the basis of their nationality when deciding whether to exempt them from the visa requirement. The author argues that

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this discrimination goes beyond purely 'rational' selection and points to a deeper racial bias. While the need to strike a balance between national solidarity and the benefit of migration explains some discrimination, racial bias implies a restriction on racially diverse migrants that goes beyond sovereignty and economic reasons. The link between racism and this discrimination is complex and could be due to implicit bias in officials or electoral incentives. Sovereignty, understood as border control, reinforces national identity by distinguishing between inside and outside, which leads to outsiders being perceived as a threat. Consequently, anti-migrant sentiment is aligned with sovereignty, leading to restrictions on immigration. This discrimination manifests itself in both unconditional and conditional forms, the former influenced by historical inequalities and the latter by racist perceptions, often unintentionally. Although some measures reflect national identity attachments rather than racial bias, discrimination persists due to long-standing unequal relations between North and South. Existing evidence points to a global mobility gap, but to understand conditional discrimination, racial perceptions beyond economic factors must be directly examined to uncover actual racial biases.

When talking about racial discrimination in visa policy, the question of what race is automatically arises. Races are groups defined by others on the basis of perceived shared physical or social characteristics that are considered innate but have no scientific basis (Rosenberg, 2023:07). It is a social construction: people create both racial categories and the characteristics that define these categories. Furthermore, races can be defined as 'ethnic fictions' Locke argues that races are sociological rather than biological facts (Henderson, 2017:503–504). Race manifests itself as a 'selective preference for certain cultural traits and opposition to certain others' (Locke, 1924:195 cited in Rosenberg, 2023). In other words, races have no biological basis, for they are merely labels imposed on people from the same geographical area based on a favourable or unfavourable perception of their characteristics (Rosenberg, 2023). This definition reveals the horizontal and vertical components of race. The construction of race requires the perception of differences.

Racial categorisation is shaped by visible characteristics and cultural practises that lead people to perceive others as racially different. While such perceptions are fundamental to the construction of race, they become problematic when they reinforce hierarchical distinctions. This vertical dimension of race involves privileged groups, usually white people or people from the Global North, categorising non-white people or people from the Global South as inferior and deviant, thus legitimising historical injustices such as slavery and imperialism (Barder, 2021). Rosenberg (2023) examines how racial discrimination in bilateral visa policies works both horizontally and vertically. States tend to deny visa waivers to those who are perceived as racially different and privilege those who are considered similar, regardless of their position in the racial hierarchy. Furthermore, non-white states are met with reluctance to grant waivers as they are perceived as inferior, reflecting the entrenched norms of global white supremacy. Rosenberg's work seeks to determine whether racial discrimination in international mobility persists despite claims of colour-blindness in migration policy. It highlights the persistent challenges in addressing racial inequalities and calls for a deeper understanding of how race affects policy outcomes in the international arena, contributing to a broader discussion of systemic racial inequalities in global mobility rights. Using the bilateral visa waiver, the study provides compelling evidence of racial discrimination in international mobility policy. It expands on existing scholarship on this topic and emphasises the need to address and correct systemic injustices in the global sphere.

5 | PREDICTORS OF STRONG AND WEAK PASSPORTS

The theory behind the visa policy is that it aims to restrict the entry of people who are perceived as a threat. However, the standardised application of this policy is not universally applicable and often results in differential treatment based on factors such as nationality, socio-economic status and geopolitical considerations. The disparity in visa access based on passport strength underscores a paradox: while citizens of countries with weaker passports may possess valuable contributions to global society, individuals from nations with the strongest passports are not immune to perpetrating harm. For instance, Anders Behring Breivik, a holder of a strong passport, perpetrated a massacre of approximately 85 individuals in Norway, while the Christchurch gunman took the lives of about 51 people without provocation. Despite this, fewer than 40 countries extend visa-free or visa-on-arrival privileges to the holders of the weakest passports. Historically, nations with the strongest passports have often posed significant threats to humanity (Ullah, 2022). Conversely, individuals from developing countries can offer considerable social remittances, contributing to various industries such as tourism and academia. Notably, immigrants from these nations have significantly enriched scientific endeavours, with nearly 40% of Nobel Prizes in chemistry, medicine and physics awarded to American immigrants since 2000 (Anderson, 2020).

Although Japan has the lowest propensity to travel (only about 1.3 million Japanese live outside their country), it has one of the strongest passports in the world, alongside Singapore, France, Germany, Italy and Spain (O'Hare, 2024). Together with Singapore, France, Germany, Italy and Spain (O'Hare, 2024) hold the top spot for the strongest passports, while South Korea shares the second most traveled passport status with Finland and Sweden. However, the strength of a passport does not always correlate with citizen satisfaction or retention. For example, a significant number of Singaporeans who are dissatisfied with their citizenship choose to renounce their passport, showing that the benefits of the strong passport are underutilised (UNDESA, 2017). While Japan offers its passport holders access to 193 visa-free or visa-required countries, residents of Afghanistan stand in stark contrast with only 27 such options, representing the largest difference between countries in recent rankings (O'Hare, 2022).

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5.1 | Economy and wealth

The economy seems to be the most important factor in the strength of passports. Visa-free travel is more common in countries with a higher gross domestic product per capita. Figure 3 shows that people from poor and low-and middle-income countries have much less access to visa-free zones than citizens from high- and middle-income countries. This pattern can be explained by two interlinked causes. First, countries are more likely to lift visa requirements for wealthy countries because they expect financial benefits from increased trade, tourism and investment. Second, immigrants from wealthier countries are less likely to cause difficulties for the host country, such as the cost of illegal immigration. Immigrants from countries with significant poverty and political upheaval are seen as a greater threat because they may overstay their visas. For example, in the early 2000s, the United States excluded Argentina and Uruguay from its visa waiver programme (VWP) for economic reasons (Zarpli & Altundal, 2022). China, the world's second largest economy, is in last place. What does this mean for the economy? Does it make sense in the real world? It certainly does. Because the ranking does not take temporary restrictions into account.

While most governments have expanded VWPs since 2006, some regions and countries have fared much better than others. By and large, it is evident that most countries have relaxed visa requirements for nationals from high-income and middle-income countries. People from low-income, middle-income and highly fragile countries have significantly less freedom to travel, with a few exceptions. People who are most in need of international mobility due to political persecution and poverty also have the greatest difficulty obtaining visas for safe and prosperous countries (Zarpli & Altundal, 2022).

5.2 | State fragility and democracy

The effect of greater fragility on the convenience of travelling is analogous to the effect of higher income, albeit in the opposite direction. Important indicators are elite fragmentation, political legitimacy and the size of the internally displaced population. We believe that unstable countries are less likely to have high passport freedom (Figure 4). The most plausible explanation for this is that these countries are considered high-risk in terms of security, asylum and overstaying (Zarpli & Altundal, 2022).

Compared to other criteria, there is no significant correlation between the form of government and the validity of the passport. India, for example, the world's largest democracy, ranks 80th when it comes to visa-free travel. You can enter 57 countries visa-free, but need a visa for 137 other countries. However, democratic states can often enter more countries visa-free than their authoritarian counterparts. In 2020, democracies received an average score of 133 for visa-free travel, while non-democratic governments had an average score of 83.

6 | BETWEEN FREE AND RESTRICTED MOBILITY: THE EMPIRICS

In this section, we take a close look at the empirical results and attempt to contextualise and analyse them in the context of the relevant theoretical frameworks. This approach allows us to gain deeper insights into the temporal dynamics and broader implications of the observed patterns. The study by Chemsripong (2016) shows that 70% of ASEAN labourers come from Indonesia (41%), the Philippines (16%)

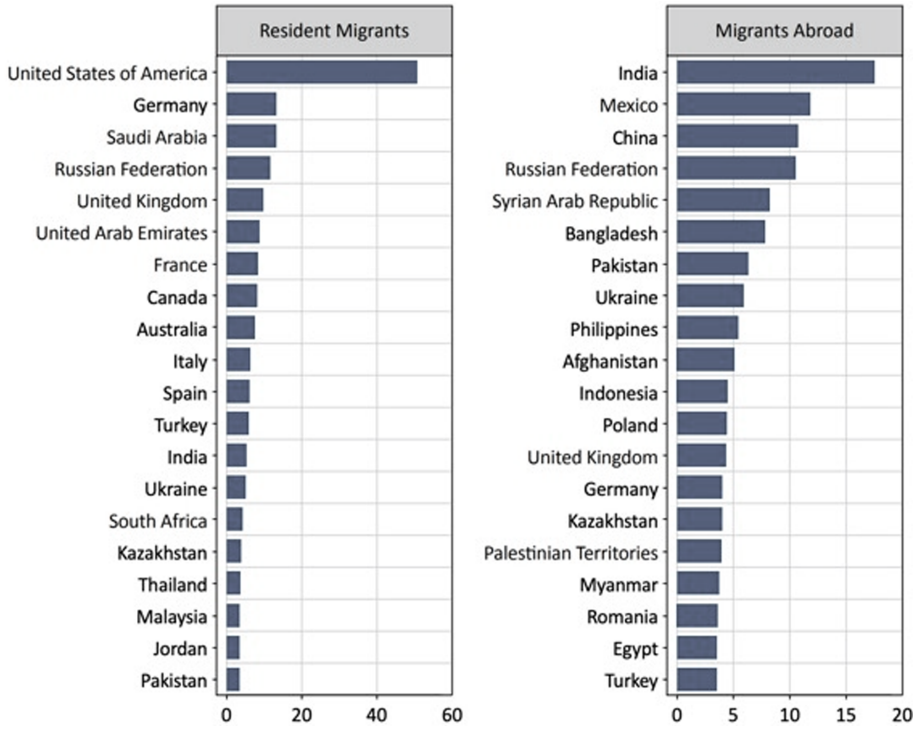

FIGURE 3 Showing some hosts countries (in comparative term). *Source*: IOM (2020).

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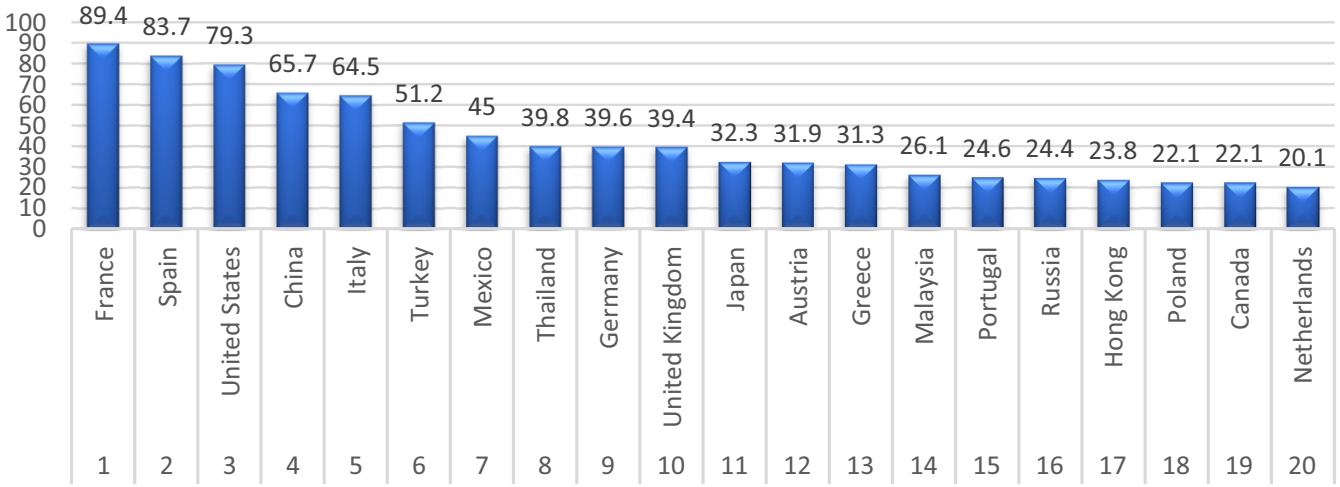

FIGURE 4 Most visited countries in the world in 2024 (in million). Source: WP Travel 2024. (Available at: https://wptravel.io/most-visited-countries-in-the-world/, accessed July 4th, 2024).

and Vietnam (15%), while the remaining 29% come from Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos. Ullah et al. (2019) outline two patterns of labour mobility within ASEAN: one focused on the Mekong, with Thailand supplying labour from Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam, and another with Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia as key destination countries for Indonesian and Filipino workers. ASEAN countries receive more than half of their migrant labour from other ASEAN countries, specifically 52.9% from Singapore, 61.2% from Malaysia and 96.2% from Thailand (Ullah et al., 2019). Since 1990, internal migration within ASEAN countries, including Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, has increased by 40% in terms of the total number of nationals working abroad (Ullah & Azizuddin, 2022; Latifi & Heydari, 2020; Ullah et al., 2019; Ullah et al., 2021).

'When I returned to England from a brief vacation abroad (I was then professor of Trinity College in Cambridge), the immigration officer at Heathrow, who thoroughly inspected my Indian passport for a long time, presented a philosophical inquiry of considerable complexity. Because everything took so long to figure out, the immigration officer wanted to know why I was so hesitant, and whether there was anything unusual about my presence in the UK' (Sen, 2007:2). Superstar of India Shah Rukh Khan was also detained at U.S. airports three times in 7 years (Raj, 2016).

We refer to a first-hand experience of another interviewee who was harassed as an immigrant on a domestic flight from Washington D.C. 'I flew to Las Vegas with my family over Thanksgiving in 2016. I was a research fellow at Georgetown University at the time. At security, the immigration officer told me that I was travelling on a passport that had expired in 2009. What was he trying to say, I was dumbfounded? I assumed he was puzzled as this was on the first page of my passport, but the relevant entries/statements/renewals were on the second page. I showed it to him, but he started arguing with me, taking me aside and scrutinising everything I was carrying. This was very embarrassing for me. I reminded him that your country only granted me a visa in 2015, so do you think mistakes are made there too?'

When travelling on business, Africans and Asians are three to four times more likely to have visa problems than Europeans or North Americans (McInroy et al., 2018). The situation has been exacerbated by the entry ban on certain US nationals and the UK's Brexit (Ullah & Azizuddin, 2022). Some countries allow almost all visitors to transit through their airports as long as they have an onward ticket and a valid visa for their final destination (if not their place of birth). Some countries, such as Canada, Hong Kong and the United States, have introduced visa requirements for transit passengers, regardless of whether they remain on board the aircraft or not. These restrictions can have a detrimental effect on international investment and trade flows, as travel and tourism account for a significant share of the global economy: 9.5% of total GDP, one in 11 jobs, 4.4% of total investment and 5.4% of global exports (Mau et al., 2015).

While applying for a visa, one interviewee said, 'Our old passports are never thrown away'. We bring all previous passports with us when we apply for a visa. We do this to convey to the embassy that we are not applying for a visa or travelling for the first time. Therefore, the visa officer should have confidence in us. In Asia and Africa, all old passports are glued together (we call them double-decker dotala passports or three-tier storey-tin tola passports).

In 2017, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) invited a world-renowned professor of development studies to Geneva to discuss a contribution to the World Migration Report. The professor is a Bangladeshi national. The IOM organised the meeting and financed all costs incurred. Hotel reservations, ticket purchases (Brunei-Geneva-Brunei) and visa applications had to be finalised within a certain time frame. When the professor called the Swiss Consulate in Brunei to apply for a visa, he was told that he would have to contact the Swiss Consulate in Singapore (SCS, thereafter). He contacted the SCS. Initially, he was told that he would have to travel to Singapore two or three times the first time to submit his application in person, then again to submit his fingerprints (which was not possible at the time of application), and then again to collect the passport,

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regardless of whether the visa is approved or not. The SCS does not send the passport to the applicant by post.

Neither the SCS nor the professor knew how long it would take for the visa to be approved for Switzerland. This is crucial as the professor has to organise his flight and hotel in Geneva based on this information. It is now time to contact the Singapore Embassy in Brunei to enquire about an entry visa for Singapore. Double or triple entry visas for Singapore is rarely granted to Bangladeshi passport holders. At this point, the professor thought his trip to Geneva was in jeopardy. Tickets (Brunei-Singapore-Brunei and hotel reservation) are required to apply for a Singapore visa. As a visa applicant, you will need to purchase a flight ticket and pay for hotel accommodation regardless of whether your Singapore visa is accepted. When applying for the Singapore visa, one of the things he had to consider was which days the SCS would be open as his travel date for Geneva was fast approaching, as well as preparations for his lecture in Geneva. In the meantime, the professor sent an email to the SCS asking for his visa to be processed and the documents to be sent. As the authorisation comes from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Geneva, SCS was unable to help. It was unable to reimburse him for the unexpected costs of travelling to and from Singapore, as well as the time and psychological costs he had incurred.

The stories of some other interviewees were similar. 'My travel plan was for me to travel from Uganda to Panama to serve as co-chair of the Global Young Academy (GYA), a science education and policy organisation that advocates for young academics worldwide'. Instead, I was stuck at home, doing the paperwork for the next trip and working on a long overdue proposal for a research project on African science leadership. On 25 July, I got in touch with the Panamanian consulate near me (in South Africa). I learned that I had to submit my visa application in person, that every page of my passport had to be photocopied and notarised, that any crossed-out information on a form would invalidate my entire application, and that all my documents, including bank statements, plane tickets and hotel reservations, had to be notarised.

My Panamanian hosts were able to negotiate with the immigration officials to have the papers sent to me via a document delivery service instead of making a 4-h journey to Pretoria for $500. Nevertheless, the documents had to be resubmitted several times due to problems such as late hotel bookings and the incorrect format of the dates in the translated documents. The visa was not processed on time. These restrictions seem to be arbitrary. My co-chair, a Brit, could have attended without a visa had it not been for the short notice. Tourists from Malaysia, Poland and the United States did not need visas, but my Polish colleague had to pay more than $160 and go through an interview to get through a US airport.

My trip to Panama was extraordinary, but not unusual. When you work in a small rural facility 100 km from the nearest city, applying for a visa takes at least 2 days: 1 day to gather all the necessary documents and submit the package, and another day to pick up the visa. This does not include the time it takes to find out what each country requires, to obtain verified bank documents, to take the necessary photos and to coordinate the proof of employment and invitation letters.

Even if other costs are covered, applicants must pay the visa fees. These fees are excessive compared to the average salary of a Ugandan academic. My salary as a PhD lecturer at the University of Twente in the Netherlands after 15 years in academia was about 60,000 Ugandan shillings (16 US dollars) per day a visa to South Africa costs 36 dollars plus 90 dollars 'processing fees'; a visa to the UK costs 120 dollars and takes 3 weeks. I spent about $100 trying to travel to Panama, including transfer fees. The cheapest visa is the Schengen visa (European Commission), which costs less than $70 and requires a week's delay In fact, Western, Northern and Southern Europeans, North Americans and Australians and New Zealanders barely have to work to pay the average price for a tourist visa, while Central Asians have to work for more than 10 days, South Asians for a fortnight and sub-Saharan Africans for 3 weeks (Recchi et al., 2021).

After my appointment as co-chair in May, I had to travel to a number of countries between September and November, representing the GYA in four of them. I was supposed to be in Japan by now, having located a Japanese national who could issue me a formal invitation and ensure that I complied with the country's regulations. I visited the Japanese embassy in Kampala several times because I overlooked or misinterpreted some elements of the application (not all were explained online).

I was invited to speak at the InterAcademy Partnership's annual conference in South Korea in April 2019. The InterAcademy Partnership is a global network of academies working in the field of public policy. I was more worried than pleased about the possibility of having to wade through another sea of visa regulations just because I am a Ugandan citizen. For example, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) passport holders have easy access to global events, while OECD countries do not always offer easy access to their own spaces. This suggests that the impoverished pay a higher price (in terms of money, stress and psychological costs) than the affluent.

We interviewed some students in the United Kingdom who needed field or lab work in other European countries. One of the interviewees, a Chinese national studying in the United Kingdom, told us that with the exception of him, all the UK nationals had just bought a plane ticket and were on their way to their study trip. As a Chinese national, he needed a visa. The student received a phone call from the embassy and several questions were put to him. The most agonising dilemma was whether he wanted to return to the United Kingdom. 'I am in the middle of my studies in the UK and if I finish my studies in the UK, I have to return to China because I have a job there', he added. In the meantime, the deadline for taking part in the trip had passed.

A student living in Geneva with a Bangladeshi passport recalled during one of our interviews that he was treated unfairly at the immigration counters of at least two European airports. The interviewee held a Swiss residence permit, which prevented him from needing a visa to travel within the Schengen Area, a group of 26 countries that have agreed to allow the free and unrestricted movement of people. During a study trip to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Hungary,

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he was confronted by immigration authorities at the airports of Belgrade and Budapest with long waiting times at checkpoints, unreasonable enquiries and harsh statements. The study tour group consisted of 26 different countries, and the discrimination became clear when some of his classmates did not have to wait long, while others did. Despite having the same Swiss residence permit, students from the Global South (in this case Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Kenya and Nigeria) were discriminated against.

All airlines have a policy of equal treatment. However, the exceptions vary greatly depending on the passport. This is particularly noticeable in times of crisis (flight delays, cancellations, etc.). If a flight is delayed or cancelled for an extended period of time, all passengers are required by law to receive hotel rooms and meal vouchers. However, only a small percentage of guests are allocated a hotel. Passports are used to decide who gets which hotels. When asked about their experiences with the transport, more than five people gave the same answers. At Narita airport in Japan, a plane was delayed for 7 h. Because I have a South Asian passport, I (and other members of my group) had to wait much longer to be picked up from the hotel than others with passports from wealthier countries. When we arrived at the hotel, we realised that there were no other passengers. We were all dropped off at the hotel, and we were all from South Asia. We later learnt that the other passengers had been put up in a five-star hotel. High-performing passport holders are put up in a better hotel first, while low-performing passport holders are left behind or put up in a backpacker motel, suggesting that passports are more respected by aeroplanes than by people (or passengers).

One of our South Asian interviewees, who lives in a Southeast Asian country, once applied for a job at a Danish university. His application was assessed by four external assessors. Based on the external reviewers' opinions, he was the recruiters' first choice. As part of the recruitment process, the applicant was asked to attend a demo session in Denmark. As a newcomer to Southeast Asia, it proved difficult to obtain a Danish visa through the local consulate and he was advised to travel to Singapore to obtain one. He then travelled to Singapore, but as he had a passport from a developing country, obtaining a visa in time proved difficult and he was unable to take up his desired job in Denmark. This example shows how a traveller's job opportunities are determined by their identity, that is, the passport of the country they hold.

We add another South Asian interviewee who is a very senior official in a well-known South Asian company. She applied for a tourist visa to visit her elder sister in the United States. She had her own sponsorship. Unfortunately, her visa was denied without giving any reason. She later learned that since she was unmarried and about 30 years old at the time of her visa application, there was a possibility that she would leave the U.S. and never return, so her visa was denied. This example shows that holding a South Asian passport, even if you are highly educated and wealthy, does not give you the freedom to travel wherever you want.

I got a scholarship to a university in the United States, said one of the many students who responded to us. When I returned to my home country, I had to apply for a visa to come back. The questions the US embassy asked were unusual at the time. My visa was denied before the outbreak of Covid-19. In February 2021, the consular officers informed me that the visa had been processed and I expected to be able to return to the United States. But the Covid-19 situation worsened. Then the visa restrictions started and I can no longer return. Worse still, I have not received a salary for over 8 months and my university will not pay me because I have been out of the country for more than 6 months Gewin (2020) found similar results in her study of a Harvard University student from Tanzania. My own country, Tanzania, was added to the list of countries with the most draconian US travel restrictions in January 2020. Tanzanians, for example, are no longer allowed to participate in the diversity lottery to obtain a green card.

One interviewee, who is seeking an academic position in the United States, believes that the conflict (trade or otherwise) between China and the United States will most likely continue after Trump leaves office. He claims that the US response to the Covid-19 epidemic has affected his confidence in the country. Dreaming of a tenure-track position was already a risky endeavour, as the likelihood of being hired is low due to uncertain immigration policies, making things even more difficult. The United States' ability to recruit well-educated people from around the world was a distinct advantage—an advantage that seems to have been lost.

One of our interviewees said he had applied for a job as a history professor in the Middle East. He has a PhD in history from Cambridge University and has an excellent academic record. His interview went well and the interview panel asked about a possible date when he might be available to work for the University. He learnt that he was up against another competitor from the West. He began to prepare for the course module at the university in the Middle East. The HR department and the dean had contacted him at this point and asked him to send a copy of his passport and other necessary documents. Two weeks later, he received a letter expressing his regret that he could not be offered the position. A few months later, he visited the website of the department where he was to work and realised that his student had been offered the job (Neumayer, 2006; Salter, 2003:2). Mobility restrictions and difficulties in crossing national borders seem to be very unequally distributed among people of different ethnicities. The question of who benefits from the disproportionate distribution of visa waivers in different regions and how it changes over time deserves to be discussed and analysed.

The terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 had a profound impact on global tourism (Cornwell & Roberts, 2010). This had a particularly negative impact on Muslim communities around the world. It has hindered the process of mutual tolerance between Muslims and Americans as well as the integration of Islam and Muslims into the American social, cultural and political landscape (Ahsan, 2022; Ullah et al., 2020). Although visa policy did not change significantly as a result of 9/11, security checks were standardised and tightened as part of the visa application process (Yale-Loehr et al., 2005). However, this only applied to tourists from countries not participating in the VWP. They were subjected to an additional stage of processing (Cornwell & Roberts, 2010).

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7 | DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The case of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, whose lifeless body was washed ashore, underscores the direct link between visa restrictions and passport strength. Aylan's fate exemplifies the restrictions faced by people from regions with weaker passports and emphasises the need for a fairer global approach to migration policy. The existing literature and our interviews show that potential travellers from the Global South face the highest mobility restrictions and pay more than three times as much as Westerners for a visa to travel abroad. The paradox is that citizens from 'poor' countries pay high prices for a visa and a last-minute flight ticket. This prejudice leads to demoralisation, excessive expenditure of time and money, harassment, demonization and the loss of their motivation to use their skills and knowledge.

The shortage of skilled labour has become a major problem in many of the wealthy countries. Moreover, the skills mismatch in the labour market has reached alarming proportions (Ullah et al., 2019). As a result of global demographic decline, there is a significant shortage of talent in a number of occupations (Ullah et al., 2021). The skills shortage is a market scenario caused by some countries producing overqualified, underqualified or irrelevant talent, leading to a mismatch between skills and market demand (ILO, 2019). People migrate from South to South (33%), with only a few countries with large passports at the top of the list. A small percentage of the world's most powerful passport countries send a disproportionate number of migrants. Similarly, 40% of all global migrants (112 million) in 2019 were born in Asia (IOM, 2020), with India (17.5 million), China and South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan accounting for the majority of migrants. In 2019, almost two thirds of international migrants—around 176 million—lived in high-income countries (OECD/ILO, 2018; UNDESA, 2017). In the same year, 82 million foreign-born people lived in middle-income countries (around a third of the total migrant pool), while 13 million lived in low-income countries (Ullah & Haque, 2020).

Visa regulations, as a driver of global isolationism, carry profound implications for global mobility and deglobalization, which, in turn, can significantly impact economies. Examples such as South Africa contemplating a 10-year visa category for academics and the UK's forthcoming program for top university graduates highlight ongoing efforts to navigate these challenges. While initiatives like the Global Passport for Scholars and the UK's program aim to attract talent, it is crucial to acknowledge that researchers confront multifaceted challenges beyond visa issues, including job prospects, funding, equipment and mentorship. Despite the complexities, addressing visa concerns emerges as one of the more manageable aspects within the broader framework of mobility regulation explored in this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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