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Traveling Across Global Divides: Freedom or Barriers to Move?

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ABSTRACT

Citizenship plays a crucial role in shaping migrants' travel freedom. Although those from the Global North typically enjoy easier travel experiences, individuals from the Global South often encounter significant barriers. These include long waits at consulates for visas and potentially stressful interrogations at borders or airports. This article explores how the power of a passport varies based on the issuing country and its impact on both the geographic and professional mobility of passport holders. It also examines the reasons behind visa restrictions in some countries and visa-free travel allowances in others. Through interviews with 45 frequent travelers—both for professional purposes and tourism—the study highlights how visa regulations can redirect travelers to alternative destinations even when policies remain unchanged. The findings have important policy implications for both source and host countries.

1 | Introduction

The image of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old boy whose lifeless body was found on a Turkish beach and photographed by a journalist, quickly became a global symbol of the migrant crisis, and evoked deep collective empathy. Despite his father, Abdullah's, financial means—he had paid 4000 euros (£2500) to a people smuggler—this sum could have been used for a legal flight had Aylan had the necessary documents (Ullah et al. 2024). His death highlights the harsh reality that nationality determines legal access to mobility and employment opportunities. However, standardized visa policies often do not take humanitarian needs into account and deny entry even in life-saving circumstances (Mau et al. 2015; Neumayer 2006; M. Anderson 2000a).

One's journey is shaped by a range of essential documents, including the passport, as well as additional materials such as the purpose of the journey, financial documents, return flight tickets, and accommodation reservations. Although citizens from developed countries travel with little-to-no hassle and pass through immigration controls with fully automated systems such as "e-gates," people from underdeveloped or developing countries, especially from South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, often require a travel visa and have to wait in long queues at the border to satisfy the immigration officer (Czaika et al. 2018).

Human mobility is a key aspect of globalization. In today's world, mobility has emerged as a critical issue due to its widespread occurrence, significant effects, and the far-reaching impacts that it brings (Chattoraj 2020). It revolves around people's aspirations, fears, successes, and struggles, which has significantly influenced international relations, making the topic not only relevant and important but also deeply compelling and engaging (Chattoraj 2020; 2024). Urry (2007, p. 8) defines mobilities as "different types and temporalities of bodily movement." All forms of migration involve movement over space, cultural, and socioeconomic divides, which makes the concept of mobility crucial to our knowledge of the processes

and discourses that relate to both of our movements and understanding of those experiences (Ullah et al. 2024).

Research shows that physical mobility is perceived as a disruption of the stable and structured boundaries of space, territory, and social order (Adey 2004). For instance, airports symbolize areas of mobility, facilitating the transit of millions of people each year (Cresswell 1993). The sprawling airport terminals are carefully designed to facilitate the smooth movement of passengers, baggage, and goods to their destinations.

n this context, passports and visas act as important instruments in regulating and monitoring the smooth flows, ensuring the security and integrity of the countries traversed. Tourists and business visitors from developed countries are prioritized over low-skilled or migrant laborers, reflecting societal norms. However, adopting a relational perspective on mobility, Cresswell (1996) shows that the meaning of mobility is context-dependent, varying across individuals, places, and times. Consequently, the way society welcomes a tourist contrasts sharply with how it treats a migrant (Adey 2004). The most conspicuous manifestations of social distinction lie in the venues through which mobility is regulated. In the foreseeable future, the delineation between desirable and undesirable mobilities will become increasingly evident at borders and airports, where mobility intersects with geographical limits.

Nonetheless, there is a common misconception that skilled and professional workers have an easier time securing overseas jobs and getting their visas processed compared to other groups. Despite legitimate circumstances, incumbents from the Global South face disproportionate hurdles in obtaining visa permits, regardless of skill classification, despite broad disagreement (Lechner and Boli 2015). Although globalization has expanded opportunities (Lechner and Boli 2015), obtaining a visa remains a challenge particularly for people from the Global South. Several foreign employers believe that potential candidates from different countries are unable to attend interviews or accept job offers due to visa issues. Although scholars like Czaika and De Haas (2014) attribute migration to globalization, Ullah et al. (2019) argue that migration, particularly of low- and semi-skilled workers, is primarily driven by skills shortages in destination countries, which creates a need to balance supply and demand.

In order to enter or exit a country, passports and visas always act as important tools for verifying the identity and background of the travelers. Immigration policies and visa requirements are designed to manage the influx of foreign workers, students, and tourists. These regulations are designed to balance the attraction of skilled labor, promote economic growth, and protect domestic labor markets. However, we contend that the strict regulations place a disproportionate burden on the Global South compared to the Global North. The standardized entry requirements and preferential treatment of passports from the Global North are inherently discriminatory and disadvantage people from the Global South who require barrier-free entry, particularly for humanitarian or economic reasons. As a result of these rigid visa policies, citizens from less affluent countries face greater financial and time burdens when organizing travel. This raises a crucial question: How do the regulations and restrictions on mobility through passports and visa policies in the Global South affect migration patterns from this region?

2 | Objectives and Methods

This article seeks to investigate how and why passports are categorized as "strong" or "weak" and what impact this categorization has on the geographical and occupational mobility of passport holders. Visa policies often differentiate between individuals based on the strength of their passport, with stronger passports allowing easier access to international travel and weaker passports imposing greater restrictions. This inequality exacerbates global inequalities by restricting the mobility and opportunities of people from countries with weaker passports, perpetuating economic inequalities and hindering intercultural exchange. Simplifying visa procedures and promoting greater equality of travel opportunities could help to alleviate these problems and promote global inclusion and understanding. To explore the different experiences of passport discrimination, we conducted interviews with people who have gone through different visa procedures in different regions.

Visa policies vary based on passport strength, creating inequality. We examined who benefits and who loses from these restrictions to highlight their unfairness. In doing so, we primarily analyzed the existing visa policies of the different countries. A qualitative approach was chosen for this study, using both primary and secondary data. Between December 2019 and December 2023, primary data were collected through structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews with 45 respondents from South Asia (18), Southeast Asia (15), Africa (8), and Latin America (4) to understand how existing visa policies impact mobility. Primarily, we identified some acquaintances across the globe and had conversations via WhatsApp, Skype, and MST about the purpose of the research. We drew up a list of potential interviewees. We selected them based on their willingness to participate in the study. We tried to match their background with our criteria (e.g., length of stay in the target countries, education and/or skill level, difficulties in obtaining a job and visa, etc.). Most of the interviewees were professionals, academics, or students.

Using a well-developed interview guide, in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants, which ensured that the answers were in line with the research objectives. We began with some general questions—such as age, country of origin, country of residence, nationality, educational and professional background, and number of countries visited—which were then followed by some specific questions such as Where is your home country? When did you move to your current country of residence? And why? Based on their answers, we further asked them questions like Did you apply for a visa? If yes, can you please explain the visa application process in more detail? These questions were followed by: Which other countries have you visited? Please explain the visa application processes. Was it smooth or were there any problems? Did you have to cancel/postpone your trip because of the visa issues?

Our study approach was influenced by the positionality and social distinction in several ways, as personal and social

variables such as race, ethnicity, occupation, socioeconomic, cultural, and political status affect perspectives and experiences. Respondent data were organized, categorized, and analyzed using a systematic approach. To analyze our nonnumerical data, such as the textual data from the interviews, we used qualitative analysis techniques such as content, thematic, and narrative analysis.

This article examines the experiences of migrants from the Global South entering the Global North, focusing on issues related to visas and passports. It highlights the challenges of obtaining visas or travel permits and traveling with weak passports. To ensure the reliability of the research findings, strict measures were implemented. In lieu of interviews, a triangulation strategy was adopted, drawing from multiple data sources, including official documents and existing literature. Expert opinions from practitioners were also gathered to provide valuable insights. While acknowledging the limitation of not being able to conduct direct interviews in the Global North, we compensated through extensive data collection and rigorous methodological approaches.

3 | The Global North and the Global South in Perspective

Geopolitical shifts led to the emergence of new frameworks for understanding global inequalities, particularly with regard to economic and social development since the end of the Cold War in 1991. In this context, the concepts of the Global North and the Global South gained importance as analytical tools in the comparative study of international development (Odeh 2010). These terms replaced earlier binaries such as "First World" and "Third World" and reflect a more nuanced understanding of global divisions that were no longer strictly defined by Cold War affiliations or ideological differences. Instead, the Global North and Global South emphasize the differences between countries in terms of prosperity, political stability, technological progress, and human development. Although the Global North encompasses the advanced industrialized countries, the Global South refers to nations still struggling with the legacies of colonialism, economic dependency, and systemic underdevelopment. These concepts provide scholars and policy makers with a lens through which to examine the structural inequalities that persist in the global order and their impact on development, governance, and international relations. Odeh (2010) identifies four main indicators that differentiate the economies of these regions: politics, technology, prosperity, and demographics. The Global North is generally characterized by democratic governance, technological progress, economic prosperity, and an aging population with near-zero population growth. In contrast, the Global South tends to show contrasting characteristics, such as political instability, limited technological progress, economic underdevelopment, and higher population growth (Odeh 2010). Geographically, the Global North comprises North America, Europe, and North Asia, with Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea often included in this category (Braff and Nelson 2022). In contrast, the Global South includes the formerly colonized countries, particularly in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia (Braff and Nelson 2022). Although the Global North

is associated with prosperity, stability, democratic institutions, and progressive human development, the Global South is often characterized by poverty, conflict, authoritarianism, and institutional deficits, particularly in relation to democratic reform.

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

4 | Foundations of Mobility Control: Visa Regimes and Global Movement

A range of theoretical concepts have been developed to critically examine the role of passports in the broader context of international relations and global mobility. State-centered theory emphasizes the crucial function of the state in determining the strength of passports and assumes that countries with great political influence and well-established diplomatic relations tend to issue passports that offer broader travel privileges (Brabandt and Mau 2013). Hegemony theory assumes that the strength of passports is determined by the influence of dominant powers or hegemons in the international system, with a nation's geopolitical position significantly influencing the mobility of its citizens. The theory of bilateral and reciprocal agreements emphasizes the importance of formal agreements between nations in shaping visa policy and travel access, with mutual recognition of mobility rights playing a central role (Dauvergne 2008). Economic theory attributes the strength of a passport to a country's economic power, claiming that states with strong economies and extensive trade networks tend to offer their citizens greater international mobility. Finally, global governance theory examines the role of international organizations and regulatory frameworks in shaping the strength of passports and recognizes the influence of global institutions in standardizing and regulating the cross-border mobility of individuals.

Ullah et al. (2024) contend that a strong passport is generally defined by the degree of international mobility and access it grants to its holders. In this article, we define a strong passport as one that allows its holders to travel to a significant number of countries either without a visa or with visa-on-arrival privileges,

thereby significantly reducing bureaucratic obstacles to free movement (Dauvergne 2008). The greater the number of countries that can be visited with minimal visa restrictions, the stronger the passport. In addition, a strong passport often includes visa facilitation, that is, if a visa is required, the application process is usually straightforward and involves fewer bureaucratic hurdles. The strength of diplomatic relations between countries and the global reputation and perception of a country play an important role in determining the strength of its passport.

In contrast, a weak passport is characterized by limited travel privileges and significant obstacles to international mobility. Holders of weak passports often face lengthy and complex visa applications with extensive documentation requirements, strict eligibility criteria, and long processing times, restricting their access to many countries. Passports from countries that are politically or economically unstable are often categorized as weak (den Heijer 2018). In addition, weak passports may be linked to travel warnings or recommendations from other countries, further restricting international mobility.

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

In many regions, strict visa regulations are a significant obstacle to legal travel and severely restrict the ability of individuals to migrate through official channels. The visa policies of many countries in the Global North pose significant challenges for citizens of the Global South who wish to obtain the necessary travel documents. These difficulties are due to a range of factors, including economic inequalities, political instability, and heightened security concerns, which are leading countries in the Global North to introduce restrictive entry controls for individuals from less affluent and politically unstable countries.

These visa restrictions not only hinder legal migration but also force many people to take alternative, often unauthorized, routes to reach their destination. The bureaucratic complexity of visa applications, coupled with high rejection rates, fosters frustration and disappointment and drives people toward irregular migration routes. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that there are no legal routes for migration, leaving potential migrants with limited and uncertain options. The imposition of strict visa regimes on citizens of the Global South perpetuates the cycle of irregular migration and emphasizes the urgent need for fairer and more accessible migration policies that take into account the socio-political and economic realities of global mobility.

The inherent differences in the strength of passports between countries of the Global North and South exacerbate the spread of irregular migration. Citizens from countries with "weak" passports, which offer fewer opportunities for visa-free travel and are subject to stricter visa requirements, are more likely to resort to irregular migration to overcome these obstacles. This phenomenon highlights a critical aspect of global mobility regulation, where strict visa policies unintentionally contribute to the persistence of irregular migration by limiting legal opportunities for mobility.

The concept of irregularity in migration is inextricably linked to the robustness of a passport. Strong passports, usually issued by countries of the Global North, allow their holders to travel more freely and with fewer restrictions. In contrast, weak passports, common in the Global South, are associated with strict visa requirements that are often difficult to fulfill, leading people to take irregular routes. This inequality emphasizes the systemic inequalities in global mobility and the role of visa policy in perpetuating these inequalities. By examining the impact of passport strength on migration patterns, the present study sheds light on how the current legal frameworks for passports and visas contribute to irregular migration and provides a critical perspective on the broader impact of global mobility restrictions.

Another perception is that migrants may have difficulties integrating into the social fabric of the Global North due to cultural or religious differences, sometimes accompanied by fears of cultural clashes, social tensions, and challenges related to social cohesion and national identity (Campbell and Crush 2015).

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

Politically, passports and visa restrictions have slowly emerged as important tools of modern regimes to control human mobility (Salter 2006; Finotelli and Sciortino 2013; Czaika and Trauner 2018; Ullah 2010). Until the 20th century, authorities were more concerned with preventing people from moving than with managing migration (Torpey 1998). We recall Samuel Huntington's (1996) seminal assertion that nationalist governments prioritize the interests of their citizens in the name of sovereignty and self-determination at the expense of reducing migration to rich countries (Huntington 1996).

Citizens of the Global South are subject to strict visa regulations (Figure 1) because there is a perception in the Global North that they pose an increased immigration risk. These concerns are often based on fears of visa overstay or potential security threats, particularly in the context of the exponential increase in international migration, which now totals 281 million people or 3.6% of the world's population. In stark contrast to the restricted mobility of many citizens of the Global South, nationals of countries such as Singapore currently enjoy visa-free access to

195 destinations, closely followed by Japan, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, with 192 visa-free or visa-required destinations in 2024 (Henley and Partners 2024). Yet, despite this unprecedented freedom for a select few, the global mobility gap has never been greater since the Henley Passport Index (HPI) began collecting data 17 years ago.

For example, Afghan passport holders at the bottom of the HPI (excluding the variable, temporary COVID-19-related restrictions) have access to just 26 destinations—169 fewer than their Singaporean counterparts. The increasing inequality in global mobility was highlighted with the emergence of the highly contagious Omicron variant in late 2021 (Ullah and Chattoraj 2022), which triggered a series of punitive travel restrictions that disproportionately targeted African countries. The HPI lists passports worldwide by the number of countries passport holders can enter without a visa. According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the average passport holder was able to enter 57 countries without a visa in 2006; this figure has since risen to 107. However, the gap between developed and developing countries is widening: although citizens of countries such as Sweden and the United States can enter more than 185 countries without a visa, citizens from countries such as Angola, Cameroon, and Laos only have access to around 50 countries (TTRW 2022). This growing gap emphasizes the stark inequality in global mobility and the systemic barriers faced by citizens of the Global South (Table 1).
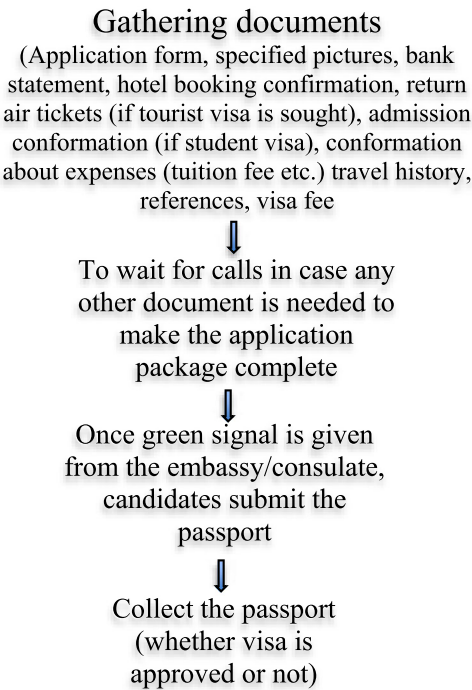
Significant differences in mobility between the Global North and the Global South are evident in both the financial costs and the logistical challenges faced by people from these regions. People in the Global North often do not understand the significant barriers to mobility faced by people in the Global South, whereas people from the Global South underestimate the relative ease with which citizens of the Global North manage international travel. These inequalities are exacerbated by different visa categories such as tourist, student, business, and work visas—which contribute to unequal access to global mobility. For example, US immigration law offers a range of visa options that vary by country of origin and purpose of travel, from permanent settlement to temporary residence. Among the various temporary work visas, the intracompany transferee visa (L-1) and the skilled worker visa (H-1B) are particularly noteworthy, as they are widely used among skilled workers, and each has different mobility restrictions (Hunt and Xie 2019).

The visa application process itself is fraught with challenges. It often takes weeks or months if processed by post and requires in-person attendance at embassies or consulates, which can involve long journeys and long waiting times (Figure 1). In addition, visa applications can be rejected without justification, reflecting a structural imbalance in immigration and travel rights. Citizens of the Global South are far more likely to

Gathering documents

(Application form, specified pictures, bank statement, hotel booking confirmation, return air tickets (if tourist visa is sought), admission conformation (if student visa), conformation about expenses (tuition fee etc.) travel history, references, visa fee

⇓

To wait for calls in case any other document is needed to make the application package complete

⇓

Once green signal is given from the embassy/consulate, candidates submit the passport

⇓

Collect the passport (whether visa is approved or not)

FIGURE 1 | A standard flow of a visa process. *Source*: Ullah et al. (2024).

TABLE 1 | Powerful and weakest passports.

Strongest passports		Destinations	Weakest passports	Destinations
1.	Singapore	195	Sudan	43
2.	France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain	192	Eritrea	42
3.	Austria, Finland, Ireland, South Korea, Sweden, Netherlands, Luxembourg	191	North Korea	41
4	Belgium, Denmark, New Zealand, Norway, United Kingdom, Switzerland	190	Palestinian territories, Bangladesh	40
5	Portugal, Australia	189	Nepal, Libya	39
6	Greece, Poland	188	Somalia	35
7	Canada, Hungary, Malta, Czechia	187	Yemen, Pakistan	33
8	United States	186	Iraq	31
9	Estonia, Lithuania, UAE	185	Syria	27
10	Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Iceland	184	Afghanistan	26

Source: Henley and Partners (2024). https://www.henleyglobal.com/passport-index/ranking.

require visas for international travel than citizens of the Global North, who are less likely to be subject to these restrictions because they are considered to pose a lower risk of overstaying or applying for asylum (Czaika et al. 2018). For states, restricting or strictly monitoring entry is one of the most effective ways to avoid potentially costly obligations to foreign nationals (Torpey 1998, p. 252). Passport and visa controls therefore serve as important tools in this process, acting as a "first line of defense" against the entry of persons deemed undesirable (Neumayer 2006). This emphasizes the role of such procedures in perpetuating global inequalities in mobility and access to international opportunities.

The visa requirement is an important mechanism by which states can regulate the authorized routes of mobility and control the entry and exit of foreigners (Ullah et al. 2024; Torpey 1998). As Finotelli and Sciortino (2013, p. 97) argue, the main objective of many governments in enforcing visa policies is to curb irregular migration. Over the past four decades, about one-third of all bilateral routes have been visa-free, leaving the vast majority—about three-quarters—of bilateral dyads worldwide subject to visa requirements. From 1980 to the mid-1990s, the global prevalence of visa requirements followed a hump-shaped trajectory, with the proportion of visa-required dyads increasing before declining slightly after 2000 (Czaika et al. 2018).

Applying for a visa is often associated with considerable logistical and financial burdens for applicants. Depending on the country, visa fees must be paid in cash or by bank cheque. In many cases, visa applications are not available online, so applicants must visit the embassy or consulate in person to collect the necessary forms. For some applicants, this means traveling to a consulate outside their home country, further increasing the cost and complexity of the process. When applying for a visa, the applicant's passport must also be presented, which is usually retained by the embassy until a decision is made, creating further uncertainty. The processing time for visa applications can vary greatly, ranging from 1 week to several months, adding to the unpredictability and difficulty of obtaining a legal travel authorization. These cumbersome procedures reflect the overall structural inequalities in global mobility, where visa requirements disproportionately affect citizens of certain regions and limit their access to international mobility and opportunities (Figure 2).

The requirement of visas as a prerequisite for entry into a country is a clear example of what Zolberg (2006, p. 443) terms
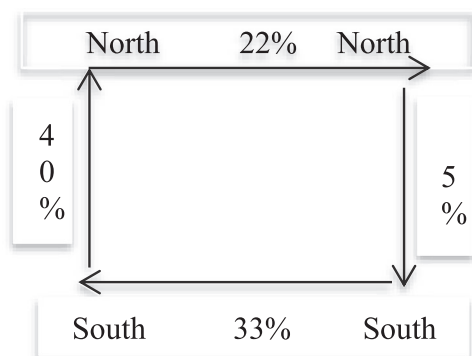

FIGURE 2 | Migration pathways. *Source*: Ullah and Haque (2020).

"remote control," or what Broeders and Hampshire (2013) describe as "pre-emptive mobility governance," where state authorities regulate the movement of individuals before they reach national borders. This form of governance is also closely tied to surveillance mechanisms (Adey 2004), through which governments seek to control and monitor cross-border mobility by preventing unauthorized entry. As Torpey (1998, p. 240), Rygiel (2008), Walters (2006), Ullah et al. (2020), and Whyte (2008) assert, states inherently possess the sovereign right to determine who is permitted to enter their territories and who is not. Visa regimes thus operate as a critical tool of state control, reinforcing national sovereignty by regulating mobility at a distance and ensuring that entry is granted only to those who have received prior authorization.

4.1 | Racial Discrimination and Social Justice

The relationship between visa regulations and mobility restrictions reveals the intersection of ethnicity and racial discrimination within this policy framework. Drawing from critical race theory and postcolonial perspectives, this article demonstrates how visa policies often perpetuate and reinforce global hierarchies rooted in race and ethnicity (Aalbers and Williams 2020). By disproportionately restricting the mobility of citizens of the Global South, these measures function not only as mechanisms of control and exclusion but also as a reflection of the systemic racism embedded in the international order (Aalbers and Williams 2020).

Rosenberg (2023) further examines how racial discrimination persists in visa policies, arguing that states often discriminate against foreign nationals on the basis of nationality when determining visa exemptions. Such discrimination, the author argues, goes beyond rational selection criteria and reveals deeper racial prejudices. Although some forms of exclusion may be justified by the tension between national solidarity and the economic benefits of migration, Rosenberg points out that racial bias in visa policy imposes further restrictions on racially diverse migrants that go beyond considerations of sovereignty or economic rationality. The complex link between racism and these discriminatory practices may be due to implicit bias among decision-makers or electoral incentives that cater to anti-immigrant sentiments.

Sovereignty, particularly in the context of border control, plays a key role in reinforcing national identity by demarcating insiders from outsiders, with outsiders often framed as a threat. As a result, anti-immigrant attitudes are often linked to the exercise of sovereignty, leading to restrictive immigration policies. This discrimination manifests in both unconditional forms rooted in historical inequalities and conditional forms influenced by contemporary racist perceptions, often unconsciously. Although some exclusionary policies reflect attachment to national identity rather than an explicit racial bias, persistent discrimination is rooted in deeply entrenched unequal power relations between the global North and South. To fully understand conditional discrimination in visa policies, one must examine racial perceptions that go beyond economic factors and uncover the implicit racial biases that shape global mobility systems.

When analyzing racial discrimination in visa policy, the question of ethnicity naturally arises. Ethnicity refers to groups defined by others on the basis of perceived physical or social characteristics that are considered innate, although there is no scientific basis for this (Rosenberg 2023, p. 7). As a social construct, ethnicity is shaped by social perceptions and categorizations, not by biology. Locke (Locke, 1924, cited in Rosenberg 2023) describes ethnicity as an "ethnic fiction" and claims that racial categories are sociological and not biological facts (Henderson 2017). Ethnicity thus manifests itself as a "selective preference for certain cultural traits and rejection of others" (Locke, 1924, cited in Rosenberg 2023). Essentially, racial categories are imposed on individuals based on perceptions of their geographical origin and shaped by favorable or unfavorable evaluations of their characteristics.

The construction of ethnicity has both a horizontal and a vertical dimension. Horizontally, ethnicity is constructed through visible characteristics and cultural practices that distinguish groups from one another. Vertically, racial categorization supports hierarchical distinctions in which privileged groups—often White or from the Global North—label non-White or from the Global South as inferior, legitimizing historical injustices such as slavery and imperialism (Barder 2021). Rosenberg (2023) analyzes how racial discrimination works in bilateral visa policy. He argues that states tend to deny visa waivers to those who are perceived as racially different, while favoring those who are seen as racially similar, regardless of their status within the global racial hierarchy. This reluctance to grant exemptions to non-White nations reflects the deeply entrenched norms of global white supremacy.

Rosenberg's work challenges the notion of a color-blind migration policy and shows how racial discrimination persists in international mobility. By examining the bilateral visa waiver system, the study provides compelling evidence of systemic racial bias in visa policy and emphasizes the need to address these inequities in global mobility rights. The study complements existing scholarship on racial discrimination in migration and urges a deeper examination of the impact of ethnicity on policy outcomes and the correction of systemic injustices in the international arena.

5 | Passport Power Dynamics: Key Predictors

According to Ullah et al. (2024), the visa policy is theoretically intended to restrict the entry of people who are perceived as a potential threat. However, the standardized application of this policy often leads to differential treatment based on nationality, socioeconomic status, and geopolitical factors. The disparity in visa access highlights a paradox: although citizens from countries with weaker passports can make a valuable contribution to global society, those from nations with the strongest passports are not immune from causing harm. For example, Anders Behring Breivik, who held a strong passport, carried out a massacre in Norway, and the Christchurch gunman took the lives of 51 people. Despite this, fewer than 40 countries offer visa-free or visa-on-arrival privileges to citizens with the weakest passports, whereas in the past, people from countries with strong passports often posed a significant global threat (Ahsan Ullah et al. 2022). Conversely, people from developing countries are important contributors to global industries such as

tourism and science, with immigrants particularly enriching scientific progress; nearly 40% of Nobel Prizes in chemistry, medicine, and physics awarded to Americans since 2000 have been won by immigrants (S. Anderson 2020b).

Although Japan has a low propensity for international travel, with only about 1.29 million Japanese living abroad (Nippon. com 2024), it holds the second most powerful passports alongside France, Germany, Italy, and Spain (Henley and Partners 2024). Singapore holds the top position in the global passport rankings, allowing its citizens visa-free access to 195 out of 227 travel destinations (Henley and Partners 2024). South Korea shares the third most traveled passport with Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Sweden (Henley and Partners 2024). However, the strength of a passport does not always correlate with citizen satisfaction or retention. For example, in 2015, a record 4279 individuals renounced their US citizenship or long-term residency, marking a 20% increase from the previous year, which had also set a new record, showing that the benefits of the strong passport are underutilized (BBC 2016). Although Japan offers its passport holders access to 192 visa-free or visa-required countries, residents of Afghanistan stand in stark contrast with only 26 such options, representing the largest difference between countries in recent rankings (Henley and Partners 2024).

5.1 | Wealth and Economic Power: Triggers of Disparities

Economic power is an important determinant of passport power, with citizens from countries with higher GDP per capita more likely to have access to visa-free travel. As shown in Figure 3, people from low- and middle-income countries have significantly less access to visa-free zones than people from high-income countries. This pattern can be attributed to two main factors. First, wealthier countries are more likely to have visa restrictions lifted because they expect economic benefits, such as increased trade, tourism, and investment. Second, immigrants from wealthy countries are seen as less likely to overstay their visas or pose a financial burden, whereas immigrants from poorer countries are seen as a greater risk, particularly in terms of illegal immigration. For example, in the early 2000s, the United States excluded Argentina and Uruguay from its visa waiver program for economic reasons (Zarpli and Altundal 2022). Despite being the second-largest economy in the world, China ranks low in terms of passport strength, reflecting the complexity of real-world factors beyond temporary restrictions.

Although many governments have expanded visa waiver programs since 2006, these benefits are unevenly distributed. High- and middle-income countries have generally benefited from relaxed visa requirements, whereas citizens from low-income and politically unstable countries face significant barriers to mobility. Ironically, those most in need of international mobility due to political persecution or poverty struggle the most to obtain visas to safe and prosperous countries (Zarpli and Altundal 2022).

5.1.1 | Governance Instability

The impact of state fragility on freedom to travel is comparable to the impact of higher income, even if it works in the opposite
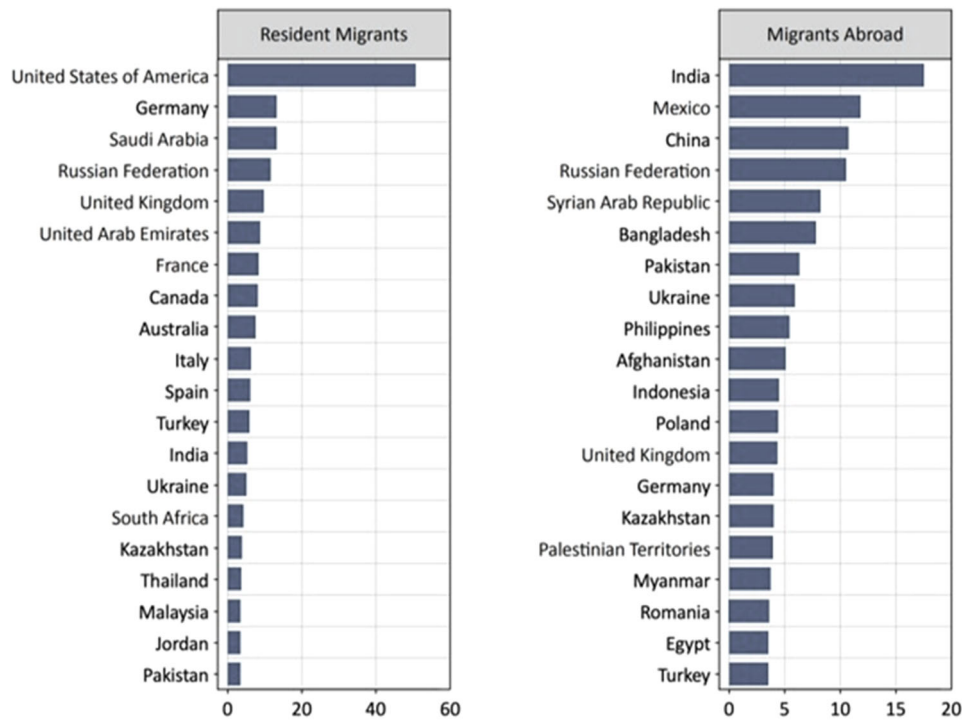
FIGURE 3 | Some host countries (in comparative terms). *Source*: IOM (2020).
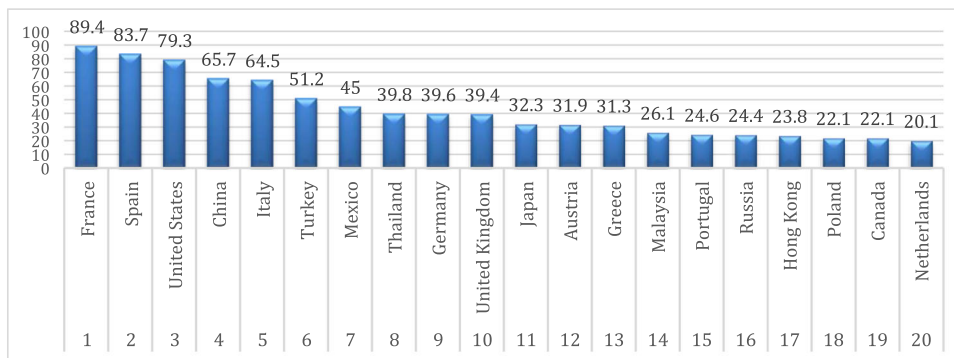
FIGURE 4 | Most visited countries in the world in 2024 (in million). *Source*: Ullah et al. (2024) and WP Travel (2024). Available at: https://wptravel.io/most-visited-countries-in-the-world/ (accessed July 4, 2024).

direction. Key indicators of fragility include elite fragmentation, political legitimacy, and the size of the internally displaced population. Countries characterized by greater political instability are less likely to offer high passport mobility (Figure 4). The most plausible explanation for this is that these countries are perceived as risky in terms of security concerns, potential asylum seekers, and visa overstayers (Zarpli and Altundal 2022).

Unlike other factors, there is no clear correlation between a country's form of government and the strength of its passport. India, for example, the world's largest democracy, ranks 81st in visa freedom, granting visa-free access to 58 countries, whereas most others require a visa (Henley and Partners 2024). However, democracies generally enjoy greater mobility than their authoritarian counterparts. In 2020, democratic nations had an average score of 133 for visa-free travel, whereas nondemocratic states fared significantly worse, with an average of 83. This suggests that although the type of governance is not the sole

determinant of passport strength, democratic systems tend to be associated with broader access to global mobility.

6 | The Spectrum of Mobility: Empirical Insights

We take a close look at the empirical results and analyze them against the background of the relevant theoretical frameworks. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the temporal dynamics and broader implications of the observed mobility patterns. Chemsripong (2016) highlights that 70% of ASEAN labor migrants come from Indonesia (41%), the Philippines (16%), and Vietnam (15%), whereas the remaining 29% come from Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos. Ullah et al. (2019) identify two primary patterns of labor mobility within ASEAN: one centered on the Mekong region, where Thailand receives workers from Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and another with Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia as the main

destination countries for Indonesian and Filipino workers. In fact, more than half of migrant workers in ASEAN countries come from other ASEAN member states—52.9% of Singaporean, 61.2% of Malaysian, and 96.2% of Thai migrant workers come from the region (Ullah et al. 2019). Since 1990, internal migration within ASEAN, particularly from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, has increased by 40% in terms of the total number of nationals working abroad (Ullah et al. 2019; Ullah et al. 2021; Latifi 2020; Ullah and Azizuddin 2022).

These empirical trends underscore the complexity of labor mobility within ASEAN, which is shaped by both regional dynamics and broader migration frameworks. The experiences of prominent figures such as Amartya Sen, who was subject to prolonged controls at the UK Immigration Service despite his status as a professor, and Shah Rukh Khan, who was detained multiple times at US airports, further illuminate the intersection of ethnicity, nationality, and mobility restrictions (Sen 2007; Raj 2016). These examples illustrate how even highly recognized individuals are subject to the broader structural inequalities embedded in global mobility regimes and reflect the nuanced interplay between policy, perception, and practice in the governance of international migration.

We refer to a first-hand experience of another interviewee who was harassed as an immigrant on a domestic flight from Washington D.C.:

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

Africans and Asians are three to four times more likely to have visa problems when traveling on business than Europeans or North Americans (McInroy et al. 2018). This inequality has been further exacerbated by recent policies such as the US entry ban on certain nationalities and the UK's post-Brexit immigration rules (Ullah and Azizuddin 2022). Although some countries allow transit without additional visa requirements as long as travelers have an onward ticket and valid documents for their final destination, others, including Canada, Hong Kong, and the United States, have introduced strict visa requirements for transit passengers, even if they remain on board the aircraft. Such restrictions can have a negative impact on global trade and investment, as travel and tourism account for a significant share of the global economy——9.5% of global GDP, one in 11 jobs, 4.4% of total investment, and 5.4% of exports (Mau et al. 2015).

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

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

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

The stories of some other interviewees were similar.

> My travel plan was for me to travel from Uganda to Panama to serve as co-chair of the Global Young Academy (GYA), a science education and policy organization that advocates for young academics worldwide. Instead, I was stuck at home, doing the paperwork for the next trip and working on a long overdue proposal for a research project on African science leadership. On July 25, I got in touch with the Panamanian consulate near me (in South Africa). I learned that I had to submit my visa application in person, that every page of my passport had to be

photocopied and notarized, that any crossed-out information on a form would invalidate my entire application, and that all my documents, including bank statements, plane tickets and hotel reservations, had to be notarized.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A student living in Geneva with a Bangladeshi passport recalled during one of our interviews that he was treated unfairly at the immigration counters of at least two European airports. The interviewee held a Swiss residence permit, which prevented him from needing a visa to travel within the Schengen Area, a group of 26 countries that have agreed to allow the free and unrestricted movement of people. During a study trip to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Hungary, he was confronted by immigration authorities at the airports of Belgrade and Budapest with long waiting times at checkpoints, unreasonable enquiries, and harsh statements. The study tour group consisted of 26 different countries, and the discrimination became clear when some of his classmates did not have to wait long, whereas others did. Despite having the same Swiss residence permit, students from the Global South (in this case Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, and Nigeria) were discriminated against.

All airlines have a policy of equal treatment. However, the exceptions vary greatly depending on the passport. This is particularly noticeable in times of crisis (flight delays, cancellations, etc.). If a flight is delayed or cancelled for an extended period of time, all passengers are required by law to receive hotel rooms and meal vouchers. However, only a small percentage of guests are allocated a hotel. Passports are used to decide who gets which hotels. When asked about their experiences with the transport, more than five people gave the same answers. At Narita airport in Japan, a plane was delayed for 7 h.

Because I have a South Asian passport, I (and other members of my group) had to wait much longer to be picked up from the hotel than others with passports from wealthier countries. When we arrived at the hotel, we realized that there were no other passengers. We were all

dropped off at the hotel, and we were all from South Asia. We later learnt that the other passengers had been put up in a five-star hotel. High-performing passport holders are put up in a better hotel first, while low-performing passport holders are left behind or put up in a back-packer motel, suggesting that passports are more respected by aeroplanes than by people (or passengers).

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

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

"I got a scholarship to a university in the United States," said one of the many students who responded to us. "When I returned to my home country, I had to apply for a visa to come back. The questions the US embassy asked were unusual at the time. My visa was denied before the outbreak of Covid-19. In February 2021, the consular officers informed me that the visa had been processed and I expected to be able to return to the United States. But the Covid-19 situation worsened. Then the visa restrictions started, and I can no longer return. Worse still, I have not received a salary for over eight months and my university will not pay me because I have been out of the country for more than six months.

Gewin (2020) found similar results in her study of a Harvard University student from Tanzania. Tanzania was added to the list of countries with the most draconian US travel restrictions in January 2020. Tanzanians, for example, are no longer allowed to participate in the diversity lottery to obtain a green card.

One interviewee, seeking an academic position in the United States, believed that the conflict (trade or otherwise) between China and the United States would most likely continue after Trump left office in 2020. He claimed that the US response to the COVID-19 epidemic had affected his confidence in the country. Dreaming of a tenure-track position was already a risky endeavor, as the likelihood of being hired is low due to uncertain immigration policies, making things even more difficult. The United States' ability to recruit well-educated people from around the world was a distinct advantage—an advantage that seems to have been lost.

Another of our interviewees said that he had applied for a job as a history professor in the Middle East. He has a PhD in history from Cambridge University and an excellent academic record. His interview went well, and the interview panel asked about a possible date when he might be available to work for the University. He learned that he was up against another competitor from the West. He began to prepare for the course module at the university in the Middle East. The HR department and the dean had contacted him at this point and asked him to send a copy of his passport and other necessary documents. Two weeks later, he received a letter expressing regret that he could not be offered the position. A few months later, he visited the website of the department where he was to work and realized that his student had been offered the job (Neumayer 2006; Salter 2003, p. 2).

Mobility restrictions and difficulties in crossing national borders seem to be very unequally distributed among people of different ethnicities. The question of who benefits from the disproportionate distribution of visa waivers in different regions and how it changes over time deserves to be discussed and analyzed.

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

7 | Conclusion

The case of Aylan Kurdi, noted at the beginning of this article, underscores the deep connection between visa restrictions and the unequal power of passports. Aylan's fate is a clear example of the obstacles to mobility faced by people from countries with weaker passports and highlights the urgent need for a more equitable global migration policy. Both the existing literature and our interviews show that people from the Global South face the toughest mobility restrictions and are often forced to pay three times more than Western travelers for a visa. This inequality leads to financial strain, demoralization, and loss of motivation, as people from disadvantaged countries face exorbitant visa fees and last-minute flight costs, compounded by harassment and discrimination during the process.

Meanwhile, many wealthier countries are struggling with severe shortages of skilled labor, exacerbated by demographic decline and skills mismatches in the labor market (Ullah et al. 2019, 2021). A significant proportion of global migrants, around 40%, came from Asia in 2019, with India, China, and South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan contributing the largest numbers (IOM 2020). Of these migrants, almost two-thirds lived in high-income countries, whereas one-third lived in middle-income countries and only 13 million lived in low-income countries (UNDESA Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017; OECD/ILO 2018; Ullah and Haque 2020).

The visa requirement, which is often seen as a catalyst for global isolationism, has far-reaching consequences for international mobility and economic interdependence. Efforts to counter this, such as South Africa's proposed 10-year visa for academics and the UK's highly skilled graduate recruitment initiative, reflect ongoing attempts to address the talent shortage. However, although programs such as the UK's Global Talent Visa aim to attract skilled individuals, researchers face additional barriers alongside visa-related challenges, including limited work opportunities, financial constraints, access to research equipment, and mentorship. Although visa-related issues are complex, they are easier to address compared to these broader barriers to mobility.

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