

SOCIUS/CSG Working Papers

Women in international careers: at the crossroads of barriers, challenges and opportunities

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Nº 01/2016

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Abstract:

This article seeks to expand the knowledge available on the motivations, constraints, opportunities and experiences of women occupying international managerial positions, either as expatriates or in autonomous professional projects. A qualitative methodology was adopted. A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with women in international careers. Family-related factors are the most common barriers to women taking advantage of opportunities and experiences abroad. Inspired by an earlier article (Mathur-Helm, 2002), women's international managerial experiences are represented here as standing at a crossroads, at the point of intersection of different, challenges and opportunities. The decision to move abroad and the mobility process are experienced as a complex and ambivalent path: a *crossroads* where both positive and negative paths intersect with each other and a *labyrinth* where pleasures derived from work, self-fulfilment, work-family conflicts and personal pain are closely intertwined in their experiences.

Keywords: women, expatriates, international careers, barriers, challenges, opportunities

1. Introduction

Companies have globalised their business activities and managerial international assignments have been increasing, in the current context of globalisation and domination of multinational corporations (MNCs) (Altman and Shortland, 2008); however, the discrepancy between the number of women and men involved in such experiences remains very noticeable (Insch *et al.*, 2008). According to the *Global Relocation Trends – 2012 Survey Report*, women accounted for 20 per cent of the total assignees.^[1] Even though there is evidence of an expatriate glass ceiling or glass border, studies have shown that women are as willing as men to pursue international careers. This article seeks to expand the knowledge available on the motivations, constraints, opportunities and experiences of women occupying international managerial positions. The literature on this topic has been increasing since the 1980s, but it is still a domain where there is scope for extending our understanding about the gender imbalances among expatriates and independent international managers. It results from a qualitative-based research carried out in Portugal, in which 20 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with women in foreign assignments. Besides the contribution that this study brings to the still scarce body of literature on the subject, it is worthwhile noting that it is particularly innovative in the Portuguese context, as no other research focus on women had been carried out before. There are no national statistical data on the number of men and women in international managerial positions. A little more is known, however, about their low representation in senior management positions: at the European level, the country ranks poorly in terms of the presence of women in the highest decision-making bodies. In 2013, women only amounted to 9 per cent of the total members represented in the highest echelons of the top 18 publicly quoted companies, and none of them were working as CEOs.^[2] This article^[3] is divided into three sections. Firstly, the core literature and concepts are reviewed in order to systematize the existing theoretical and empirical insights. The main aim is not to elaborate on an exhaustive literature review, but rather to select the contributions most directly related with the focus of our research. Secondly, an overview of relevant national statistics is presented, followed by the methodological approach, the analysis and discussion of the main qualitative data, and the concluding notes

2. The expatriate glass ceiling and the glass border: metaphors as conceptual tools

The first studies on the topic can be traced back to the 1980s where the main focus was on the underrepresentation of women in expatriation processes and on the main barriers faced by them versus the opportunities experienced by their male colleagues. In order to fully understand the phenomenon, two metaphors have been used: *glass border* and *expatriate glass ceiling*. Both

^[1] Report available at <http://espritgloballearning.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/2012-Brookfield-Global-Relocations-Trends-Survey.pdf> (access on 10 July 2014).

^[2] Database available at: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/gender-decision-making/database/business-finance/supervisory-board-board-directors/index_en.htm (access on 14 July 2014)

^[3] The title was inspired in Mathur-Helm (2002).

seek to illustrate the invisible organizational barriers that prevent women not only from reaching the top managerial positions in their national settings (glass ceiling) (Hymowitz and Schellhardt, 1986), but also from being selected to international assignments as expatriates (expatriate glass ceiling) (Insch *et al.*, 2008) and from pursuing an international career (glass border) (Linehan and Walsh, 1999).

However, despite the heuristic potential of both concepts, our view is that they do not readily capture the complex web of constraining forces. For this reason, the *labyrinth* metaphor, proposed by Eagly and Carli (2007) is particularly enlightening for our research. It maps the intertwining relationship between different sources of constraints, and encourages us to look at women's lives/trajectories in a more comprehensive way, bringing together the organizational, family-related, societal-based and individual constraints. When observing career-trajectories, women's lives can be compared to a labyrinth – a very complex route, a complex network of pathways, full of walls all around, of intricate crossroads and conflicting paths, of twists, turns and blind alleys.

The revision of some of the most important theoretical and empirical contributions enables us to see these metaphors as relevant and complementary conceptual tools for our analysis. The studies by Nancy Adler are among the seminal contributions on the subject. In observing the career plans of male and female MBAs graduating from top universities, she questioned the myths about the low presence of women in international managerial positions and refuted the individualistic explanations. Her study contradicted the argument that women are less interested than their male colleagues in pursuing an international career, as no differences were found between the female and male graduates. However, according to their perceptions, men were given more opportunities of being selected for an international assignment than for women (Adler, 1984).

The individualistic arguments are found among career development, human capital and preference theorists. The underrepresentation of women in international managerial careers is explained on the grounds of the attitudinal barriers that prevent them from applying for such positions (Tharenou, 2009), as women are inherently less ambitious and less career-oriented than men (Sullivan, 1999; Hakim, 2000). They are also seen as lacking the required human capital (skills, knowledge, managerial experience and social networking) to be selected for senior positions. On the contrary, men are more likely to possess the human capital that sustains a higher productivity and a better performance. Managerial policies and practices are objective, gender-neutral, rational and non-discriminatory, explaining the recruitment of male workers for the most strategic, higher-status occupations and the respective compensation with higher payments, promotions and better career opportunities (Becker, 1993).

Individual-level explanations, however, fail to take into account the structural elements that reproduce systemic gender inequalities, the reasons why women have fewer opportunities and resources and, sometimes, less motivation to strive to achieving visibility and positions of power (Orser and Leck, 2010). They also fail to explain why women, even when they are as qualified as men (or over-qualified), tend to experience fewer career opportunities than their male counterparts (González Menéndez *et al.*, 2012; Muir, Wallace and McMurray, 2014). Some scholars have laid emphasis on the structural dimension underpinning systemic gender inequalities (Orser and Leck, 2010) and other locations in the social structure (such as social class and ethnicity), reflected in different regimes of inequality in organizations (Acker, 2006).

In this regard, gender inequalities are described as systematic disparities between men and women in “power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes; workplace decisions such as how to organize work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect; and pleasures in work and work relations” (Acker, 2006, p. 443).

Societal-level explanations locate individuals and organizations within the wider social, political and economic structures (González Menéndez *et al.*, 2012). Gender-typed socialization processes are particularly examined, as they shape both the individual options and aspirations and the managerial assumptions regarding women and men as employees. Gender stereotypes have also been documented as powerful barriers; female workers end up having less career opportunities due to the “think manager, think male bias”. According to the dominant stereotype, women in general do not fit into the *male-typed* executive role, being rather perceived as less career-oriented due to a strong commitment towards family duties (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Tharenou, 2008). Moreover, they also account for the reason why managers tend to be reluctant to selecting women for international assignments on the grounds that they will experience prejudice, resistance, and not be accepted in host countries (Israeli *et al.*, 1980), even if that perception is a myth rather than a real issue (Adler, 1984).

Regarding the structural constraints, gender imbalances in domestic/caring responsibilities also limit women’s availability to invest in their careers and in social capital (as the labyrinth metaphor seeks to illustrate). The prevailing asymmetries in domestic and caring responsibilities increase the total burden of work for women and in many cases limit the time available to invest in further training opportunities and in their careers, the time available to spend on social networking and to be geographically mobile. Moreover, the absence of a favourable gender equality policy framework, also reflected in the lack of childcare services (Insch *et al.*, 2008) in some societies, also needs to be taken into account.

Furthermore, many studies have stressed the constraints located at the organizational level (structures, work organization, culture) – illustrated by the *glass ceiling* metaphor. The role of HRM policies in constraining women’s career opportunities abroad and the success of their international experiences has also been pointed out (Forster, 1999; Linehan and Walsh, 1999). Traditional organisational cultures prevent women from being promoted to positions requiring greater career investment and commitment. The dominant organizational culture is embedded in a masculine ethos, meaning that the prevailing formal and informal norms, the institutionalized and the informal social practices tend to rely on the traditional representation of the ideal worker – the male breadwinner, totally available, professionally visible, committed to his career, and freed from family/care responsibilities (Wajcman, 1998; Rapoport *et al.*, 2002; Lewis and Humbert, 2010). This idealized model is associated with not only long-hours, 24 hour commitment, but also geographical mobility (round the clock and round the world commitment) (Wittenberg-Cox and Maitland, 2008).

Linehan and Walsh (1999) found out that organisations tend to be inflexible in their demands, instead forcing the family to be flexible in responding to organisational demands. As a consequence, on the one hand, for many highly-qualified women, the work-family conflict is so overwhelming that they downgrade their career aspirations or sometimes even drop out, in a process that has been described as “the hidden brain drain”, meaning that an important pool of talented, educated, skilled women are not fulfilling their full potential in the

management and decision-making processes across the business sector (Hewlett and Luce, 2005). Such an outcome is also reinforced by the empirical evidence that either top management or international positions are mostly filled by men, and the subjective perception that they will not get there, regardless of their own commitment and qualifications. Accordingly, the lack of female role models, the exclusory homosociability embedded in social networks, have also been described as constraining factors (Linehan and Walsh, 1999), along with social isolation, close scrutiny, the double bind dilemma and a range of hurdles even when apparently the “glass ceiling” has been broken (Kanter, 1997[1977]). On the other hand, managers and human resource managers tend to select, assess, promote and reward according to the traditional dominant assumption on the ideal worker, normally the one to be selected or appointed to an international managerial position is a man. In this debate, organizations are seen as not gender neutral, but as inherently *gendered* – with gender being acknowledged as a fundamental element of organisational structure, culture and practice. Therefore, gender assumptions are embedded in the dominant culture, the organizational structure, working time policies, the work organization, as well as in selection, recruitment, rewarding, development and promoting criteria and procedures (Acker, 1990; Wajcman, 1998; Britton 2000).

The focus on organizational-level constraints has sought to provide explanations for the so-called glass-ceiling phenomenon - the lack of women in senior positions, but also searched for the reasons why women are less likely to be appointed or selected for managerial positions overseas. Interestingly, studies have also shown that there seems to be a cycle-effect, as having an international managerial experience is seen as a fundamental condition for reaching the top managerial positions in their domestic settings (Insch *et al.*, 2008). This means that the glass ceiling seems to reinforce the glass border and vice-versa (Altman and Shortland, 2008).

This debate has also benefited from the influence of more recent approaches that emphasize women’s agency. Women’s decisions to move abroad are not only shaped by their social circumstances (labour market opportunities, social class and family conditions), but also the search for fulfilment and emancipation (Ramos and Martín-Palomino, 2015). Furthermore, in light of the constructivist approaches, The *firewall* metaphor aims to capture the way in which gender inequalities are produced and reproduced through daily work routines, social interactions, narratives (Bendl and Schmidt, 2010), and, as far as expatriate processes are concerned, it can also help in understanding gender inequalities. Organizations are seen as social constructions, and relevance is given to the actors involved in the construction process, to the way in which gender inequalities are produced and reproduced through daily work routines, social interactions, narratives, symbols and language, in a fluid and dynamic way (Acker, 2006). Gender is seen as a dynamic, inter-relational element with potential for being constructed (doing gender), reproduced in daily interactions, but also negotiated and contested (Fletcher and Ely, 2003).

3. Women on the move? Contradictory trends in Portuguese Society

In Portugal, with democratic revolution, in 1974, equality between women and men was finally enshrined in the Portuguese Constitution, with women acquiring the same civil rights as men in 1976. Since then, investment in formal education has been noticeable. In 1970-71, women amounted to just one third of those with a university degree, in the 1980s they were already 50 per cent, and according to the latest data available (2010-2011), they now represent 60 per cent of all graduates, nearly 64 per cent of those with a master's degree and 55 per cent of those with a PhD (CIG, 2013; Chagas Lopes and Perista, 2010).

The dual full-time breadwinner model is the dominant one in Portugal, involving about 57.9 per cent of household arrangements (Casaca, 2012, 2013). Until the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis, women's employment rate was situated above the average level for the EU. In 2008, it was registered as 62.5 per cent, whereas the EU27 average was 60.1 per cent. Reflecting the impact of the severe labour crisis in the country, according to the latest data available (for 2013), the women's employment rate is now 58.2 per cent and the EU average is 58.8 per cent. Interestingly, Portugal has displayed an employment rate that is far higher than those found in the other countries with which it is frequently grouped together, due to certain socio-economic similarities, namely the so-called Southern European countries: Spain, Greece and Italy, the rates are 49.7, 40.1 and 46.5 per cent, respectively ^[4](Casaca and Damião, 2011).

There are historical and socio-economic reasons for the relatively high levels of Portuguese women's participation in the labour market. It was prompted, in the 1960s, by the shortage of male workers due to the massive recruitment for the colonial war and male-dominated emigration flows; the need to contribute to family incomes. Since the revolution (1974), other factors may account for the trend towards an increasing female participation in employment, such as the development of the public administration sector (health, education and social security), the higher level of women's formal education, previously mentioned, and the effects of a family socialisation process based on a dual full-time breadwinner model (e.g. Casaca and Damião, 2011; Torres et al., 2004).

Portuguese women tend to not interrupt their labour trajectories after childbirth and also tend to be involved in intensive working time regimes, as about 85 per cent work on a full-time basis (Casaca, 2012).

Since 2007, the National Action Plans for Gender Equality have incorporated concrete measures, including financial incentives, to encourage the promotion of gender equality in the business sector and in all organizations in general. A recent 2012 Government Order made it mandatory for state-owned companies to implement gender equality plans, and the publicly listed companies were also strongly recommended to put in place policies and practices to tackle gender imbalances, including top management. Public policies have been far ahead of social representations and practices. Studies have also shown that women in particular have been the most penalized group in terms of job opportunities and career prospects, due to the

^[4] Eurostat, Labour force Survey, women 15-64 years old. Access on 29.5.2014.

prevalence of discriminatory practices, unfriendly organizational cultures and traditional managerial approaches (Casaca, 2013).

Despite the important strides that have been made in public policies, education and labour market participation, the under-representation of women in management positions is noticeable. Women represent about one third (33.9 per cent) of the total managers (all levels and all sectors of activity).^[5]

In the civil service, they amount to 35 per cent of the highest managerial positions (Directors), but only 26 per cent of women are actually running public bodies (CIG, 2013). In comparison with men filling the same managerial positions (all levels, all sectors of activity), data show that women are younger (average: 43.3, whereas the total average among managers is 45) and more qualified (36.1 per cent hold a university degree, whereas the percentage of men in a similar situation is 27.4) (INE, 2013, p. 6). Female managers are less likely than male managers to be found in a marital (or similar) situation (66.1 per cent and 74.9 per cent, respectively), and more likely to be single or divorced (INE, 2013, p. 7).

As far as the largest publicly listed companies are concerned, the scenario is even more gender-asymmetrical, with Portugal filling one of the lowest positions in the EU in relation to the representation of women among board members – only 11% (and none of them holds a CEO position, in 2015).

4. Women as expatriates and in international management positions: Research findings

Methodological note

The main findings discussed in this section result from twenty in-depth interviews conducted with women filling managerial positions abroad (outside Portugal) either as expatriates or involved in autonomous experiences of global mobility.

Using the professional network LinkedIn, the support of other sources (such as some international organizations for women's leadership) and contacts previously established during seminars and conferences on equality and diversity in corporate management, a list was compiled of women filling international managerial positions. After this, an individual e-mail was sent out with information about the research project and an invitation to participate in the study. Once their consent has been obtained, the

^[5] Data provided by the Census 2011, INE (2013: 6).

interviews were scheduled. Nineteen interviews were conducted through Skype, as participants were working abroad, and only one was conducted in person as the interviewer was in Lisbon at the time. The interviews had an average length of ninety minutes and took place in 2012.

The interviewees are aged between twenty-seven and forty-eight years old. All of them have higher education in areas such as Management, Economics, Accounting, Marketing, Psychology and Pharmacy. Only one of the interviewees is not involved in a mobility process, being the only testimony in the study that refers to a recent past experience. All the others hold managerial positions outside Portugal. While most women's experiences of managerial positions have occurred within the EU, we also gathered testimonies from professionals whose experiences took place in North and South America (USA, Mexico, Colombia), Africa (South Africa, Angola, Algeria), Asia (Singapore and Malaysia) and Australia.

Women as expatriates

Twelve interviewees stated that their work abroad has been conducted within the same organization. Global mobility is perceived as a common practice within their companies, where international experience as "expatriates" is valued and encouraged by senior management. This fact, along with the professional challenge and the positive influence on their career development and advancement, is the main reason given for choosing an international career. However, it should be noted that it is not so clear whether they were genuinely willing to be expatriates or – as some studies have highlighted in relation to expatriates in general – "felt somehow compelled to do so by their employing organizations" (Pinto, Cardoso and Werther Jr., 2012: 2309), in order to not compromise their careers advancement.

A greater diversity in terms of career opportunities, recognition and career advancement are often mentioned as incentives to keep pursuing experiences abroad. Moreover, the more international experiences that women have, the more likely they are to be invited to take up other international assignments. The interviewees relate their international exposure to a greater pool of career prospects available, which they also link to more networking opportunities. All of them relate their participation in international mobility to their professional development.

One of the expatriates, who has relocated to Mexico, emphasized the availability of broader career opportunities in countries where the economy is growing. Simultaneously, when questioned about the main barriers that women face when in international positions, the interviewees identified the characteristics of the country of destination as one of the potential challenges, not because of the women's willingness or not to relocate to those countries, but because of some companies' reluctance in selecting women for missions in problematic/insecure countries:

In Portugal I was in charge of the global mobility programme and to be honest I don't think that the opportunities between men and women are different but, in terms of challenges that one might face in the country of

destination there might be a difference. If a woman relocates alone, she might face some... I wouldn't say discrimination but, being a woman and alone, she might be perceived as someone who needs help (...). But I think things are changing and in my case I didn't feel any discrimination. (Alice, Senior Consultant, relocated to Angola)

This opinion about the way in which women are perceived and how it influences their mobility was expressed by one of the participants in the study, Sara, who relocated to Bogotá. She states that some of her colleagues and superiors show concern for her safety sometimes, a situation that she associates with her gender and the way in which women are socially perceived. Expatriates often work in multicultural/international environments, where teams are composed of professionals from diverse origins. The interviewees working in these contexts recognize a need to constantly keep in mind those cultural differences while interacting with their co-workers, but they also mention a sense of empathy among expatriates. Along with the organizational support associated with their relocation, the women interviewed consider that their familiarity with the organizational culture and the similarity between the home and the host organizational units can help smooth the adjustment process. Expatriates with more than one international assignment acknowledge that the accumulation of mobility experiences gradually facilitates their adaptation to each different context.

The lack of women in some industries and in top management can also impact on their international experiences. One of the interviewees explained that during the initial stage of her expatriate assignment in the USA, some of her co-workers were surprised by the fact that she was a woman working in male-dominated industry (e.g. videogames/IT):

They were surprised that a cutting-edge technology company had a young woman as its representative... I don't know if it is a common situation with other women in this type of function or not but I felt that, which led me to invest even more in a super professional attitude...and have a work ethic beyond what was expected. (Rafaela, International Advertiser Operations Associate in an IT company, relocated to the USA)

It was also mentioned that the integration process can be more complex for women in senior positions. The smaller number of women and their low visibility in leadership positions can produce challenges for women international managers, especially in contexts where gender asymmetry in top management is more pronounced and where it is not common for women to occupy such positions.

As a shared barrier to both women's access to top management and international mobility, work-family conflict is perceived by the participants as one of the main challenges for women. The interviewees recognized the impact that family responsibilities can have on the decision to relocate and on their professional experiences abroad. At the time of their mobility, only one expatriate (Beatriz) had children, half (six out of twelve) were single or divorced and the others were living with their husbands/partners in the country of destination (See Annex). Within this latter

group, two husbands decided to interrupt their careers in order to accompany their wives (Beatriz and Sofia) during their relocation process (*expat-husbands*). In two other cases (Teresa and Margarida), the decision to relocate was facilitated by the fact that their partners also had obtained a job in the country of relocation, while a third case (Bruna) refers to an interviewee's partner who had a job that allowed him to work from any location (Annex). The distance and separation from their family and friends are mentioned as negative implications associated with their mobility. Delaying personal projects is also mentioned as one of the consequences of pursuing an international career:

There is the distance effect, because I left my parents and boyfriend in Portugal... it's hard but all the communication tools that we have available today, like Skype, WhatsApp, allow us to be constantly connected and help us to deal with the distance, along with that, I've also established a travel plan which will allow me to visit them (...) but there were implications like delaying some personal projects(...). I had bought a house with my boyfriend (...). The plan was that we would eventually get married this year or the next one - those projects, getting married, having children, had to be postponed. (Sara, HR manager in an IT company, relocated to Colombia)

In a group of twelve expatriates, only one has children (see Annex). This interviewee (Beatriz) revealed that, at a certain moment of her career, she participated in a project that involved frequent trips to Spain. At the time, she showed willingness to relocate and occupy a permanent position in that country; however, she was informed that there were no vacancies available there and her superiors proposed a relocation to Australia. At that particular moment she had to refuse the offer because she was pregnant and in that country she wouldn't have the family support during that period. While Beatriz did not accept that first opportunity, years later her company made a new relocation proposal to Australia, where she would occupy a leadership position. She accepted it and lives there with her husband and two daughters. The interviewee acknowledges that the support of her husband was crucial, especially at an early stage of their mobility, during which he interrupted his professional activity in order to give better support to the education of their daughters. For the same reason, he only works part time at the moment:

I came here and I have a successful career because I have a husband who came to Australia and spent two years at home with the children and even now he only works part-time (...). It is very rare when men give up their own career to help the family, not just in Portugal but anywhere in the world. And this is what I think is the biggest obstacle. Not women, because they are good workers, and when they have a good performance, they are usually rewarded. The problem is that women often fail to get opportunities because of motherhood. And the major obstacle is not having support at

home. (Beatriz, Director in a consumer goods company, relocated to Australia)

This same perception is shared by another professional, Sofia, who, during her career, participated in several expatriation processes, during which she always was accompanied by her husband. These moves implied numerous adjustments to his career. In both cases, it was recognized by the interviewees that it is not common for men to compromise their professional development in order to give priority to women's career and this contributes to a lower participation of women in international missions. The lower participation of women in international assignments and the small number of men willing to accompany them in expatriation assignments also influence the way companies design spousal adjustment programmes. According to one interviewee, the activities included in such programmes are often aimed at designating expat-wives, relying on internalized gender stereotypes.

Women as self- autonomous international managers

For those eight managers whose international experiences are independent from any labour relationship with a home company (self-autonomous mobility), the economic situation in their country of origin and the greater number and more diverse development opportunities available in the destination countries are the most relevant factors underlying their decision to move abroad. A further important catalyst for mobility can be family-related. This was the case with two interviewees (Carolina and Susana) who were expat-wives - women who accompanied their spouses in their expatriation processes (See Annex). These interviewees relocated with their husbands but ended up getting a job in the expatriation country, initiating their own international careers.

Despite the variety of reasons that influence the decision to pursue an international career, the possibility of professional development is the factor that the interviewees mention most frequently to explain their choice. All professionals establish a causal relationship between the human capital acquired and developed through international experiences and their career prospects.

Unlike expatriation assignments, international experiences of this type (which imply not only moving to a new country, but also entails entering a new organization and starting a new job), don't have the organizational support usually associated to organizational mobility processes (relocation packages; cultural training etc.). When questioned about their adaptation process, socio-cultural discrepancies between the country of origin and the country of mobility are often pointed out as the greatest challenges faced during this period. Along with insecurity, the lack of autonomy in some cultural contexts is stressed as a possible constraint for woman. Like in Algeria, where one manager perceived some insecurity and lack of autonomy but she also felt some difficulties while interacting with more conservative elements of the local team:

What was more difficult for me was the absence of a sense of security and

autonomy that I felt when I was in Algeria. It was a difficult project for reasons related with infra-structural deficiencies, different approaches to task execution (...) and also because I was the only team member that accepted to relocate to Algeria and that was very hard (...). It also because being in a Muslim country and the fact that I am a woman, despite their openness (...), it makes the work more challenging, especially in the interaction with certain team members that associate woman with a more traditional role. (Matilde, Change Manager, freelance consultant)

There is also an association between socio-cultural factors: how a woman's role is perceived in certain countries and the repercussions this can have on their experience. One interviewee, Paula, also associates the way in which women are perceived in German society with their exclusion from social networks, which translates into a lack of access to development opportunities:

There is a different relationship among men. The informal relationship that exists between men ... women do not enter those circles. In the region where I'm working it's even more difficult, it's a conservative area and the fact that wages in Germany are high, some young professionals end their careers to stay at home to care for their children. This is something that surprised me, that people from my generation saw their mothers doing that and nowadays they end up doing the same, but this is also related to the lack of childcare facilities here (...). We, women, do not enter those circles, men go out for a drink together, or go to the sauna ... it's very difficult to get into that circle. I do not think they see us as equals, much more here than in Portugal (...). We do not enter in this 'networking', and therefore we don't have the same opportunities. (Paula, Manager in a company specializing in optical-electronic products)

In this group of women, three interviewees are married/living with a partner (Carolina, Matilde and Paula). In this sub-group, only one of the professionals (Matilde) doesn't have the company of her spouse in the various countries where she has been developing her activity. This is due to the fact that her husband also holds a job position that involves frequent travels and therefore it is not possible for the couple to reconcile their activities in order for them to develop their projects simultaneously in the same country.

Our research also includes one professional (Paula) whose spouse is a native-born resident in the country to which the relocation took place - a factor that was identified by the interviewee as one of the drivers for her mobility. The other professional, Carolina, as was mentioned before, is considered an "expat-wife", having accompanied her husband on his expatriate assignments and then started her own international career. This group also includes three interviewees who are single and two who are divorced. Among all professionals who autonomously initiated their international careers, only these last two (Elisa and Leonor) have children (see Annex).

It is a shared perception that single professionals face fewer challenges during

their decision-making process and throughout their mobility experience, compared to those that are married and have children or are unmarried/divorced with children. All interviewees agree that the decision to relocate will be more complex according to their marital status and family situation.

I don't have a family, I'm not married and I don't have children, therefore, that clearly facilitates my mobility. It's not crucial but when it's only a person deciding vs a couple's decision, something that implies work opportunities for the couple, children relocation... it's more complex. (Maria, Finance Director in a Telecommunications company)

Elisa and Leonor, the only two interviews with children, are divorced and have the support of their parents in the country of destination. They consider this support crucial because their work schedules are not compatible with the children's needs. One of the interviewees, who moved to the UK with her daughter and her mother, reflects on the implications of this move:

It implied major changes in my personal life, I stopped seeing my friends and my family, but I had my mother's help (...) and having my mother here is a great support, she takes care of my daughter, because I work until 5 pm but that isn't always the rule because, in this position, I am often required to have meetings with the directors and I can't say: 'I can't, I have to go pick up my daughter'. It's very hard for a woman alone, but we manage. (Elisa, Department Director on a financial institution, U.K.)

The discrepancy in the distribution of family responsibilities between men and women and the lack of support is mentioned as one of the key factors that limit women's availability of women for international mobility. One of the interviewees reflects about this topic pointing out the differences that she observed in two distinct countries and explains how the availability of domestic and childcare support can make a difference when it comes to women's access to top management and also international experiences:

While in Portugal I was the only female director, in South Africa, there were more woman in top management than men... I think there were two factors ... the quotas ... and in South Africa it was also very easy to have domestic support and it was common for people to have two, three maids ... Now, in this sense, it is much easier to reach a director position, because having that support at home, I can leave work at seven, if necessary... If I am in England for instance, where I have no support from anyone, I can't get out of work after half past four because the daycare closes at five ... In South Africa, if I leave the office at seven, there is no problem ... I think it makes a big difference, domestic support makes a huge difference. (Susana, Department Director in a financial institution, UK)

Concluding notes

Based on a qualitative research study, women's motivations for an international career were observed, as well as the constraints, opportunities and challenges faced by women working abroad as either expatriates or in autonomous professional projects. All the interviewees are career-oriented, and their choice to pursue an international career is recognised as a source of improved future career prospects. In line with our theoretical framework, the individual explanations are insufficient for fully understanding their career options and their professional and personal experiences abroad. For the women interviewed, both the decision to move abroad and the mobility process have been experienced as a complex and ambivalent path: a *crossroads* where both positive and negative elements intersect with each other and a *labyrinth* where pleasures derived from work, self-fulfilment, work-family conflicts and personal pain are closely intertwined in their experiences (to use the enlightening metaphors proposed by Mathur-Helm (2002) and Earli and Carli (2007), respectively; see also Schütter and Boerner, 2013).

Family-related factors are the most commonly mentioned barriers limiting women's availability for international mobility – a barrier that is much more pronounced than the issues related to either possible insecurity or cultural differences in the country of relocation. All the interviewees acknowledged that family commitments have a major impact on women's decisions to accept a job offer to move abroad. In this regard, it should be noted that only three out of the 20 interviewees had children at the time of their mobility process, and the majority (eleven) were either single or divorced. Postponing individual and family projects (marriage, motherhood) is also one of the consequences of their choices for an international career, considering that long hours and total work commitment are common requirements for such job offers. For the few women with children, their husband's support is perceived as fundamental and is highly valued due to the perception that the common pattern is not for men to downgrade their career aspirations in order to support those of their wives. This is also seen as one of the reasons why professional mobility across the globe is still a male-dominated phenomenon. Such work-family related barriers have been identified in other studies and should not underestimate the broader sense of professional and personal enrichment described by the interviewees (see also Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011; Schütter and Boerner, 2013).

Society and organisational-level constraints were also mentioned by the interviewees, particularly gender stereotypes and traditional representations of gender roles. Cultural differences in the way in which the role of women in society is perceived can be mitigated by organisational cultures – contexts in which the dominant formal and informal norms tend to be similar both at home and in the host work setting, and where expatriates tend to form a supportive network, including the way in which gendered narratives are challenged. However, this situation excludes those who have developed autonomous international careers, for whom the lack of organisational support represents an extra challenge (or barrier) in their experiences abroad. It was also mentioned that the integration process is more complex for women in senior positions,

especially in contexts where gender asymmetry in top management is more pronounced, and where it is not common for women to occupy such positions. Women in these circumstances tend to make an extra effort in order to continuously demonstrate their competences and work ethos. As mentioned, for all the interviewees, the option to pursue an international career was motivated by their career-orientation, as – particularly for expatriates – global mobility is perceived as a common practice within their companies, and an international assignment is valued and encouraged by senior management. All the interviewees related their current experience to a greater pool of career prospects available, which they also linked to greater networking opportunities. Therefore, a longitudinal research study would be particularly relevant for examining the implications of their current professional experiences for their future careers.

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Annex

Expatriates' Profile							
Name	Age	Marital status	Parental status	Relocation	Occupation	Host country	Estimated duration of the mobility
Alice	28	Single	without children	Alone	Senior consultant (management consulting firm)	Angola	undetermined
Ana	44	Single	without children	Alone	Commercial Director (consumer goods company)	Spain	3 years
Beatriz	42	Married	2 daughters	Her husband and daughters accompanied her in the relocation process	Director (consumer goods company)	Australia	undetermined
Bruna	29	Living with a partner	without children	Her partner accompanied her in the relocation process	Marketing Manager (consumer goods company)	Switzerland	2 years
Catarina	36	Single	without children	Alone	Project Manager (consumer goods company)	U.K. Switzerland (current)	3.5 years
Filipa	27	Single	without children	Alone	Marketing Manager (IT company)	Mexico	undetermined
Margarida	34	Married	without children	Her husband accompanied her in the relocation process	Manager (consumer goods company)	U.K. Switzerland (current)	3 to 4 years
Sara	29	Single	without children	Alone	HR Manager (IT company)	The Netherlands Colombia (current)	undetermined
Sofia	37	Married	without children	Her husband accompanied her in the relocation process	Senior consultant (pharmaceutical company)	Singapore Malaysia Germany (current)	2-3 years
Susana	42	Divorced	without children	Alone	Department director (financial institution)	Angola South Africa UK (current)	undetermined
Teresa	35	Living with a partner	without children	Her partner accompanied her in the relocation process	Marketing Manager (consumer goods company)	Sweden	2 years
Rafaela	33	Married	2 stepchildren	Her husband is American and already lived in the US at the time of her relocation to that country	International Adviser Operations Associate (IT company)	U.S.A	undetermined

Self- autonomous international managers - profile							
Name	Age	Marital status	Parental status	Relocation	Occupation	Host country	Estimated duration of the mobility
Carla	48	Single	without children	Alone	Department manager (insurance company)	Ireland	undetermined
Carolina	31	Married	without children	Her relocation to the USA happened following her husband selection to an expatriate mission in that country	HR Manager (<i>chemical industry company</i>)	U.S.A.	It depends on the duration of her husband's expatriate assignment (2-3 years)
Elisa	32	Divorced	1 daughter	Her daughter lives with her in the U.K.	Department director (financial institution)	U.K.	undetermined
Inês	39	Single	without children	Alone	Back-office manager (consumer goods company)	Spain	undetermined
Leonor	36	Divorced	1 daughter	Her daughter lives with her in the U.K.	International Lending Control Associate Director (financial institution)	U.K.	undetermined
Maria	35	Single	without children	Alone	Finance director (telecommunications company)	U.K.	undetermined
Matilde	37	Married	without children	Alone	Change Manager (freelance consultant)	Spain Belgium Algeria Russia U.K. Switzerland (current)	It varies -the current project has the duration of 1 year
Paula	34	Living with a partner	without children	Her partner is from Germany, he already lived in Germany at the time of her relocation.	Manager (optical – electronic company)	Germany	undetermined