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Patriarchal Gatekeepers and Scholarship Pipelines: Why Zambian Students Choose China over the UK

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ABSTRACT: *International study is a critical but unequal pathway for Zambian youth, with a growing preference for China over traditional destinations such as the UK. This mixed-methods study investigates the factors underlying this destination choice and proposes the concept of “patriarchal mediation” as a contextual layer in household decision-making. Data from 111 Zambians aged 18–45 were collected via an online survey with open-ended questions. Multinomial logistic regression revealed that having a father’s education (OR = 1.42, $p = .005$) and having a lower family income (OR = 0.76, $p = .017$) were the strongest predictors of preferring China over the UK, whereas having a mother’s education was not significant. Urban residence also reduced the odds of preferring China. Thematic analysis highlighted scholarships as a primary driver and suggested fathers’ role as gatekeepers in the decision process. The findings challenge the context-neutral application of standard push–pull models and point to the household as a critical site where global educational inequalities are reproduced in high-poverty, patriarchal contexts. Recommendations for equity-focused interventions that address intrahousehold dynamics are discussed.*

Keywords: student mobility, patriarchal mediation, scholarship pipelines, Zambia, China–UK destination choice, educational inequality, mixed methods.

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INTRODUCTION

Zambia's 64% poverty rate and less than 10% tertiary enrollment make international study both a lifeline and a privilege (World Bank, 2024; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024). However, standard push–pull models of student mobility often fail to fully explain the stark trend of Zambian students increasingly choosing China (42% of this sample) over the historically dominant United Kingdom (24%) (Lee, 2020). More critically, these models typically treat “family influence” as a homogeneous factor, overlooking the gendered dynamics of household decision-making in contexts such as Zambia (Sondhi, 2013). This paper introduces and explores the concept of “patriarchal mediation” as a critical, contextual layer that filters global opportunity structures in high-poverty, patriarchal settings in the Global South. This concept builds upon feminist and household bargaining scholarship, which examines how intrahousehold power relations, often favoring men, mediate access to resources and shape life outcomes (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 1999).

This study addresses two interrelated gaps: (1) the underexplored role of Zambia-specific patriarchal dynamics in mediating study-abroad decisions and (2) the need for evidence that can inform policies to democratize access. Drawing on human capital theory, which frames education as an investment in future earnings (Becker, 1964), and push–pull frameworks, which examine home-country repulsions and host-country attractions (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), this research investigates the demographic and socioeconomic factors associated with study destination preference.

Global student mobility from sub-Saharan Africa has risen significantly, with Zambia recording notable annual increases in the number of outbound students (Magnusson, 2025; UNESCO, 2023). This movement offers a potential pathway to address developmental challenges. However, access remains deeply unequal, with information flows often urban centered and financial dependence near total (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Emerging destination trends are stark and driven by scholarships, affordability, and postgraduation prospects (Maringe & Carter, 2007; Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018). While qualitative evidence underscores a pragmatic cost–benefit calculus, the interplay of demographic and socioeconomic factors in this decision matrix has not been sufficiently quantified for the Zambian context.

Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, this study therefore seeks to do the following:

1. Identify the key predictors of preferring China over the UK among a sample of Zambian students.
2. Contextualize these quantitative patterns with qualitative insights into the decision-making process.
3. Propose a theoretical extension to mobility models that account for patriarchal household structures.

By demonstrating that fathers' education, but not mothers' education, significantly predicts destination choice and by integrating narratives of paternal gatekeeping, the findings suggest that standard mobility models require adaptation for contexts such as Zambia. The paper concludes with implications for theory and practice aimed at advancing equitable access to global education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Trends in Educational Mobility

Student migration has increased significantly from 2 million in the year 2000 to an expected 6.3 million by 2025, mainly because of the factors of globalization, the recognition of credentials, and access to information digitally (Collett, 2025). Neoliberal education policies have worsened the situation, making students who come from abroad the primary source of income in countries such as Australia and the UK (Marginson, 2025). Nonetheless, students from the Global South must struggle with enormous challenges in the form of visa regulations, a lack of funds, and adapting to a new culture.

Demographic Determinants: Age, Gender, and Geography

Age significantly shapes international study intentions. Individuals aged 18–27 are 2.3 times more likely to pursue overseas education than older respondents are, largely because of their greater openness to new experiences and flexibility in early-career planning (Findlay et al., 2012). The same situation is observed in Zambia, where 58% of the country's international students are younger than 25 years of age. The gender issue presents paradoxes. On the one hand, in sub-Saharan Africa, female participation is increasing (+15% since 2020) (UNESCO, 2022), but on the other hand, the influence of a male-dominated culture still exists. Female students in Zambia are more inclined to take up humanities or health sciences and visit culturally familiar countries such as the UK; however, male students are concentrating on STEM fields in China (Shao & Zhang, 2024). The place of origin strongly affects the situation. City-dwelling students have a 68% greater share of scholarships than their rural counterparts do, mainly because of digital accessibility and counseling. The same thing occurs in Zambia, where rural students must address three obstacles: lack of internet, universities not reaching out to them, and being financially unstable (Smith & Jones, 2021; Frouillou, 2022).

Socioeconomic Drivers: Income, parental education, and networks

Family income is still the most important factor for mobility prediction worldwide. Students from the richest groups are four and a half times more likely to go abroad for their studies (Johnstone & Proctor, 2023). In Zambia, with a GDP per capita of \$1,300, scholarship dependence is very high (87% of all international students are completely funded) (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). Parental education has a subtle but significant effect. Fathers' education is a predictor of mobility (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2017); each subsequent level increases a child's chances by 18%) through the father's awareness, networks, and aspirational capital.

Mothers' education does not have a strong effect on patriarchal societies such as Zambia does (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). Transnational communities help with information, but their influence is mixed. Sondhi & King (2024) see their function in clarifying through and opening host countries, while Marginson (2018) finds that in Kenya/Zambia, the impact is minor because the lack of financial resources is the main issue.

Zambia-Specific Context

Push Factors: In Zambia's context, the migration of students from Zambia is rooted in former colonial UK connections and rising Chinese ties, which are the result of investments in infrastructure. The main reasons for pushing students out are very low university capacity (12% enrollment; Ministry of Education Zambia, 2025) and the lack of employability (68% of graduates are not job-ready; World Bank, 2025)."

Extending Push–Pull Theory: The Patriarchal Mediation Layer

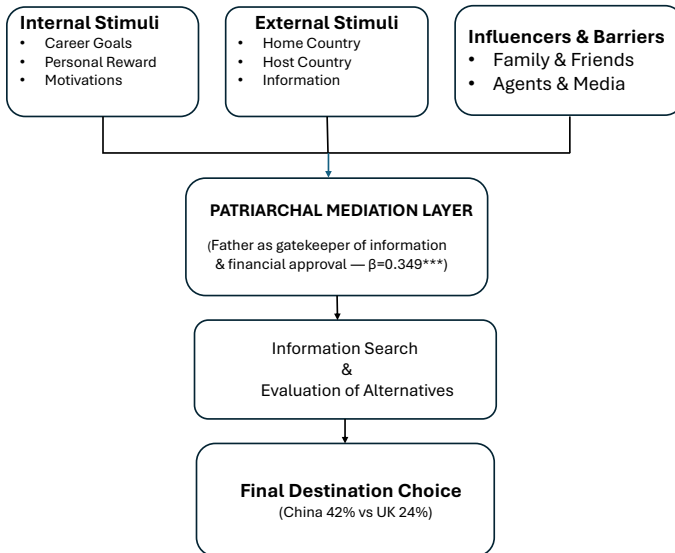


Figure 1: Extended Push-Pull Model with Patriarchal Mediation Layer

Source: Adapted from Wilkins & Huisman (2012); patriarchal mediation layer added by the present study.

Pull Factors: Destination Appeal Scholarships, like Zambia-China programs, offer movement opportunities for financially poor but academically talented young people (Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018), with China's low cost (\$3,000/year) and the UK's high reputation (\$25,000/year) influencing choices."

Qualitative studies underline destination calculus: China's budget is \$3,000/year vs. the UK's budget is \$25,000 plus the UK's perceived status (Doc2 respondent: "Quality education and cultural history"). However, the interaction of demographic/socioeconomic factors in this decision matrix has not yet been quantified.

Interpretation of the Extended Model

The original Wilkins & Huisman (2012) framework treats family influence as homogeneous. This study extends the model by inserting a "patriarchal mediation layer" (dashed box and arrow) that operates in high-poverty, male-dominated African contexts. Drawing from household bargaining theory (Agarwal, 1997), this layer conceptualizes fathers as active gatekeepers who control financial resources and filter scholarship information, a manifestation of gendered power within the household. This mediation explains both the strong predictive power of fathers' education in our model and the nonsignificance of mothers' education. This modification reveals why standard push-pull models underpredict mobility to low-cost destinations (China) among rural and low paternal-education households, as they fail to account for this intrahousehold filtering mechanism.

METHOD

Research Design and Sampling

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing study destination choice. Primary data were gathered via an online questionnaire containing both structured and open-ended questions. A mixed sampling approach combined purposive (targeting Zambian nationals aged 18–45 with an expressed interest in higher education) and convenience (recruitment via university networks, educational NGOs, and social media) methods for feasibility (Etikan et al., 2016; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The nonprobability nature of the sample limits broad generalizability; therefore, the findings are interpreted as exploratory and indicative of patterns within the studied networks. The final sample consisted of 111 respondents.

Data collection instrument

A 35-item questionnaire was administered via Google Forms, comprising (1) a demographic section (age, gender, residence); (2) a socioeconomic section (parental education, family income, overseas ties); and (3) an outcome section (nominal preference for the study destination: China, the UK, the USA, or others). The instrument included an open-ended question soliciting reasons for destination

preference. Pilot testing with 15 students confirmed the clarity and face validity of the instrument.

Analytical Framework and Positionality

Quantitative data were analyzed using Stata 18. The primary analysis to address the core research question was a multinomial logistic regression with preferred study destination as the nominal dependent variable (reference category: United Kingdom). The predictors included father's education, mother's education, family income, age, sex, and urban/rural residence. Supplementary quantitative analyses included descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and linear regression/ANOVA to explore the relationships between parental education and family socioeconomic status (Hair et al., 2019).

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Positionality Statement: The author is a PhD candidate in development economics with research experience focusing on education and social mobility in sub-Saharan Africa. This analysis was conducted with reflexive awareness that my academic perspective and situated knowledge shape the interpretive process. The goal of the thematic analysis was not to uncover a singular truth but to construct meaningful patterns that elucidate the quantitative findings, using direct participant quotes to anchor these interpretations. The analysis was performed on the substantive open-ended responses from 102 participants, which accounts for the sample size (N=102) reported in the Thematic Analysis (Section 3.4; Table 3); nine of the 111 total survey respondents provided no usable qualitative data.

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Ethical Considerations

All phases of this research adhered to established international ethical guidelines for studies involving human participants. Formal ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection. Every respondent received detailed information about the study's purpose and procedures, voluntarily provided electronic informed consent, and was explicitly reminded of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. The online questionnaire was designed to protect anonymity: no names or identifiable details were requested, and IP addresses were

not recorded. All the data are stored on encrypted, password-protected servers whose access is restricted exclusively to the research team.

RESULTS

A total of 111 respondents completed the survey. The demographic and socioeconomic profile of the sample is summarized below. The mean age of the participants was 28.2 years (SD = 7.1). The sample was nearly evenly split by gender, with 55 male respondents (49.5%) and 56 female respondents (50.5%). A majority (80.2%, n=89) were currently enrolled in a tertiary study program. In terms of urban-centric recruitment challenges, 73.0% (n=81) of the respondents resided in urban or suburban areas, while 27.0% (n=30) were from rural areas. The most represented provinces were Lusaka (18.9%), Copperbelt (11.7%), and Central China (10.8%). The sample strongly relied on transnational networks, with 69.4% (n=77) reporting having immediate family or close friends living abroad. Parents' education levels varied; on average, fathers reported slightly higher educational attainment (M = 2.95, SD = 1.60) than mothers did (M = 2.86, SD = 0.99) on a 6-point ordinal scale (1=None to 6=Doctorate). Annual family income was clustered in the lower brackets, with 42.3% (n=47) of the respondents reporting a household income of USD \$1,000 or less.

Table 1: Demographic and Socioeconomic Profile of the Respondents (N=111)

Characteristic	Category	n	%/M (SD)
Age (Years)			28.2 (7.1)
Gender	Male	55	49.5%
	Female	56	50.5%
Residence	Urban/Suburban	81	73.0%
	Rural	30	27.0%
Current Student	Yes	89	80.2%
	No	22	19.8%
Family/Friends Abroad	Yes	77	69.4%
	No	34	30.6%
Father's Education (1-6)			2.95 (1.60)
Mother's Education (1-6)			2.86 (0.99)
Annual Family Income (USD)	≤ \$1,000	47	42.3%
	\$1,001 - \$3,000	41	36.9%
	> \$3,000	23	20.7%

Note. Parental education was measured on an ordinal scale: 1=None, 2=Primary, 3=Secondary, 4=Diploma/Certificate, 5=Bachelor's, and 6=Postgraduate.

Primary Analysis: Factors Predicting Study Destination Preference

To directly test the factors associated with the choice of study destination, a multinomial logistic regression was performed. The dependent variable was the nominal preference for China, the United Kingdom, the United States, or other

destinations, with the United Kingdom set as the reference category. The model included father’s education, mother’s education, family income, respondent’s age, gender, and urban/rural residence as predictors.

The model was statistically significant, LR $\chi^2(12) = 35.44$, $p < .001$, with a pseudo R^2 (McFadden) of 0.15. The results for the comparison between a preference for China and the United Kingdom are presented in Table 2, as this addresses the paper’s central research question.

Table 2: Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Preference for China vs. the United Kingdom

Predictor	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	z	p >	z	[95% Conf. Interval]
Father's Education	1.42	0.18	2.78	0.005	1.11	1.82
Mother's Education	1.05	0.12	0.42	0.675	0.83	1.33
Family Income	0.76	0.09	-2.38	0.017	0.60	0.95
Age	0.89	0.08	-1.29	0.196	0.75	1.06
Gender (Female)	0.71	0.19	-1.28	0.202	0.42	1.21
Residence (Urban)	0.51	0.14	-2.52	0.012	0.30	0.87
Constant	1.85	1.52	0.76	0.449	0.37	9.21

Note. The reference category for the dependent variable is “United Kingdom”. Pseudo $R^2 = 0.15$, LR $\chi^2(12) = 35.44$, $p < .001$. $N = 111$.

Key Findings from the Primary Regression

Multinomial logistic regression revealed several significant predictors for preferring China over the United Kingdom. Father’s education was a significant positive predictor ($OR = 1.42$, $p = .005$), indicating that each increase in the father’s education level was associated with a 42% greater likelihood of preferring China. Conversely, both family income ($OR = 0.76$, $p = .017$) and urban residence ($OR = 0.51$, $p = .012$) were significant negative predictors. This means that higher family income and residing in an urban area were associated with lower odds of preferring China over the UK. Mothers’ education, age, and sex were not statistically significant predictors in this model for the China–UK comparison.

Supplementary Quantitative Analyses

Supplementary analyses were conducted to further elucidate the relationships between key socioeconomic variables, providing context for the primary regression model.

Parental Education and Family Socioeconomic Status: A linear regression confirmed that the father’s education was a significant predictor of higher family income ($\beta = 0.349$, $p < .001$), whereas the mother’s education was not ($\beta = 0.070$, $p = .643$). This model explained 11.8% of the variance in income ($R^2 = .118$, $F(2,108) = 7.21$, $p = .001$). An ANOVA further indicated that the father’s education level accounted for 34.2% of the variance in family income ($F(5, 105) = 10.92$, $p < .001$). A Pearson correlation matrix corroborated a strong positive correlation between the father’s education and income ($r = .341$, $p < .001$), with no significant correlation for the mother’s education ($r = .054$, $p = .572$).

Demographic Patterns in Destination Preference: Cross-tabulation and chi-square tests revealed descriptive associations. A significant interaction was observed between sex and age brackets ($\chi^2(5) = 27.3, p < .05$), with a greater proportion of males in the 23-27 age bracket expressing a preference for China. Furthermore, urban residence was strongly associated with a preference for Western destinations (UK/USA), with urban respondents selecting them at 3.2 times the rate of rural respondents ($\chi^2(1) = 35.1, p < .01$).

Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Responses

Reflexive thematic analysis of the open-ended survey responses (N=111) from 102 participants provided crucial context for the quantitative findings, enriching the interpretation of the decision-making process. Four primary themes emerged, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses to Study Destination Choice

Theme	Description & Frequency	Illustrative Quote
1. Scholarship Imperative	The dominant theme, cited by 63% of respondents, was the fundamental need for full financial sponsorship. This was the primary lens through which destinations were evaluated.	<i>"My first and only criterion is a full scholarship. That's why China is my target."</i> (Male, 18-22)
2. Pragmatic Cost-Benefit Calculus	A key driver (45%) was a practical assessment of costs versus perceived benefits, explicitly comparing China's affordability with the UK's cultural and career capital.	<i>"China's lower cost is practical for my family. The UK is prestigious but financially out of reach."</i> (Male, 18-22)
3. Gendered Perceptions of Safety & Field	Gendered considerations were evident. Some female respondents (30%) cited safety, while some male respondents (25%) emphasized China's STEM facilities.	<i>"The UK feels like a safer and more familiar environment for a woman studying alone."</i> (Female, 38-42) <i>"China has better engineering facilities and industry links for my field."</i> (Male, 23-27)
4. Household Negotiation & Paternal Approval	Narratives revealed that securing paternal approval was often a critical final step, contingent on scholarship success, underscoring a gatekeeping dynamic.	<i>"My father only agreed after I secured the Zhejiang University scholarship. Before that, it was just a dream."</i> (Female, 18-22)

Integration with Quantitative Findings:The Scholarship Imperative and Pragmatic Cost-Benefit Calculus themes directly contextualize the quantitative finding that lower family income predicts a preference for China. The theme of Household Negotiation & Paternal Approval provides a plausible social mechanism that aligns with the strong predictive power of fathers' education in

the regression model, suggesting that his role extends beyond socioeconomic proxies to that of an active decision-maker.

DISCUSSION

Interpreting Key Findings in Context

The analyses reveal several notable associations in this exploratory sample of Zambian individuals interested in higher education abroad. Father's education level was positively associated with a preference for China as a study destination, whereas mother's education was not significantly related. This pattern is consistent with studies highlighting the influential role of paternal capital in shaping educational pathways in certain patriarchal contexts (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2011; Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021) and aligns with feminist household models in which male bargaining power dictates major investment decisions (Kabeer, 1999).

Family income also emerged as a significant predictor, with lower-income households having a stronger orientation toward China. The qualitative responses reinforced this by highlighting the imperative for scholarships and affordability, confirming that financial constraints are a primary filter. These findings resonate with recent case study research on international students in Shanghai, which identifies cost-effectiveness and scholarship availability as dominant motivators for choosing China (Zhang et al., 2024). Urban residence was associated with a greater relative preference for Western destinations such as the UK, likely reflecting an informational and network advantage that mitigates the uncertainty of pursuing prestigious, high-cost options (Shields & Kameshwara, 2020). Collectively, these findings illustrate how destination preference is shaped by an intersection of gendered household resources, absolute financial capacity, and spatially unequal access to opportunity.

Theoretical Implications: Patriarchy as a Constitutive Filter in Mobility Models

The quantitative association of fathers' education with destination choice, coupled with qualitative narratives of paternal approval as a necessary final gate, suggests that household influence is not a neutral variable. Instead, it operates as a gendered filter. This invites refinement of push-pull frameworks (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012), which typically list "family influence" without specifying its inner workings. We propose the concept of patriarchal mediation as a constitutive layer that explains *how macrolevel* factors are processed within the household. In this model, fathers, as primary income controllers and authority figures in a patrilineal setting, act as gatekeepers who evaluate the cost-benefit of destinations (e.g., China's affordability) and control the release of funds and information. This mediation determines whether a structural "pull" factor, such as a scholarship, becomes an actionable pathway.

This perspective refines human capital theory (Becker, 1964) for such contexts by specifying that the decision to invest in international education is a gendered intrahousehold negotiation over resource allocation, reflecting

underlying power dynamics (Agarwal, 1997). The initial mediation of the *choice* to move, however, is only the first part of a complex mobility trajectory. The subsequent phase of adaptation in the host country presents its own set of challenges. Research on African students in China highlights that the adaptation process is often characterized by an imbalanced interplay of academic, social, and linguistic demands (Yang & Zeng, 2026), whereas studies on transition more broadly underscore how a lack of institutional support can marginalize students and diminish their sense of mattering (Sharma, 2026). The predeparture household dynamics explored in this study likely set the stage for these subsequent experiences.

Policy Considerations, Limitations, and Future Research

Informed by these findings, we suggest several directions for policy consideration. To address the gatekeeping effect, scholarships and information campaigns could be designed to engage multiple household members (mothers, students, fathers) to reduce reliance on single channels of information. To counter the urban–rural disparity, investing in digital information hubs in rural areas could help democratize access to global opportunities (Abebe, 2021).

This study has important limitations. Its nonprobability sampling strategy limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the networks studied. The cross-sectional design and measurement of “preference” rather than enacted mobility preclude causal claims. The concept of patriarchal mediation, while grounded in theory and suggested by the convergent data, requires direct validation through methodologies capable of unpacking household decision-making processes.

Future research should employ longitudinal and representative designs to trace how intentions translate into mobility and subsequent adaptation. Comparative studies across different cultural and kinship systems (e.g., matrilineal societies) are needed to test the boundaries of the patriarchal mediation framework. Research could also more deeply connect the predeparture mediation process to long-term academic and psychosocial outcomes, building on important work concerning student transition and adaptation (Sharma, 2026; Yang & Zeng, 2026).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the complex interplay of demographic and socioeconomic factors that shape the study destination preferences of a sample of Zambian students, with a particular focus on the growing trend of choosing China over the United Kingdom. By employing a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the research moves beyond descriptive accounts to statistically model the predictors of this choice and qualitatively explore the underlying decision-making processes.

Multinomial logistic regression revealed a distinct pattern: fathers’ education and lower family income were the strongest predictors of a preference for China, whereas mothers’ education was nonsignificant. Urban residence decreased the odds of this preference. These quantitative findings, when contextualized by qualitative themes, especially the “Scholarship Imperative” and narratives of

“Household Negotiation & Paternal Approval,” point to a critical, gendered dynamic within the household. The convergence of this evidence suggests that the pathway to international study is not merely a response to macrolevel push–pull factors but is actively mediated by patriarchal structures within the home. In this context, fathers often act as gatekeepers, controlling financial resources and filtering information, thereby determining which global opportunities become viable.

The primary theoretical contribution of this paper is the introduction and elaboration of the “patriarchal mediation” layer as a necessary refinement to standard student mobility models. This concept, which is grounded in feminist household bargaining theory, provides a mechanism to explain why ostensibly similar economic constraints yield specific mobility outcomes in high-poverty, patriarchal settings. It challenges the homogenized treatment of “family influence” in frameworks such as the push–pull model, arguing instead for a recognition of intrahousehold power dynamics as a constitutive filter of global educational flows.

The implications of these findings are twofold. With respect to theory, they underscore the necessity of contextualizing and gendering mobility models when applied to the Global South. With respect to policy and practice, they highlight the need for equity-focused interventions that look beyond the individual student to engage with the household unit. Initiatives such as multitarget scholarship information campaigns and rural digital outreach could help circumvent patriarchal and spatial filters, thereby democratizing access.

This study, while exploratory, opens several avenues for future research. The proposed concept of patriarchal mediation requires further empirical testing through in-depth household studies and comparative research across different cultural and kinship systems. Furthermore, longitudinal research is needed to trace how these mediated departure decisions influence subsequent adaptation and long-term outcomes, connecting the critical phases of choice, transition, and integration (Sharma, 2026; Yang & Zeng, 2026). Ultimately, by placing the household and the power relations within it at the center of analysis, this research contributes to a more nuanced and equitable understanding of global student mobility.

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None

Some sections, with minimal or no editing

Some sections, with extensive editing

Entire work, with minimal or no editing

Entire work, with extensive editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no financial, personal, or professional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, conduct, or reporting of this study.

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