

Moving from Latin America to Germany: Culture shock and challenges faced by a geoscientist family

Liseth Pérez | Matthias Bücker



Images: M- Bücker and L. Pérez

Dr. rer. nat. Liseth Pérez

Aquatic Ecologist working in Neotropical lakes. Originally from Guatemala, a developing country with numerous aquatic ecosystems that are threatened by human impacts. My research focuses on the long-term history of Neotropical aquatic ecosystems, and how they are responding to recent climate and human influences. Such studies are essential to conserve and manage tropical water bodies and I have been involved in many (paleo) limnological investigations in Mexico and Central America.



Age: 38 | 2 children | married

Scientist at the Institute of Geosystems and Bioindication, TU-Braunschweig, Germany

Publications: <https://scholar.google.de/citations?user=6q1vqhAAAAAJ&hl=de>

Member of

OSWD: Organization for Women in Science for the Developing World

KFG: Commission for equality, TU-Braunschweig

500WS: 500 Women Scientists

Image: Geotem, 2018

Dr. rer. nat. Matthias Bücker

Geophysicist. Originally from Germany. My research interests include geoelectrical and electromagnetic methods, pore-scale modelling of the electrical properties of geological media and, in particular, the induced-polarization phenomenon.



Age: 37 | 2 children | married

Scientist at the Institute for Geophysics and extraterrestrial Physics, TU-Braunschweig, Germany

Publications:

<https://scholar.google.de/citations?hl=de&user=jSIvaxsAAAAJ>

Image: A. Flores Orozco, 2019

Our kids

Lara Isabella (Age: 7) | Jonas Andreas (Age: 2)

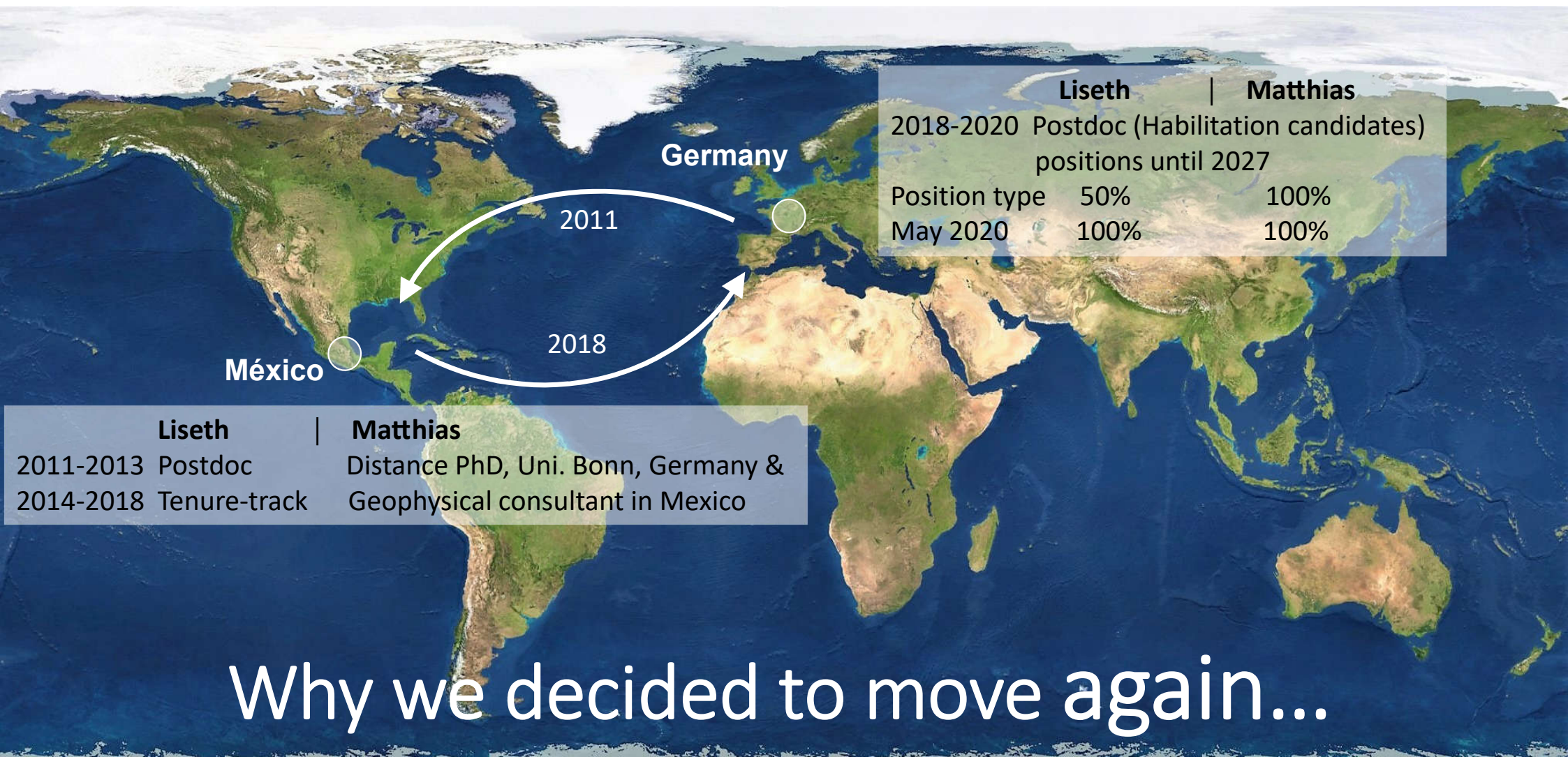


Image: L. Pérez, 2019

Our geoscience family



Images: M. Bucker and L. Pérez



Why we decided to move again...

Personal reasons

- A better life quality (pollution, insecurity)
- Closeness to kids' grandparents

Laboral reasons

- A top destination for geoscientists
- A variety of funding research agencies

- More options for cooperation initiatives between Latin America and Germany

Changing country of residence is very challenging, and such challenges are **amplified** if one has **small children**, and especially if **both parents are active researches**.



Culture shock is often expected to be severe when moving from Europe to a developing country like Mexico or Guatemala.

However, we experienced the opposite.

Problem

1. Insufficient childcare options in Germany: Our University had 3 daycares, which were full. The waiting list was really long.

Consequences

- One of us always forced to work during late afternoons, evenings, and weekends. Extremely exhausted parents, who could have a negative impact on both family and work activities (paper and proposal writing, teaching).
- Many families decide to hire a private nanny (more expensive) or a „Tagesmutter“ and parents need to make a “casting-contest” to get a space. If parents continue finding such solutions, universities might believe they do not have a problem anymore.

Solutions

- Universities should always save some places for children under 4 years from new international families (sometimes this happens spontaneously). Important now that many European universities want to become more international. Women and dual career couples should have priority.

Insufficient childcare options in Germany

- In Mexico and Guatemala most women want to and have to work. Older generations motivate young women to combine family and career. This is what we learned from our mothers and aunts, who showed us how to succeed.
- Gender disparity in science is larger in Germany (only 28% female researchers, UNESCO, 2018, see slide Nr. 17). German women often fear family's impact on career and only few return back to work.
- In Mexico and Guatemala, there are plenty of daycares and preschools with open spaces and parents can even choose a particular philosophy (Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, etc.).
- Contrasting the situation in Germany where parents are often just happy if they find any place!



Image: L. Pérez, 2020

Problem

2. Cultural differences at work, such as family-“unfriendly” scheduling of important meetings.

Consequences

- Less opportunities to participate in meetings for discussion and decision making.
- Stress and frustration.
- You feel punished for having chosen to have a family. Many ignore that this is a service for our future society. Kids are our future legacy and they will be important components of our future society.

Solutions

- Communicate your interest to participate and ask for a change of scheduling. Explain the reason.
- Group leaders and advisors play a fundamental role. They should be supportive and understanding. Make sure to establish good communication with them.

Problem

3. Lack of flexibility with respect to financial support for families whose members participate in professional symposia or fieldwork.

Solution

- Universities and/or funding agencies should have „mobility grants“ to allow taking your young kids on field trips and congresses. The official „Equality Plan“ of the TU-Braunschweig mentions it, however, there are no funds.

Consequences

- Researches need to pay for the children costs (hotel, flight tickets). In our case, both parents are researchers and when traveling together for a joint field campaign or congress (e.g., offline EGU), you cannot leave your kids alone!
- In 2018, we had 3 international trips (Austria, Guatemala, and Mexico) and we paid for the 4 of us!



Image: J. Gallistl, 2018

Problem

4. Policies of granting institutions and scientific unions organizing congresses (EGU, AGU) that sometimes, unintentionally, preclude family-friendly work in academic research.

Consequences

- Sometimes there are deadlines the week right after Christmas and New Years vacations, which forces parents to work and neglect family quality time.
- The same happens for deadlines during the school vacations in summer.

Solutions

- The equality committees from granting institutions and scientific unions should try to avoid this by checking important periods for families.
- Organizing committees of congresses should continue providing child care. Both parents attending and women should have priority.



Image: L. Pérez, 2019

Problem

5. Universities are building strong programs through internationalization of the faculty.

Solution

→ Universities need to consider the needs of families of incoming foreign researchers and actively support dual-career professional couples (also at the postdoc level and before).

Consequences

→ Frustration from dual-career professional couples that have to face several limitations of international and family programs in German universities.



Image: IGeo, 2018

Our IGeo institute at the TU-Braunschweig is highly international

Problem

6. Most initiatives supporting women in science are ignoring experienced women that have not yet become professors or research group leaders (Age: 35-45)

Solution

- Create more grants, scholarships, prizes for women that are not considered ECR (Early Career Researches) anymore.

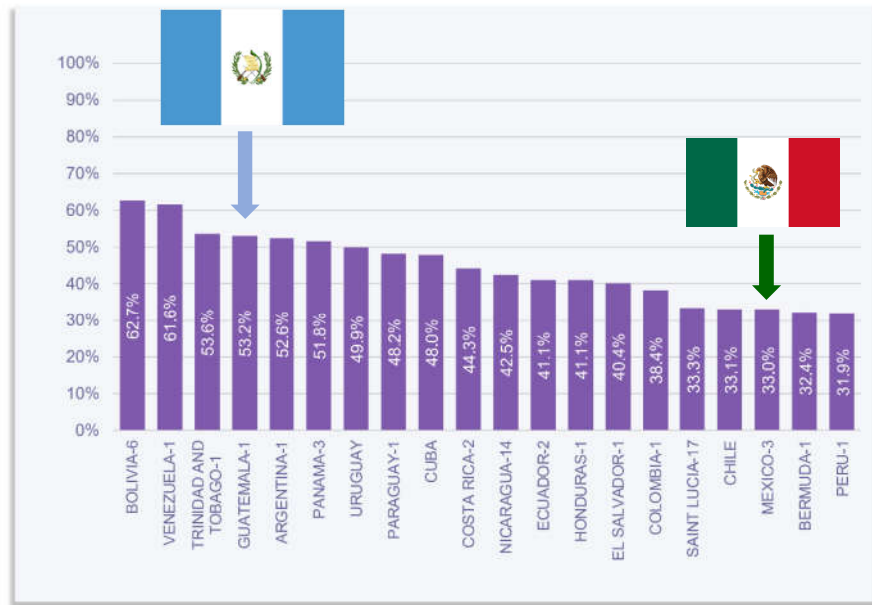
Consequences

- Women that have more than 1 postdoc, and children are not getting enough support or recognition.
- If the situation coming back from parental leave is harsh and challenging then no wonder that only few women become research group leaders.
- It is not enough to over-motivate young postgraduate female students if child care is insufficient once you are ready to go back to work.
- There are programs recognizing the labor of female professors, and little or none for habilitation candidates or postdocs.

Our personal experiences may help to elucidate why the gender disparity in science is larger in wealthy, central European countries such as Germany (28.0% female researchers) than in many Latin American countries, such as Mexico (33.0%) and Guatemala (53.2%).

Figure 2. A breakdown of female researchers in the Americas

Female researchers as a percentage of total researchers (HC), 2016 or latest year available

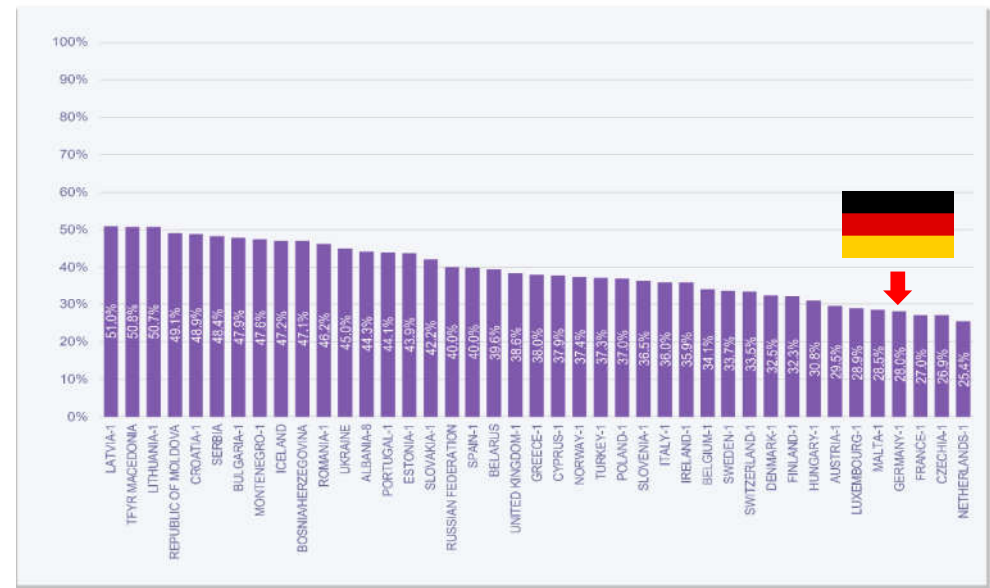


Notes: -1 = 2015, -2 = 2014, -3 = 2013, -6 = 2010, -14 = 2002, -17 = 1999.

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2018.

Figure 3. A breakdown of female researchers in Europe

Female researchers as a percentage of total researchers (HC), 2016 or latest year available



Notes: -1 = 2015, -8 = 2008.

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2018.

(UNESCO, 2018)

Final thoughts and recommendations

- Insist and be persistent. Rarely, university administration solves your problems immediately. Talk about your problem to all departments and offices that you believe could help you.
- Attend to workshops organized by your university and participate actively. Share your problems, experiences and possible solutions.
- If you want to make a change, become a member of the equality and family committees of your university and local and international organizations.

Even though, we have encountered several problems, we are lucky to have

Prof. Dr. Antje Schwalb and Prof. Dr. Andreas Hördt as bosses.

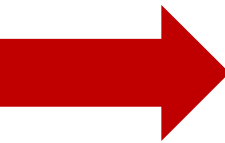
They have supported us during this challenging time by being flexible and understanding.

Having a good communication with your bosses and advisors is fundamental.

Effects of the Corona outbreak on the careers of women geoscientists



- Many scientist women around the world are working less, because of lack of child care for an extended period (often, delivering emergency family services is still a mother's job).
- Children (>6 years) will start school in May/June in the state of Lower Saxony, where we live. However, preschools and daycares will not open before August for children <5 years.
- Even though dual-career couples (like us) are equally working and taking care of kids at home, this will definitely have a negative impact on both parents' and in particular women's CVs (about ½ of the normal time for paper and proposal writing, funding agencies cutting funds/ cancelling calls, experiments and analysis in the laboratory are being extremely delayed).

 *Should we highlight in our CVs the unproductive 2020 due to Corona? as well as years when our children were not still at school and childcare was insufficient?
Will committees consider this as “valid” during job interviews?*

By sharing our story we want to motivate all dual-career researchers and, in particular, women to continue in science and find solutions to build and improve family-friendly universities and research institutions.



Images: L. Pérez

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Feel free to contact us!

Thank you!