



Women's Participation in International Education: Gendered Barriers and Diplomatic Agency in South-South Student Mobility

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Abstract

International student mobility has grown substantially over the past two decades, yet gender remains an undertheorized axis within this literature. This article examines the experiences of Indonesian female students who participated in IISMA, a government-sponsored international student exchange program, specifically in Malaysia. Focusing on their motivations, the gendered barriers they navigated, and the diplomatic roles they performed, this study draws on qualitative phenomenological interviews with eight female alumni and institutional data from two major Indonesian universities. The findings reveal that women represent 66 to 70 percent of awardees yet face persistent patriarchal constraints: parental gatekeeping over destination choices, gendered financial disadvantages, and administrative burdens compounded by marriage-readiness expectations. Guided by Raghuram and Sondhi's (2021) gendered mobilities framework and Collins and Bilge's (2020) intersectionality framework, we analyze how participants strategically negotiate overlapping structures of gender, class, and religious norms to achieve participation. Female participants further functioned as active agents of educational diplomacy by organizing cultural events, leading academic collaborations, and transferring knowledge beyond their formal student role. This study contributes to feminist scholarship on international student mobility by foregrounding women's voices and agency in a South-South context and highlights structural gaps that gender-neutral program designs fail to address.

Keywords: Gender; International Student Mobility; Iisma; Educational Diplomacy; South-South Mobility; Intersectionality; Feminist Phenomenology

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INTRODUCTION

International student mobility has emerged as one of the most significant phenomena in contemporary higher education, with more than 6.4 million students enrolled outside their home countries as of 2022 (UNESCO, 2022). As cross-border educational flows intensify, scholarly and policy attention has increasingly turned to understanding who participates, under what conditions, and with what consequences. Yet within this expanding body of scholarship, a critical dimension remains insufficiently examined: gender. Women constitute the majority of study-abroad participants in many national programs, yet the specific mechanisms through which gendered structures shape their motivations, constrain their choices, and mediate their experiences abroad have received limited systematic attention (Tompkins, Cook, Miller, & LePeau, 2017; Van Mol, 2021). This gap is particularly consequential in the context of the Global South, where intersecting inequalities of gender, class, and religion produce mobility experiences that dominant theoretical frameworks, largely developed from North-North and North-South corridors, may not adequately capture.

Scholars have approached international student mobility from several theoretical and empirical angles. Early contributions focused on economic rationales and human capital accumulation, treating mobility as a rational investment in future employability (Raghuram, 2013). Subsequent work expanded the analytical lens to include cultural capital, identity formation, and intercultural competence development (Berry, 2005; Malakolunthu & Selan, 2011). Within this broader literature, a growing strand has attended to gender. Bottcher et al. (2016) documented a persistent gender gap in the ERASMUS mobility program, demonstrating that women outnumber men in European exchange participation. Van Mol (2021) attributed this gap to differential social norms and maternal educational attainment, while Sondhi and King (2017) and King and Sondhi (2018) examined how Indian women negotiate familial expectations to pursue international education. More recently, Mahmood et al. (2026) investigated academic integration and psychological well-being among international students at Chinese universities, highlighting the coping strategies students deploy in culturally unfamiliar environments. On the institutional side, Knight (2020) conceptualized educational diplomacy and soft power as key rationales for government-sponsored mobility programs, while Lipura and Collins (2020) and Yang (2020) examined how Asian governments instrumentalize student mobility within broader geopolitical and developmental agendas. Singh and Jack (2022) and Zakaria et al. (2024) examined the role of language and cultural barriers in shaping academic adjustment among international students in Malaysia, contributing to an understanding of intra-ASEAN mobility dynamics. Oldac (2023) called for reframing international students not as passive recipients of host-country education but as agential actors who shape diplomatic and institutional relations.

Despite these advances, several critical dimensions remain underexplored. First, the gendered mobilities framework proposed by Raghuram and Sondhi (2021) has not been systematically applied to South-South mobility corridors, where patriarchal governance of female spatial mobility operates through mechanisms distinct from those documented in European or North American contexts. Second, while quantitative studies have established the numerical dominance of women in exchange programs, qualitative investigations foregrounding their lived experiences, particularly the negotiation strategies they employ to navigate familial, financial, and institutional barriers, remain scarce (Tompkins et al., 2017). Third, existing scholarship on educational diplomacy (Knight, 2020) has not examined female students as diplomatic actors in their own right, despite their disproportionate representation in mobility programs. Collins and Bilge's (2020) intersectionality framework offers a productive lens for understanding why formally gender-neutral program designs fail to produce gender equity, yet this framework has not been brought into dialogue with the international student mobility literature in the Indonesian context. Furthermore, the overwhelming concentration of scholarship on North-South and North-North mobility routes (Oldac, 2023) has left South-South mobility, particularly within ASEAN, empirically thin and theoretically underdeveloped.

Indonesia presents a particularly instructive case for addressing these gaps. While the country has achieved Gender Parity Index equivalence in primary education, structural gender inequalities persist across multiple domains. The average years of schooling for women stand at 7 years compared to 7.9 years for men, representing the largest gender gap in ASEAN (World Bank, 2024). Female labor force participation hovers at approximately 53 percent, a figure that has remained largely stagnant for two decades despite educational progress (World Bank, 2023). In formal diplomacy, only 65 of the 1,230 ambassadors Indonesia has sent since independence (5.28 percent) have been women (Smith, Larner, & Patel, 2024). These macro-level inequalities sit alongside a striking anomaly: in a government-sponsored student exchange program, women consistently represent more than 65 percent of awardees. This paradox of high female participation in international mobility coexisting with persistent patriarchal constraints at home and underrepresentation in formal diplomacy demands an analytical approach that moves beyond single-axis explanations. By integrating Raghuram and Sondhi's (2021) gendered mobilities framework with Collins and Bilge's (2020) intersectionality framework, this study examines how overlapping structures of gender, class, and religious norms simultaneously constrain and enable female participation, and how participants exercise negotiated agency within these structures. The study focuses on Malaysia as a destination country, given its status as one of the most popular exchange destinations for Indonesian students and the South-South, intra-ASEAN character of the mobility route. Indonesia and Malaysia share linguistic heritage rooted in the Malay-Indonesian

archipelago and a Muslim-majority demographic, creating conditions of cultural proximity that make Malaysia a uniquely accessible yet instructive host environment (Zakaria et al., 2024).

This study addresses three interrelated objectives: first, to document and analyze the motivations driving Indonesian female students to participate in government-sponsored international exchange in Malaysia; second, to identify the gendered barriers they navigate and the negotiation strategies they employ; and third, to examine the diplomatic roles female participants perform during and after their exchange experience. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design with semi-structured interviews involving eight female alumni and supplementary institutional data from two major Indonesian universities, this study foregrounds women's voices and lived experiences to illuminate the structural dynamics that quantitative analyses alone cannot reveal.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological design, drawing on the interpretive tradition of understanding lived experience from the perspective of those who have lived it (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board with serial number 00018/UN10.A0123/B/DI/2025.

Eight female alumni who participated in an international exchange program at Malaysian universities between 2022 and 2024 were recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity across sending universities, host universities, and fields of study. Participants were identified via official student organisation accounts across five Malaysian host universities; 15 students were contacted and 8 agreed to participate. All were Indonesian women aged 20 to 23 in their fifth semester at the time of participation. Pseudonymous codes (R1 to R8) are used to protect confidentiality. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with international office representatives from Universitas Brawijaya (UB) and Universitas Negeri Malang (UM), supplemented by institutional awardee statistics disaggregated by gender, faculty, and destination country for 2021 to 2024.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Code	Sending University	Host University	Field	Year	Funding
R1	Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia	Mechanical Engineering	2023	Co-funding
R2	Universitas Diponegoro	Universiti Malaya	International Relations	2024	Fully funded
R3	Universitas Negeri Malang	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	Education	2024	Co-funding
R4	Universitas Diponegoro	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	International Relations	2024	Fully funded
R5	Universitas Indonesia	Universiti Sains Malaysia	International Relations	2023	Fully funded
R6	Universitas Gadjah Mada	Universiti Sains Malaysia	Pharmacy	2023	Co-funding
R7	Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Jakarta	Universiti Sains Malaysia	Public Health	2022	Co-funding
R8	Universitas Bengkulu	Universiti Putra Malaysia	Pharmacy	2024	Fully funded

In-depth interviews, conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and lasting 60 to 90 minutes, covered four thematic areas: motivations for applying; administrative, financial, and social barriers;

experiences of cultural adjustment; and reflections on roles assumed during and after the program. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed across six phases: familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and write-up. Analysis was conducted inductively and then deductively mapped against the theoretical frameworks. Member-checking with participants, international office representatives, and research supervisors enhanced trustworthiness. Institutional data were analyzed through descriptive statistics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Female Dominance in Programme Participation

Institutional data from UB and UM reveal a consistent and striking pattern of female dominance across the four-year period 2021 to 2024. At UB, female awardees constituted 65.1 percent in 2021, maintaining a stable range of 65 to 67 percent through 2024, by which time the total cohort had grown from 63 to 129 awardees, representing 104.8 percent growth. At UM, female awardees ranged from 63.2 to 81.8 percent, with an average of 67.7 percent across the period and an overall program growth of 100 percent. These figures decisively exceed both the national university enrolment gender ratio and the 57 percent global benchmark for women in higher education (UNESCO, 2020). Critically, program expansion at neither institution disrupted the established gender dynamics.

Table 2. IISMA Awardee Distribution by Gender in UB and UM from 2021 to 2024

University	Year	Male	Female	Total	Female %	YoY Growth
UB	2021	22	41	63	65.1%	—
	2022	19	38	57	66.7%	-9.5%
	2023	26	52	78	66.7%	+36.8%
	2024	44	85	129	65.9%	+65.4%
UM	2021	5	6	11	77.3%	—
	2022	6	13	19	68.4%	-13.6%
	2023	2	5	7	71.4%	-63.2%
	2024	5	17	22	77.3%	+214.3%

Note. Data sourced from International Offices of Universitas Brawijaya (UB) and Universitas Negeri Malang (UM). YoY = Year-on-Year total awardee growth.

Faculty-level analysis reveals gendered patterns in disciplinary participation. At UB, the faculties of Cultural Studies (82.5 percent female), Administrative Science (81.3 percent), and Medicine (80.0 percent) recorded the highest female participation rates. At UM, the faculties of Psychology and Vocational Studies recorded 100 percent female awardees. In contrast, the faculties of Mathematics and Natural Sciences (35.3 percent female) and Engineering (38.5 percent female) at UB exhibited male-dominated patterns, reflecting broader gender segregation in STEM fields (UNESCO, 2020). Destination data further confirm that female dominance is not confined to culturally proximate or perceived safe destinations. Female awardees constituted 85.7 percent of those bound for the United States from UB, 81.8 percent for Ireland, and 75.0 percent for Turkey. This cross-destination consistency challenges narratives that frame female international mobility as primarily risk-averse or proximity-driven.

Multilayered Motivations

Female participants articulated motivations clustering into three overlapping categories: academic and professional development, cross-cultural exploration, and social responsibility toward Indonesian higher education. Academic motivations were consistently prominent, reflecting the competitive ethos of the selection process. R5 described her decision as a desire to explore and expand her knowledge and international experience, while R2 linked participation to disciplinary interests in international relations. For STEM-field participants, the aspiration to encounter different technological environments was prominent, with R1 explaining her interest in expanding her understanding of technology applications in a country that has a similar industrial context to Indonesia but is more advanced in technology integration.

A third motivational strand, the desire to contribute knowledge back to Indonesian higher education, is less commonly noted in the international student mobility literature but was present across multiple participants. R3 framed participation explicitly in terms of social impact, noting that inclusive education in Indonesia is still lacking and that she wanted to participate in education and research at the international level. The co-funding structure reinforced this accountability dimension, as R3 also explained that because the scholarship is from the government and co-funded by parents, there is pressure and responsibility to be useful to society.

Gendered Barriers: Patriarchal Governance of Mobility

Participants encountered interlocking barriers distinctly shaped by their gender, clustering into three sub-themes: patriarchal family control over destination choices, financial disadvantages compounded by gender norms, and administrative burdens intersecting with academic obligations. Parental authority, particularly gatekeeping over destination choices, was the most consistently reported social barrier. R8 described how parents supported her participation but placed limits on destination, while R2 connected parental constraint to her positionality as the youngest daughter. These narratives resonate with Raghuram and Sondhi's (2021) analysis of how families police female students' spatial mobility more intensively than male students'.

Financial barriers were amplified by gendered investment norms. R1 articulated what several others expressed less explicitly, noting that among female friends, many agreed that it was not worth spending so much on student exchange and mobility, and that while the program was fully funded, medical check-ups and visa costs had to be paid out of pocket with only partial reimbursement. The phrase "not worth it" for female students investing in international mobility echoes Duflo's (2012) findings that families with limited resources systematically underinvest in daughters' educational capital relative to sons. Administrative complexity intersected with academic obligations in additional ways: R3 described the compounding effect of overthinking about departing in the seventh semester because it coincided with thesis writing. This reflects the double burden documented in gender and education research (Collins and Bilge, 2020): female students manage academic timelines according to family expectations tied to marriage readiness while simultaneously pursuing international opportunities.

Despite these barriers, all eight participants successfully completed their programs. Their navigation of obstacles through parental persuasion, financial strategizing, and careful timeline management constitutes negotiated agency (Raghuram and Sondhi, 2021), echoing Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the patriarchal bargain in which women secure individual gains through strategic accommodation of, rather than direct resistance to, patriarchal structures.

The Structural Gap: Formal Gender Neutrality and Persistent Inequality

The central paradox documented in this study is that women constitute a decisive majority of participants yet navigate gender-specific barriers that their male counterparts largely do not face. This extends Van Mol's (2021) observation of a gender gap in European study-abroad programs into the Global South, with the distinctive dimension that in Indonesia, the family is the primary site of gender constraints on mobility rather than the formal institutional gatekeeping.

Collins and Bilge's (2020) intersectionality framework illuminates why formal gender neutrality fails to produce gender equity. The barriers female participants face are not produced by gender alone but by the intersection of gender with class (families that perceive female educational investment as wasteful), religion (norms around female spatial mobility), and institutional design (preparation costs that create hidden disadvantages). Government-sponsored programs remove the financial barrier to participation in core programs but do not address residual preparation costs, patriarchal family dynamics that constrain destination choice, or the absence of female-specific welfare mechanisms. Participants articulated these structural gaps directly. R4 observed that there needs to be female welfare and that while male colleagues are gender-sensitive, they still do not fully understand women's needs. R2 called for a dedicated helpline for reporting protection cases involving female awardees. R4 further identified a channel deficit: female students are expected to make changes and take roles in the internationalization of education, but are not given a platform to effect real change. Without direction and a channel, they will move on their own, separately. This structural injustice cannot be addressed by gender-neutral program design. Identifying this gap is not to prescribe a specific remedy but to establish that the phenomenon is structural, not individual, echoing Tokas et al.'s (2022) argument that holistic support structures are as important as financial access.

Cultural Adjustment and the Proximity Paradox

Participants universally reported experiencing culture shock in Malaysia despite the cultural proximity between the two nations. R1 described adapting to everyday language differences, ways of interacting in an international campus environment, and a faster academic rhythm, noting that Malaysians routinely speak English not only on campus but in daily life. R3 described linguistic and dietary adjustment, explaining that the way Malaysian Malays speak is different and that food was strongly spiced and did not suit Indonesian palates. The unexpected nature of intra-ASEAN culture shock is theoretically significant. Linguistic similarity paradoxically heightened the salience of differences: participants had assumed comprehension would be straightforward, making actual difficulty more unsettling. This supports Muthuswamy and G's (2023) argument that cultural distance is multidimensional and that intra-regional mobility can involve adjustments as complex as North-South mobility.

Malaysian campus life presented positive contrasts that challenged female participants' domestic educational assumptions. More project-based pedagogy, intensive English use, and inclusive student welfare services, including free confidential counseling services noted by R5 as absent at her home institution, produced a form of comparative education with implications for participants' subsequent advocacy for reform in Indonesian higher education. This educational system comparison dimension of South-South mobility deserves greater attention in comparative education scholarship.

Female Students as Diplomatic Actors

Beyond adjustment challenges, participants emerged as active agents of educational diplomacy across three domains: cultural promotion, academic collaboration, and knowledge transfer. In cultural promotion, female participants took initiative in organizing and performing Indonesian cultural events at host universities. R2 reported that female students tended to be more active in preparing cultural events, while R3 described presenting angklung performances, traditional attire for fashion shows, Kartini dramas, and Indonesian food. R5 described organizing a mandatory cultural program around the theme of mutual assistance by cleaning beaches and making batik with international students while also selling Indonesian food.

In academic collaboration, participants engaged deeply with international peer-learning environments. R1 described a memorable cross-national capstone project on autonomous agricultural robotics with teammates from Malaysia and Albania. R3 reported participating in intercultural courses attended by multiple nationalities and encountering micro-teaching methodologies that moved beyond rote learning to critical thinking exercises. In knowledge transfer, participants committed to reforming Indonesian higher education upon return. R1 shared tips and experiences with students at her home campus, while R5 leveraged her exchange experience through activities at her university's international office. R1 also observed that the chair of the alumni association for 2024 to 2025 is a female student, demonstrating that women have the space and capacity to lead and contribute.

These findings advance Oldac's (2023) call for more agential frameworks in international student mobility research and extend Knight's (2020) concept of educational diplomacy into a domain where female students are not merely recipients but active producers of diplomatic relations. That women represent more than two-thirds of participants and are the program's primary diplomatic agents has implications that program designers may not have fully anticipated: a country's soft power infrastructure in ASEAN is, to a substantial degree, being constructed by young women navigating patriarchal constraints at home to participate in international spaces abroad. The gendered dimension of this diplomatic agency should not be read as evidence of an essential female disposition toward diplomacy but as the product of gendered socialization that emphasizes relational and intercultural skills in women (Tompkins et al., 2017).

DISCUSSION

This study yields three principal findings regarding Indonesian female students' participation in IISMA exchange programs in Malaysia. First, institutional data from Universitas Brawijaya and Universitas Negeri Malang confirm that women consistently represent 66 to 70 percent of awardees across the 2021–2024 period, a figure that substantially exceeds both national university enrolment ratios and the global 57 percent benchmark for women in higher education (UNESCO, 2020). This female dominance persists across faculties, years, and destination countries, indicating that it is a structural rather than incidental phenomenon. Second, despite their numerical

majority, female participants navigate distinctly gendered barriers that formally gender-neutral program designs do not address. These barriers include patriarchal parental gatekeeping over destination choices, gendered financial disadvantages rooted in differential family investment norms, and compounding administrative burdens that intersect with marriage-readiness expectations. Third, female participants function as active agents of educational diplomacy by organizing cultural events, leading academic collaborations, and transferring knowledge back to Indonesian higher education institutions. This diplomatic agency operates through grassroots channels rather than formal institutional platforms, revealing a structural channel deficit that limits the sustainability of female students' contributions to internationalization.

The finding that women constitute more than two-thirds of exchange participants is consistent with Bottcher et al.'s (2016) documentation of a persistent gender gap in the ERASMUS mobility program, where women similarly outnumber men. Both studies confirm that female numerical dominance in international exchange is not context-specific but reflects a broader transnational pattern. However, the present study diverges from Bottcher et al. (2016) in a critical respect: whereas the European gender gap is primarily attributed to institutional and programmatic factors, our findings foreground the family as the principal site of gendered constraint, reflecting the distinctive operation of patriarchal governance in the Indonesian context (Wieringa, 2002). Van Mol (2021) attributed the gender gap in European study-abroad participation to differential social norms and maternal educational attainment. Our findings partially corroborate this explanation, as participants reported that family norms regarding female spatial mobility shaped their destination choices. Yet the Indonesian case adds a dimension absent from Van Mol's European analysis: the intersection of gender norms with religious expectations and marriage-readiness timelines, which produced compounding barriers that social norms alone cannot explain.

Sondhi and King (2017) examined how Indian women negotiate familial expectations to pursue international education, identifying strategies of persuasion, compromise, and selective compliance. Our participants employed similar negotiation strategies, confirming the cross-cultural applicability of "negotiated agency" within patriarchal structures. The similarity likely arises from shared features of South Asian and Southeast Asian patriarchal systems, where families exercise considerable authority over daughters' mobility. Nevertheless, a key difference emerges: Sondhi and King's Indian participants navigated barriers primarily in North-South mobility corridors, whereas our participants operated within a South-South, intra-ASEAN context where cultural proximity paradoxically heightened rather than diminished adjustment challenges. Tompkins et al. (2017) demonstrated that gender influences study-abroad participation rates and intercultural competence development among American students. While our study corroborates the finding that gender shapes participation patterns, the nature of gendered influence differs substantially. In the American context, gender operates through peer norms and institutional messaging, whereas in the Indonesian context, gender operates through direct familial authority over mobility decisions, particularly for unmarried daughters.

Mahmood et al. (2026) investigated academic integration and coping strategies among international students at Chinese universities, highlighting the psychological demands of cross-cultural adjustment. Our findings parallel theirs in documenting the emotional and social labor involved in cultural adjustment. However, while Mahmood et al. focused on North-South mobility and identified institutional support systems as key mediators, our participants in South-South mobility reported that the assumption of cultural similarity between Indonesia and Malaysia created a "proximity paradox" in which expected ease of adjustment was disrupted by unexpected linguistic and social differences. This distinction suggests that intra-regional mobility produces qualitatively different adjustment dynamics that cannot be captured by frameworks developed for intercontinental mobility. Oldac (2023) called for reconceptualizing international students as diplomatic actors rather than passive recipients of host-country education. Our study provides direct empirical support for this reframing by documenting how female participants organized cultural events, led academic collaborations, and transferred knowledge back to their home institutions. The novelty of our contribution lies in demonstrating that this diplomatic agency is gendered: women, who constitute more than two-thirds of participants, are the primary agents of educational diplomacy, yet they operate without formal institutional recognition or support platforms.

Collins and Bilge's (2020) intersectionality framework, which builds on Crenshaw's (1989) foundational articulation of how overlapping systems of power produce compounded marginalization, has been widely applied in feminist scholarship but has not previously been brought into sustained dialogue with the international student mobility literature in Indonesia. By applying intersectionality to analyze how gender, class, and religious norms produce compounding barriers that formally gender-neutral programs fail to address (Hopkins, 2019), this study extends the framework's analytical reach into a new empirical domain. The key insight is that female participants' barriers are not additive but intersectional: it is not gender plus class plus religion, but the specific configuration of these axes in the Indonesian context that produces the barriers documented in this study.

This study makes three distinct contributions. Theoretically, it advances feminist scholarship on international student mobility by integrating Raghuram and Sondhi's (2021) gendered mobilities framework with Collins and Bilge's (2020) intersectionality framework within a South-South mobility corridor. This integration demonstrates that gendered barriers to mobility are not produced by gender alone but emerge from the intersection of gender with class-based family investment norms and religious expectations surrounding female spatial autonomy. Furthermore, the study extends Oldac's (2023) agential framework by empirically demonstrating that educational diplomacy in government-sponsored programs is predominantly performed by women, a finding that has not been previously documented. Practically, the findings highlight specific structural gaps that program designers can address: the provision of gender-sensitive welfare mechanisms, the establishment of dedicated reporting channels for protection cases involving female awardees, and the creation of formal platforms through which female alumni can sustain their diplomatic and knowledge-transfer contributions. The absence of such mechanisms means that women's contributions to internationalization remain informal and individually driven, limiting their institutional impact. From a policy perspective, the study demonstrates that formally gender-neutral program designs are insufficient to produce gender equity in international student mobility. Policymakers in the Indonesian Ministry of Education and in ASEAN-level educational cooperation frameworks should consider gender-responsive program elements, including pre-departure financial support for preparation costs, institutional mentoring that addresses family resistance, and post-return platforms for sustained engagement.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample of eight female alumni from Malaysian host universities, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, limits the generalizability of findings to other destination countries and mobility corridors. The experiences of female students exchanging to Western or East Asian destinations may differ substantially from those documented here. Second, the study relies exclusively on female participants' retrospective accounts, which may be subject to recall bias and social desirability effects. The absence of male participants as a comparison group means that gendered barriers are identified through participants' self-reports rather than direct comparative analysis. Third, institutional data were obtained from only two Indonesian universities, UB and UM, both located in East Java. Awardee patterns at universities in other regions or with different institutional profiles may vary. Fourth, the study captures a cross-sectional snapshot of participants' experiences and does not track the long-term effects of exchange participation on career trajectories, diplomatic engagement, or gender consciousness.

Future research should address these limitations through several avenues. Longitudinal studies tracking female alumni over three to five years would illuminate how exchange participation shapes career development, gender consciousness, and sustained diplomatic engagement. Comparative studies examining gendered experiences across different host-country contexts, for instance contrasting South-South mobility in Malaysia with North-South mobility in Europe or Australia, would test the transferability of the gendered mobilities and intersectionality frameworks applied here. Including male participants as a comparison group would enable direct assessment of gender-specific versus universal barriers. Expanding the institutional scope to include universities beyond East Java, particularly those in regions with stronger conservative religious norms or in metropolitan centers with different class compositions, would strengthen the external validity of the findings. Finally, research employing mixed-methods designs that combine qualitative phenomenological data with large-scale survey data across multiple IISMA cohorts would provide both depth of understanding and breadth of generalizability, enabling a more comprehensive assessment of the structural dynamics documented in this study.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the motivations, barriers, and diplomatic roles of Indonesian female students participating in international exchange programs in Malaysia. Three findings warrant emphasis. First, women represent 66 to 70 percent of awardees from UB and UM, decisively surpassing both the national university enrolment gender ratio and the global 57 percent benchmark. This participation rate is consistent across years, faculties, and destination countries, indicating that female dominance in this form of mobility is structural rather than incidental. Second, this numerical dominance coexists with persistent patriarchal barriers, including parental destination control, gendered financial disadvantages, and compounding administrative burdens, that formally gender-neutral program design does not address. A structural gap exists between what programs offer and what structurally disadvantaged female participants require to participate on equal terms. Participants navigate these barriers through negotiated agency (Raghuram and Sondhi, 2021), making strategic choices within rather than against patriarchal structures. Collins and Bilge's (2020) intersectionality framework reveals that these barriers are produced not by gender alone but by the intersection of gender with class, religion, and institutional design. Third, female participants function as active agents of educational diplomacy, organizing cultural events, building intercultural academic collaborations, and leading alumni networks. These activities constitute grassroots educational diplomacy with long-term soft power implications. Yet participants also reported a structural channel deficit: they are expected to contribute to the internationalization of education but are not given institutional platforms to do so sustainably. Future research should employ longitudinal designs tracking alumni over time, intersectional analysis attending to class, ethnicity, and religion alongside gender, and comparative studies examining gendered experiences across different host country contexts. The 66 percent who are women, and the full complexity of what their mobility means for themselves, for their institutions, and for their nations, deserves sustained scholarly attention.

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