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### Voices From the Periphery: Lived Experiences of Women International Students From the Global South Studying at U.K. Universities

### Voix périphériques : expériences vécues par des étudiantes internationales du Sud global poursuivant des études universitaires au Royaume-Uni

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Pluralizing Educational Mobilities: Towards a More Equitable and  
Inclusive Discourse

Pluralisation des mobilités éducatives : vers un discours plus  
équitable et plus inclusif

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#### Article abstract

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## Voices From the Periphery: Lived Experiences of Women International Students From the Global South Studying at U.K. Universities

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# **Voices From the Periphery: Lived Experiences of Women International Students From the Global South Studying at U.K. Universities**

## **Voix périphériques : expériences vécues par des étudiantes internationales du Sud global poursuivant des études universitaires au Royaume-Uni**

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### **Abstract**

Critical and intersectional perspectives on international student mobility (ISM) are burgeoning; however, gendered aspects are still rarely examined. This paper offers a contribution to this lacuna and provides further understanding of how gender shaped the experiences of six women international students from the Global South. The women participated in episodic narrative interviews as part of a wider study analyzing ISM in relation to socioeconomic status (SES). Women constitute more than half of the international students in the U.K., reflecting aspects of the feminization of migration. Consequently, the narratives were critically interrogated as to the extent to which the women were aligned with the “postfeminist subject.” However, the extent to which the women were “freely choosing” and “self-reinventing” is contested, in relation to choices, financial independence, and career aspirations. The findings indicated that there was a realignment of “success” upon near completion of educational qualifications which reflect gendered inequalities in society. Therefore, “neoliberal feminism” may be a more effective way in which to theorize an “ideal” of a balance between the imagined future identity of a “strong, independent career woman” with naturalized aspects of femininity for women international students.

### **Résumé**

Les perspectives critiques et intersectionnelles sur la mobilité internationale des étudiants (MIE) sont en plein essor, mais les aspects liés au genre sont encore rarement examinés. Cet article contribue à combler cette lacune et permet de mieux comprendre l'impact du genre sur les expériences de six étudiantes internationales du Sud global. Ces six femmes ont participé à des entrevues narratives épisodiques dans le cadre d'une étude plus large qui avait pour but d'analyser la MIE en relation avec le statut socio-économique (SSE). Le genre féminin représente plus de la moitié des étudiants étrangers au Royaume-Uni, un fait qui reflète certains aspects de la féminisation de la migration. C'est pourquoi les récits recueillis ont fait l'objet d'une interrogation critique quant à la mesure dans laquelle les femmes s'alignaient sur le « sujet post-féministe ». Toutefois, la mesure dans laquelle les femmes « choisissent librement » et « se réinventent » est contestée au niveau des choix, de l'indépendance financière et des aspirations professionnelles. Les résultats indiquent que le concept de « réussite » est remis en question à l'approche de l'achèvement des qualifications éducatives, ce qui reflète les inégalités entre les sexes dans la société. Par conséquent, le « féminisme néolibéral » pourrait être un moyen plus efficace de théoriser à quoi pourrait ressembler l'équilibre « idéal » entre l'identité future imaginée d'une « femme de carrière forte et indépendante » et les aspects naturalisés de la féminité pour les étudiantes internationales.

**Keywords:** international student mobility, global south, gender, postfeminist, neoliberal

**Mots-clés :** mobilité internationale des étudiants, sud global, genre, post-féministe, néolibéral

## Introduction and Context

Internationally mobile student<sup>1</sup> are a heterogeneous group, and their experiences are multidimensional and highly stratified (Glass et al., 2022; Mittelmeier et al., 2022). However, in much of the higher education mobility discourse, essentialist *groupism* continues to prevail, generalizing their experiences and reifying them as internally homogenous (Brubaker, 2002). Similarly, issues of adjustment and adaptation remain a predominant research focus in the international student literature (see Schartner & Young, 2020), with many studies taking a cultural approach, often with national cultures as the focus on inquiry, rather than examining other aspects of international students' identities (Liu, 2017). In response, this paper seeks to foreground the heterogeneity of international students' lived experiences through an intersectional lens. This article intends to pluralize research on international mobility in relation to gender, with a specific focus on women. We recognize concerns from the research community in relation to "more voices" simply reinforcing established lines of enquiry. Therefore, whilst we offer our research questions below, we invite scholars to challenge the way in which our research design and analysis has been shaped by conventions of the Global North hegemonic academy. We practised "political reflexivity" in our consideration of our privilege as scholars in the Global North undertaking research with participants from the Global South (Ibrahim et al., 2023). We value decolonial research approaches for emphasizing "insider" status and one member of the research team shared a Global South identity with the participants (third author). However, we were keen to avoid an oversimplistic demarcation of Global North researchers having "outsider" status (first and second authors) and Global South researchers having "insider" status. The research team felt that an emphasis on only a Global North or Global South identity may obfuscate other important aspects of our positionality. All three of the researchers shared some aspects of their identities with the participants as women, university educated, and carers with previous or current experiences of economic precarity, social mobility, or international mobility and career concerns. Our recognition of aspects of insider identities, of course, does not negate or minimize the way in which Global North knowledge is privileged in the academy, nor are we suggesting that our focus on similarities in experiences means that our experiences are "the same." Our intention has been to reflect the voices of our participants, but we acknowledge that our analysis of the data has inevitably been influenced by our own subjectivities. The aim of our study is ultimately to encourage further development and understanding of inclusion in universities.

The findings reported in this article form part of a qualitative approach to examine the experiences of women international students from the Global South undertaking degree programs in the United Kingdom (U.K.). The research questions focused on in this paper are

1. What are the experiences of women international students from the Global South studying at U.K. universities?
2. How do social categories influence international students' identities and lived experiences?

This study sits within a limited but burgeoning body of research that seeks to deconstruct the notion of "international student experience," acknowledging its subjective and highly individualized nature (e.g., Glass et al., 2022; Heng, 2019; Liu, 2017; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021). It also contributes to a growing body of literature exploring the unique experiences of women international students studying in "Western" countries (Martin, 2021). Finally, the study responds

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms "international students," "internationally mobile students," and "student migrants" interchangeably in this article. The former two are arguably the most frequently used in public discourse, whereas the latter recognizes the diversity of this group and the nonlinear trajectories of their experiences (see Nada et al., 2023 for use of the latter term).

to a lack of critical research on the lived experiences of international students from the Global South (see Mittelmeier et al., 2023), a segment of the international student population that is expected to grow exponentially over the coming years (ICEF, 2023). Although the heterogeneity of international students is increasingly being acknowledged (e.g., Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021), much of the literature continues to construct them as a young, carefree, relatively affluent, and elite group of migrants (Wanki & Lietaert, 2019). Moreover, individuals who pursue overseas study are primarily perceived as “students” and there is little recognition of the multifaceted nature of their identities and the various roles they may take on in their daily lives (Olwig & Valentin, 2015).

There is some evidence that international students from the Global South are routinely “othered” and perceived as more “foreign” than their peers from countries in the Global North with the latter being portrayed as “cosmopolitans and part of a privileged mobile elite” (Alves & King, 2022, p. 181). For example, research with international students from Africa studying in Portugal has shown that these students are routinely racialized and seen as underprivileged (Alves & King, 2021).

Overseas study may make different facets of one’s identity salient. Research suggests, for example, that international students may become aware of their skin colour for the first time during study abroad and may be ascribed a racial minority identity (Bardhan & Zhang, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has surfaced some of the vulnerabilities international students from the Global South may face, including for example their dependence on precarious work (Malet Calvo et al., 2022).

It is important to acknowledge that student migrant flows are starting to shift as a more diverse set of countries is hosting international students (Glass & Cruz, 2023). Emerging regional higher education hubs increasingly attract overseas students (Yin & Yeakey, 2019) with geographic proximity, cultural similarity, homophily in the dominant language, and historical ties being appealing factors (Vögtle, & Windzio, 2022; Glass & Cruz, 2023). However, mobility patterns also remain deeply rooted in historical patterns (OECD, 2021) and a South-North mobility flow prevails with 67% of all international students in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) coming from developing countries (OECD, 2021). As Alves and King (2022) posited, “international students are exemplars of enduring postcolonial relations. Many of them move towards their former colonial metropolises, for cultural and linguistic reasons; whilst on the other side of the coin, the recruitment of these international students is an expression of postcolonial soft power exercised by former imperial centres” (p. 182). The U.K. is one such example. In 2021–22, the most recent data year available, the U.K. hosted 679,970 international students, accounting for 24% of the total student population, with the Global South countries China, India, and Nigeria being the main sending countries (Bolton et al., 2023).

### **Conceptual Underpinning**

Despite evidence that not all globally mobile students come from affluent backgrounds (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016; Kim, 2023), much of the higher education literature continues to view international students as elite migrants who are, by and large, “financially secure” (Waters, 2012, p. 128) and there is a lacuna of studies investigating the impact of gender and socioeconomic background on their lived experiences (Schartner & Shields, 2023). This study responds to calls for research exploring the “intersections between class belonging and experiences of student mobility” (Iorio & Pereira, 2018, p. 13). Intersectionality is “the approach used to recognise multiple forms of inequality in social research” (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2017, p. 82; Ploner, 2023).

The concept of gender is used to understand the socially constructed natures of characteristics and behaviours that are perceived to be “masculine” or “feminine” and moves away from the idea that these traits are “natural” and an inherent aspect of an individual’s biological sex. We define social class here as an “economic and social marker” (Liu, 2017, p. 251) that may affect how international students experience cross-border mobility and university life. We employ a holistic definition that goes beyond economic capital and includes “internalized social structure or social disposition that is acquired from one’s past experiences in specific social contexts” (Cui et al., 2017, p. 181). As such, we view social class as a “relational concept which includes both material resources but also cultural and symbolic as well as social capital” (Iorio & Pereira, 2018, p. 2).

Postfeminism is a contested concept (see McRobbie, 2007). However, for the purpose of this paper, it is defined as “full equality for all women and a blurring of the boundaries between traditional ascriptions of gender” (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2017, p. 107). The premise of postfeminism is that it is no longer necessary to strive for equality for women as this has been achieved and that societies are operating on a level playing field. The postfeminist narrative is one of female success with the same educational and career opportunities available to women as their male counterparts. It is also important to recognize that “the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing” postfeminist subject is almost indistinguishable from the “autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism” (Gill, 2008, p. 443).

Additionally, postfeminism is further contested in its transferability to women in the Global South (Yang, 2023) with it being primarily attributed to White, middle-class women in the Global North (see Butler, 2013 for a critical discussion; Yoong, 2020). Koffman and Gill (2014, p. 243) noted the “contrasting constructions of girls in the Global North or South as, respectively, empowered, postfeminist subjects and downtrodden victims of patriarchal values.” McRobbie’s (2007) work is an exception giving the example of women working in a factory in the Global South: “the global girl like her western counterpart the career girl is independent, hardworking ... and able to enjoy at least some of the rewards of feminine consumer culture which in turn becomes a defining feature of her citizenship and identity” (McRobbie, 2007, p. 733). Chen (2012) built upon this theorizing “chick-lit” (i.e., literature appealing primarily to women) as a form of postfeminist culture in China. Yoong (2020) contended that whilst the concept of postfeminism is most likely to be adduced in the Global North literature, there are examples of it being used to understand the experiences of women in a range of countries, including her own study in Malaysia (Yoong, 2020); Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2010), and Nigeria (Dosekun, 2015).

Nonetheless, scholars, such as Dosekun (2015), argued that the possibility of postfeminism being relevant to women in the Global South has not been sufficiently theorized and that these theorizations are limited if they do not sufficiently consider the socioeconomic status of women. Furthermore, she contended that even in the most inegalitarian and unequal countries, women with class privilege may be “already empowered” (Dosekun, 2015). It is likely that understandings of postfeminism will shift in relation to specific contexts as it moves across “geopolitical and cultural spaces” (Yoong, 2020, p. 31), however, the emphasis on individualism will still resonate. Whilst mindful of concerns of concepts being transferred from the “west to the rest” (Yan, 2013), postfeminism is used in this paper as conceptual underpinning to critically interrogate the experiences of women international students from the Global South who are engaging in educational opportunities in the Global North (U.K.). Women constitute more than half of the international students in the U.K. (Erudera, 2022), reflecting aspects of the feminization of migration (Tittensor & Mansouri, 2017). Our aim in this study is to explore the extent to which postfeminism is a useful conceptual lens through which to examine the lived experiences of female

student migrants, and whether postfeminism is reflected in their migratory stories. By doing this we query the assumption that it is no longer necessary for women to strive to achieve equality, if societies are operating on a level playing field. Postfeminist perspectives tend to undermine the relevance of gender in modern-day workplaces (Kivijärvi, 2021) yet the COVID-19 pandemic has surfaced dramatically the “intersecting marginalities” (Coffey et al., 2020) female student migrants face in Global North higher education systems, especially in times of global crises.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The data reported here were part of a larger mixed methods research project on the experiences of less privileged international students (see Schartner & Shields, 2023 for the quantitative data set). The focus of this article is a group of six female interviewees from countries in the Global South studying at British universities (Table 2). The inclusion criteria were (1) that the students had to come from a country included in the Group of 77 (G-77), an intergovernmental organization of developing countries in the United Nations (Group 77, 2023) used as a proxy for Global South countries, and (2) they self-identified as being female and from a less privileged socioeconomic background. Understandings of “less privileged socioeconomic background” varied amongst our participants based on comparisons with those in their social circles. Therefore, participant of being part of a less privileged socioeconomic group in this article may not resonate self-identification with all readers’ understandings and/or experiences of this term (for a discussion of the complexity of defining socioeconomic status, including cross-culturally, please see Shields & Schartner, in press).

Various conceptualizations and typologies of the Global South abound in the literature. Broadly, it refers to predominantly lower-income and culturally or politically marginalized regions in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania (Dados & Connell, 2012). Geographically, many countries in the Global South are actually located in the Northern Hemisphere, so the notion can be viewed as “a general rubric for decolonized nations roughly south of the old colonial centres of power” (Haug, 2021, para 4). Scholars have embraced the term for its potential to examine global power structures and challenge oppression which distinguishes it from earlier, and now contested, concepts such as “Third World” and “developing countries” (Clarke, 2018).

Mahler (2017) distinguished three conceptualizations of Global South:

1. A nation-state focused one that uses the term to refer to economically disadvantaged countries and as a post-Cold War alternative to “Third World.”
2. A de-territorialized one that uses the term to refer to subjugated peoples across geographic boundaries, including within the borders of wealthier nations in the geographic North.
3. One that emphasizes the shared experience of subjugation under contemporary global capitalism where the world’s Souths mutually recognize one another.

As such, the term Global South can refer to socioeconomically relatively disadvantaged nation states located primarily, though not exclusively, in the Southern Hemisphere (1, above), or it can refer to inequalities within countries (2), or finally it can refer to manifestations of anticolonial solidarity amongst peoples of the South (3).

In this study, we applied a combination of (1) and (2) in that we were interested in exploring the experiences of international students who were from countries classed as “developing economies” by the United Nations World Economic Situation and Prospects report (2023) and also self-identified as being from socioeconomically less advantaged backgrounds. This self-identification element was important in order to acknowledge the inequalities that exist in all

countries regardless of their geographic location, and to reflect the fact that many countries in the Global South have large and growing middle classes, for example, estimates suggest that by 2030 a majority of the global middle classes will be in the Global South (Short & Martinez, 2020).

This study followed a qualitative inquiry, underpinned by narrative principles and a social constructivist approach, with an emphasis on the construction of reality from the perspective of the research participants (Ntinda, 2019). Recognizing the often-autobiographical nature of narrative approaches, we reflected on our own positionality and reasons for conducting this research study. Author 1 is a woman who previously identified as an international student and understands her status in the U.K. as an immigrant. Author 2 is a woman who has benefitted from the transformative impact of education as a vehicle for social mobility. Author 3 is a woman and was recently an international student and is currently facing longer-term uncertainty about remaining in U.K. academia. We are conscious that our own narratives are shaped by gender, class, and ethnicity and we were drawn to the concept of intersectionality to help to explain the experiences of the women who participated in our study.

Informed by intersectional theory, episodic narrative interviewing (Mueller, 2019) was used to elicit how social categories influence student migrants' identities and lived experiences (Goodman, 2014). Episodic narrative interviews bring together elements of semi-structured interviews, narrative inquiry, and episodic interviews, and as such, offer "a targeted window into the experiential aspect of social concepts and issues" (Mueller, 2019, p. 3). Following the principle of storytelling as "an inherently human process that requires little more than adequate prompting" (Mueller, 2019, p. 5), the interviews were only lightly structured (Wengraf, 2001) and limited to open prompts (see Table 1 for examples). As such, the interview protocol acted as scaffolding, or a "request for stories" (Mueller, 2019, p. 6) about specific aspects of participants' lives as student migrants. To mitigate any power asymmetries associated with the two lead authors' status as White, middle-class "Western" female academics, the interviews were conducted by a trained facilitator, the third author, who was herself an international student from the Global South at the time of data collection with no preexisting relationship with the interviewees.

**Table 1**

*Example Interview Prompts*

Example prompt 1	Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
Example prompt 2	What made you decide to study abroad?
Example prompt 3	Please tell me about your social life at [host university]?
Example prompt 4	Please tell me about your academic life at [host university]?

The data analysis was inductive and employed a "bottom up" approach to identifying meaning from the data (Terry et al., 2017), following principles of thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). This thematic approach focuses on "the told" (p. 58) or the "what" of stories, seeking to identify commonalities across stories. The interviewer (third author) of this paper undertook an initial analysis to identify common narratives emerging from the lived experiences of the six student migrants. Peer debriefing was then used to enhance trustworthiness and credibility. The first and second author acted as "critical auditors," reviewing the transcripts and emerging narratives to assess whether any issues were missed or overemphasized (Janesick, 2015).



**Table 2***Interviewee Demographics*

	<b>Student (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Level of study</b>
1	Maria	Sri Lanka	Postgraduate taught (MA)
2	Kexian	China	Undergraduate (BA)
3	Yanan	China	Doctoral (PhD)
4	Simin	China	Doctoral (PhD)
5	Layla	Algeria	Doctoral (PhD)
6	Selma	Singapore/Malaysia	Undergraduate (BSc)

**Student Migrant Vignettes**

Individual narrative profiles (Nada et al., 2023; Trahar, 2014) are presented below<sup>2</sup>:

***Maria's Story***

Maria was a 37-year-old mother of two from Sri Lanka who came to the U.K. on her own and left her husband and children in her country of origin. She was studying for a master's degree in international development. Supporting her family financially and finding paid employment alongside her studies was a priority for her because, as she said, "I don't have much money in my hand." Maria described juggling academic studies and other responsibilities as "a little difficult sometimes." She was actively looking for work in the caring professions in order to be able to send remittances home. Additionally, she was struggling to pay the remaining balance on her tuition fees whilst at the same time financially supporting her children in Sri Lanka, commenting that it is "very difficult for international students to study and work and also like maintain their family." Upon completing her master's degree she hopes to return to Sri Lanka with career promotion prospects. Alternatively, she acknowledged that staying to work in the caring sector in the U.K. might make more sense financially if it enables her to support her family more effectively.

***Kexian's Story***

Kexian was an undergraduate student from China, studying at a prestigious university. She highlighted the status implications of university choices in her family's decision-making about her study abroad, explaining,

Deciding between "University A" and "University B" was the hardest choice. Because [of] the QS ranking. If I go to "University A," my parents will be more happy. I feel like. I feel like the Chinese people really care about ranking really, really, really care about the QS ranking. If I go to "University A" you know my parents are happy.

In addition to university rankings, she also considered the financial implications of her choices: "The living cost and study fees are less than London." Kexian explained how illness in the family, affecting both her elderly grandparents and parents, took a toll on her well-being and made her feel "quite depressed." She uses technology to communicate with her family, stating:

<sup>2</sup> Any grammatical or syntax errors in the interview excerpts were deliberately not corrected to ensure authenticity. This is line with the American Psychological Association (APA) which recommends that direct quotes should "match the wording, spelling, and interior punctuation of the original source, even if the source is incorrect" (APA, 2024).

It's just my grandma 24/7 with him. That just made it feel I have the responsibility to spend more time with them and FaceTime them more during the week. If I'm by their side, I could do something to help but I can't.

For Kexian, even though she hopes to have a job that involves travelling around the world, she was keen to include her parents in this opportunity, as she explained, “after my undergraduate degree I want to do a master and then probably a PhD ... Whenever I go, I'll tell my parents, and then bring my parents with me.”

### ***Simin's Story***

Simin was a self-funded PhD student from China. Her parents had sold a property in order to finance her to study overseas. Simin understands her socioeconomic comparatively with her peers as other families have not needed to take such extreme measures to fund study abroad; she stated, “their [others] family background is very high to support their study abroad. Not like my family, you need to sell a house to do that.” Her doctoral study had been an emotional roller coaster and her earlier ideas about pursuing a career in academia had shifted. Now in the latter stages of her doctorate, her emphasis was on enjoyment and good levels of well-being:

I can just have my time and my personal life. I can enjoy my life. Yeah, this is my decision and why I want to do this ... But once there is a nerve, and then it may break, and you may just very breakdown from your mental health. I don't think it's very good for your PhD. I think the most important thing in your PhD is to enjoy it.

Simin recognized that she had been away from home for a long time and increasingly was feeling homesick. Simin was not considering having a family of her own, but was keen to care for her own parents, alongside returning to the comfort of a familiar environment:

My parents are getting older and older, so I want to stay with them to ... and also work near to my house, so after my work I can come back home to eat in my home. I think it's very happy thing to do that.

### ***Yanan's Story***

Yanan was a doctoral student from China. She explained that she had to manage her finances prudently and lived according to a “*budget plan*.” She described focusing on the necessities in daily life as “[she didn't] have budget for like travel or clothes.” Yanan explained how her peers scrutinized one another's background routinely for indicators of wealth. Her parents and her mother in particular were supportive of her pursuing a doctoral degree abroad: “because my mother didn't have an opportunity to study ... sometimes I think she want[s] to make her dream come true by supporting my PhD.” However, Yanan and her parents had been facing pressures from relatives regarding social conventions around the right time to “settle down”: “My parents, they respect my relatives but sometimes they are also very hesitate (hesitant), about my marriage, these kinds of things, when could I have my own family?” Yanan acknowledged tensions between educational opportunities and societal pressures to return to China and get married and have a family of her own.

### ***Layla's Story***

Layla was a doctoral student from Algeria. Although she was in receipt of a government scholarship, she had “to work to fund [her]self.” She felt extremely privileged receiving a scholarship to study in an anglophone country given the languages of Algeria are Arabic, Berber,

and French. She described that her family were relatively financially comfortable, nonetheless asking them for financial support was not an option for her. She explained, “I have to work and to fund myself, without being able to go back to my family and ask them for more.” Layla was keen to explore other parts of the world. Her time away from her family had left her feeling increasingly disconnected from them:

I don't feel like I can go back to my country ... It's just a matter of belonging, so I feel like the more you spend your time away from family and from friends ... They are changing differently, and I don't feel the belonging anymore.

Layla was not necessarily planning to stay in the U.K. as she was exploring future “third country” possibilities. She knew that she would have to pay back her government scholarship if she does not return to Algeria. However, Layla has several siblings, which reduces her pressure to return home to care for family members.

### ***Selma's Story***

Selma was an undergraduate studying biomedical science. Her degree program is based on a U.K. satellite campus in Malaysia and includes a year of study in the U.K. Selma wishes to support herself financially:

I would like to be financially free, like on my end here, even though I'm studying, I'm trying to pick up some like part-time jobs to help, so that my dad doesn't have to sponsor me the whole time and I can also have to pay off my tuition fees.

She recognized the misconceptions held about people from her country of origin:

People think that a lot of Singaporeans are very rich, because Singapore is known to be very, economically, very well known. But in reality, a lot of Singaporeans are not really rich. We actually survived by taking out a lot of loans and basically incur a lot of debt.

Selma was actively looking for part-time work in the U.K. in order to manage financially:

So I applied for many jobs because at this point, even though I'd like to find jobs that I would like—this funds my money is like the main concern, right? So the job interviews that I've gotten for a care assistant, I think as a support worker. The other is always raising funds as a charity fundraiser.

She was concerned about the impact working might have on her academic progress. She had to compromise between finding employment that is related to her academic discipline and work that will enable her to fund her future.

### **Discussion of Narratives**

The section below presents and discusses three narrative themes that were central to the lived experiences of the women international students in this study: freely choosing, self-reinvention, and caring responsibilities.

#### ***Freely Choosing?***

The positioning of international students as a privileged and elite group, who are able to make extensive choices as part of their opportunity to study abroad (Ploner, 2017) aligns with the discourse of the postfeminist subject. This characterizes women international students as taking personal responsibility for their individualized choices and assumes uncritically that choices are equally available to all. This also aligns with the concept of “choice feminism” (Kirkpatrick, 2010;

Thwaites, 2017) of which very educated women have been deemed to benefit from. However, a key criticism of both choice feminism and postfeminism is that it does not sufficiently account for the way in which economic inequalities structure choices (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Each of the six student migrant stories highlights economic rationality as part of the decision-making in study abroad. Choices appeared to be constrained in terms of what was reasonable within their financial scope and do not suggest the complete freedom of an affluent student, nor do they suggest “consumer choice and cosmopolitan lifestyles” of the “already empowered” postfeminist woman (Dosekun, 2015, p. 967). Critically, these were a group of women who were “betwixt and between” (cf. Bosetti et al., 2008)—on the one hand having the opportunity for mobility and higher education, but on the other hand their choices were shaped by economic rationality.

### ***Self-Reinvention?***

The women all perceived a strong desire for financial independence and career opportunities. This self-reinvention has similarities to neoliberalism in terms of the pressure on the individual to take full responsibility for their choices and to maximize their potential. However, crucially within a postfeminist discourse, any gendered differences are not identified as part of gendered inequalities such as patriarchal structures, but rather these are understood as active choices that women are making in relation to personal preferences. Whilst the six women all expressed educational and career aspirations, these were often contrary to their practical plans of prioritizing financial earnings in low-skilled sectors (Maria and Selma) or opting for a career that would enable them to return home (Simin and Yanan). Kexian and Layla were perhaps the closest to achieving self-reinvention with the possibility of a job involving travel or relocation to a third country. However, these possibilities were still not without considerations of family and financial ramifications. Overall, the opportunities for self-reinvention as advocated by the postfeminist discourse appeared to be highly contingent on financial and family considerations. However, these were framed as individual choices and personal preferences as a postfeminist discourse would imply, rather than in relation to structural inequalities related to gender and socioeconomic background.

In order to understand how the women student migrants understood their “individualized” choices as part of their self-reinvention, “neoliberal feminism” (Rottenberg, 2018) rather than postfeminism may be more useful conceptually. Neoliberal feminism propounds a work-life balance as a sign of “success” for the ambitious career woman with caring commitments (Rottenberg, 2018). Rather than seeing a tension between career and naturalized ideals of femininity related to women as mothers and caring for family members, the expectation is that women identify a way to effectively manage this. Individualized solutions as to how to achieve this work-life balance are proposed in neoliberal feminism, and we see a number of alternative suggestions in the six women’s stories as to how they plan to achieve this balance. However, neoliberal feminism “reinscribes white and class privilege and heteronormativity while ... presenting itself as post-racial and LGBTQ friendly” (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 21). Indeed, two of the stories (Maria and Selma) indicate the possibility of becoming the “care workers” who have increased in society (the majority of whom are women of colour or immigrants) since the rise of the middle-class women entering professions (Rottenberg, 2018).

### ***Caring Responsibilities?***

Baker (2010, p. 13) contended that young women have to mediate between their aspirations and fulfilling caring commitments: “While young women’s aspirations may reflect the continuation of historically and culturally imposed limits, they are obliged to articulate and account for these in a

postfeminist framework of presumed equality and personal choice.” These caring responsibilities for the women student migrants were related to the financial support of offspring, future expectations of motherhood, and caring for parents. The students’ transnational family relationships affected how they were experiencing life as international students. Maria and Kexian’s narratives illustrate that international students may not be the carefree migrants they are often portrayed to be (Doyle et al., 2016), but they are in fact individuals who are embedded in a network of transnational relationships (King & Raghuram, 2013; Olwig et al., 2015; Sin & Schartner, 2024). “Transnational mothering” profoundly shaped Maria’s lived experiences as she tried to negotiate being an international student and a transnational mother (Lockwood et al., 2019). Maria’s experience demonstrates that caregiving continues even when the parent is physically away from their children (Hoang et al., 2015), and illustrates the strain, financially and emotionally, that mature female international students may experience when negotiating the conflicting roles of “student” and “parent” (Kibelloh & Bao, 2014). Kexian’s example illustrates how overseas study and transnational relationships may place a strain on traditional care patterns for aging relatives (Gui & Koropecjy-Cox, 2016). Both stories show that international students can be far from the individualistic and carefree individuals that they are often conceived to be. In fact, they may negotiate overlapping, and at times competing, identity roles as students, employees, and transnational caregivers (Wanki & Lietaert, 2018). Ng et al. (2006) discussed women’s movement in Malaysia, arguing that “individualized, depoliticized and market-driven feminism often glorifies women’s ability to combine their professional and family commitments but does nothing to change the patriarchal order” (as cited in Yoong, 2020, p. 30–31).

### **Conclusion and Discussion Points**

The findings suggest that there is not one international student experience, instead, it is in fact fluid, highly contextual, and multidimensional. Some common experiences at the intersection of gender and social class were uncovered in the data, providing evidence that international students’ experiences are highly contingent on other, nonacademic, aspects of their identity (Xu, 2022).

The findings above help to critically deconstruct the international student experience, illustrating its subjective and intersectional nature. By foregrounding student voices from the Global South, this study helps to unpack a prevailing misconception of international students as privileged elites who engage in overseas study to reproduce their social advantage (Findlay et al., 2012). The narratives above illustrate that student migrants are socioeconomically stratified and that they may make considerable sacrifices, financially and otherwise, in order to study abroad. Socioeconomic background matters, but in order to make sense of how it shapes the lived experiences of international students, it is useful to explore how it intersects with other aspects of identity (Holloway et al., 2012). Our findings indicate that overseas study is a gendered experience and that women international students may face specific challenges (Sondhi & King, 2017). This was evident in an account of “transnational parenthood” (Carling et al., 2012) which, in the context of overseas study, remains relatively underexplored (Lockwood et al., 2019). Narratives of international students engaging in transnational caregiving, whether of children or elderly relatives, call into question the default construction of university students as “carefree,” (Moreau & Kerner, 2013) and the conceptualization of the “individualistic” international student “without any significant ties or caring relationships” (Waters & Brooks, 2012, p. 30). At the same time, overseas study can mean freedom from conformity pressure for women international students (Brown, 2009) at least temporarily as study abroad acts as a “zone of suspension” (Martin, 2018).

The identities of international students are complex and multifaceted (Gomes et al., 2014) and arguably go beyond “being a student” or “being international.” The students in this study were also daughters or a mother and these roles remained deeply embedded in the social fabric of their lives. The analysis suggests that although aspects of the women’s experiences could be related to postfeminism indicating its transnational relevance for some women in the Global South, it was apparent that socioeconomic constraints and “choosing to care” meant that not all aspects of this “already empowered” narrative was relevant to the women in the study. Tentatively it may be suggested that further studies exploring the relevance of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2018; Yoong, 2020) to women international students may be salient. The requirement of individuals to take full responsibility for managing their lives within a neoliberal society requires an individual to find suitable strategies to manage and cope with challenges. This extends to managing and coping with challenges which result from gender inequalities. It appears therefore that gendered and classed inequalities suggest that postfeminism is only meaningful for those without economic constraints and family commitments in both the Global North and Global South, yet neoliberal feminism anticipates that the “empowered woman” will effectively balance a career and family life through individualized solutions. Wilson (2015) highlighted how the World Bank (2011) advocated “Gender Equality as Smart Economics,” which perpetuated a neoliberal discourse of assiduous women. Postcolonial feminists rightly stressed that this has not replaced a discourse of women from the Global South as lacking agency and being the submissive receivers of aid (Kapoor, 2008, as cited in Wilson, 2015). Yet, neoliberal discourses are central to the global escalation of women’s paid labour alongside unpaid labour, this suggests a perpetuation of “gendered constraints on women’s time and mobility and the unequal division of labour” (Wilson, 2015, p. 808). Consequently, the different ways in which neoliberalism “plays out” for women from different backgrounds and from different parts of the world need to be further examined to understand both the relevance of neoliberal feminist theory to women, but also to extend and challenge our understandings of “feminisms” further.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

The findings will be of interest to a range of higher education practitioners, including academic tutors and professional services staff such as student well-being advisors. The study shines a light on the multifaceted nature of international students’ experiences and how an intersectional approach can help universities offer support to their diverse international student population that goes beyond a “one size fits all” model. An intersectional approach to international student support might help expand a prevailing narrow conceptualization of studenthood (see O’Connor, 2020), thereby creating more opportunities for women international students to participate in social activities on campus. Our findings can encourage supportive interventions that consider gender which are uncommon in current support provision (Merry et al., 2021).

Moreover, there are implications for how universities support student carers. There is ample evidence that student carers face challenges as they navigate academia (e.g., Hook et al., 2022), and it is likely that these are amplified for international students engaging in transnational caregiving, a form of caregiving that is perhaps less visible than traditional in-country caregiving (see Miyawaki & Hooyman, 2023, for a discussion of the two notions). University staff should be offered training to understand the multidimensional nature of transnational caregiving (cf. Baldassar, 2007), including practical, financial, and emotional/psychological issues that transnational student carers may face. The findings are also relevant to widening participation agendas and access to higher education initiatives and policies. Here, scholarships aimed at

international students from the Global South and/or those from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds seem pivotal (see Campbell & Neff, 2020 for a review) given the financial strain reported by the interviewees in this study. At a conceptual and empirical level, the study illustrates how the “international student experience” is highly contingent on notions of gender and socioeconomic background, and further showcases that, rather than being carefree, international students navigate “transnational social fields” by sustaining “relationships with their kin and communities in their homeland” (Miyawaki & Hooyman, 2023, p. 2).

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