

Gender and Mobility: Insights into the field of Physics



4. Mobility = Flexibility?

Although most of the interviewees confirm the importance of being mobile, mobility also appears to be a challenge. In the interviews national and international differences in language, culture and work environment were mentioned. It seems that short-term mobility is more flexible than long-term mobility. This means that it is easier to coordinate one's professional and private life if the absence is only for a few weeks than some half a year or more.

Different sub-disciplines within physics require different levels of flexibility. For example, there is a great amount of cooperation and exchange in experimental physics between the different research institutions. Thus, for progression you have to have cooperation and collaboration with other research institutions, because you might have a lack of equipment at your organization.

As some authors¹⁾ describe, the main obstacle in international mobility is the lack of financial resources. Studies confirm: 56% of scientists do not go abroad because of a lack of financial resources for research or for stays abroad.²⁾ Our interview results also confirm these findings.

“When it comes to financial aspects of travelling, you have to fight for the money because there are insufficient resources for travelling. One has to gather money on her own. And it depends on the luck [...]” (female, senior scientist)

While scientists are willing and able to go abroad there are many other barriers beyond financing of international mobility. There are organisational and bureaucratic problems which scientists have before or while moving to another country. These logistical problems hinder 52% of scientists from going abroad.³⁾ *“There are terrible administrative obstacles in everything.”* (female, senior scientist) The list goes from frequent commitments in teaching, research and administration⁴⁾ through language problems to lack of support in planning and implementation.

Social relations

Another obstacle which can be found in literature as well as in the results from the interviews is social relations⁵⁾. This assumption is based on different studies, which show that personal/family reasons may hinder scientists ability to be internationally mobile. With a percentage of 67% the reconciliation of professional and private life is the most important obstacle to mobility for scientists from EU countries.⁶⁾ This raises an interesting question - whether being mobile is the same as being flexible?

Mobility has an impact on the individual and on the partner/family as well. *“[...] maybe one of the biggest problems in science [is] that you have to be extremely flexible including everyone around you. Well, that means if you have family, everyone needs to be flexible as well.”* (male, young scientist)

There are difficulties with the transparency of one's career path and the uncertainty of what will happen in the future. Different stages of life require different strategies to move forward in one's career and life. Starting a family can be definitely a barrier for mobility within the early phases of an academic career.

"You have to be competing and moving constantly in the period when people normally think about forming a family." (male, senior scientist) Contrary to our expectations, this view is shared by female and male scientists alike. The preference for raising a family has to be taken into consideration and is related to the decision to leave the partner behind and start a new life abroad.

"The other point is for maintaining a distant relationship: of course it's difficult when you have to work in different countries than your partner." (female, young scientist)

Key factors are reciprocal understanding, the knowledge of the requirements and maybe the willingness to follow. But the main problem in this case is to find a place to work together.

"And the partner also plays a big role in it." (male, young scientist)

"[...] so from my personal experience, it is not a problem for me but, [...] let's say, for instance for my wife, it is an important topic every time of course, because [...] it is not easy to start from scratch every time, [...] that is expected in our profession, but, [...] for the other people, the family or something that is of course, [...] not necessarily practical." (male, senior scientist)

"Mobility for long periods is challenging from a human point of view. In my offsite experience, it would have been even more difficult because it would have led me away from my family." (female, young scientist)

The consequences of the decision are shown above in various obstacles with regard to reconciliation of professional and private life. *"It is always hard [to reconcile work and family life] but it is easier for sure when having flexible working hours, for sure it is easier."* (female, senior scientist) Similar results from the interviews show that dual careers in academia would make it easier to reconcile work and private life especially when being mobile. One male scientist stated that it would have helped to have the opportunity for dual careers, but it was not possible for him and his partner.

Mobility and family

Netz and Schirmer⁷⁾ describe that social ties can complicate career development and affect one's work- life balance. That is the most obvious aspect we observed in the interviews:

"Before I used to move a lot, I really enjoyed it: conferences, workshops, colloquium [...] every time I had the opportunity to travel, I moved. Now, with a baby, of course it's more complicated. I need to check with my companion if he can take care of our child while I'm away, so I try to leave only when it's really necessary." (female, senior scientist) This statement is also confirmed in Figure 4, which shows the percentage of women and men with or without children who considered the balance of professional and private life as an obstacle. *"Now I'm older and with a family implicated in my professional life, I would hesitate to leave this country for another one. My children are of course an important point in this decision. Even if I'm not always satisfied with the situation in the laboratory, I don't want to move them in the middle of the scholar year or to a country they don't understand language."* (male, senior scientist)

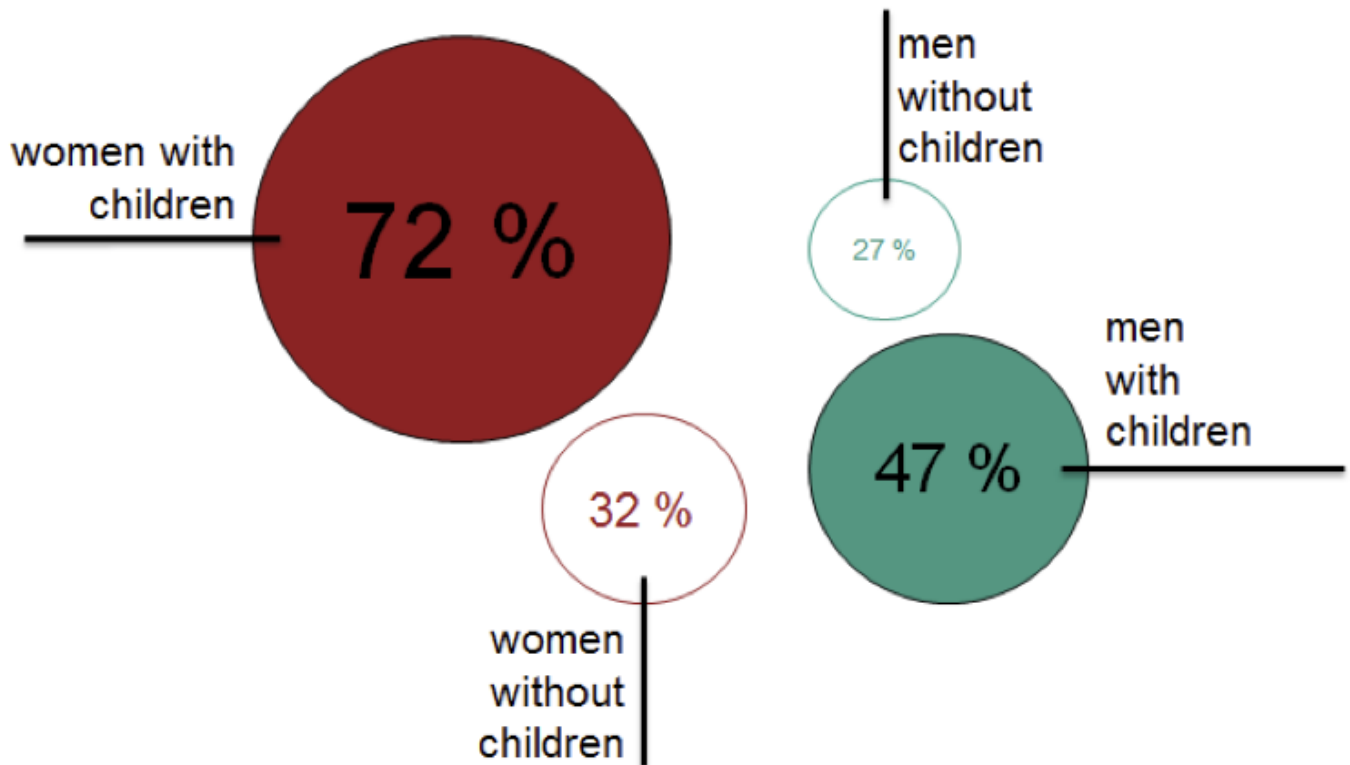


Figure 4: Percentage of scientists who considered reconciliation of professional and private life as an obstacle for international mobility⁸⁾

A large majority of scientists indicated that being mobile is more difficult when you have to reconcile job and private life, and in a concrete manner with children. *"My family influenced my decisions on travelling abroad [...]."* (male, senior scientist) Scientists without children stated fewer obstacles for international mobility. There is a significant difference of perceptions between female and male scientists. The percentage of women - independent of with or without children - is markedly higher than expected. So, Figure 4 shows that 72% of women with children need to deal with more obstacles to be mobile than men (only 47%). In some cases that's *"the reason why some women, even though they have talents, stop."* (female, senior scientist) The numbers of scientists without children who perceive reconciliation of private life and international mobility is relatively balanced (about 30%).

Taking the decision to be mobile, to leave the family, has always an effect. One interviewed woman described her international stay as a "personal sacrifice", because she had a little baby at home while she was yet breastfeeding. *"Such a dramatic picture that I can tell you is that at one point in my work the analysis [I performed] was completely closed and I wanted to consult my [...] mentor, such direct supervisor, I wanted to present him [the results] in detail and more deepened way than by email. I decided to go to [abroad], it was a 3-day trip, so I wasn't at home for 3 days, and that was the period when I breastfed and it was probably the most dramatic period of my life. As I returned, the baby literally jumped on me. So these dramatic memories of those 3 days, those swollen breasts and that baby on the other hand at home, it was pretty dramatic."* (female, young scientist)

In general it is necessary to consider that not only the scientist has to be mobile but also his/her family has to be. *"I need to check with my companion if he can take care of our child while I'm away, so I try to leave only when it's really necessary."* (female, senior scientist)

"I believe that is [...] maybe one of the biggest problems in science that you have to be extremely flexible including everyone around you. Well, that means if you have a family, everyone needs to be flexible as well." (male, young scientist)

In summary it can be said that reconciliation of private and professional life in science and particularly

in physics requires a special strategy before leaving for an international trip. Most times *“it depends on what phase of your life [you are in].”* (female, young scientist)



1)

Sekuła, P. et al., 2018; Netz, N., Schirmer, H., 2016

2) , 3)

DAAD/DZHW, 2016

4)

Netz, N., Schirmer, H., 2016, p. 16

5)

Sekuła, P. et al., 2018; Netz N., Schirmer, H., 2016

6)

Friesenhahn, I., Beaudry, C., 2014

7)

Netz, N., Schirmer, H., 2016, p. 15

8)

Friesenhahn, I., Beaudry, C., 2014;

<http://www.humboldt-foundation.de/web/kosmos-cover-story-105-1.html>

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