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Women's participation in organisationally-assigned expatriation: an assignment type effect?

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Abstract

This article examines women's participation in long-term, short-term, rotational and commuter organisationally-assigned expatriation. It explores the effects of assignment length, pattern and accompanied/unaccompanied status on career contribution and home/family life outcomes. This triangulated research draws upon e-mail correspondence with 71 current female expatriates to learn about assignment types undertaken and future assignment intentions; and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 26 of these assignees, and 14 Human Resource professionals in two case study oil and gas firms. This research is set within the theoretical frame of rational choice which suggests that couples engage co-operatively in their division of labour to maximise lifetime earnings, with women prioritising home and family over career prospects. The research finds that long-term assignments enable women to maximise or achieve high levels of both career and family outcomes. Alternative 'flexpatriate' assignments provide lower quality career potential and familial relationships, leading to career and/or family compromise/sacrifice. A model is presented to explain women's assignment preferences in meeting career and family life objectives, extending rational choice theory into the expatriate context. Increasing use of flexpatriation may inhibit expatriate gender diversity.

Key words: expatriation; flexpatriation; gender; careers; work-life balance; rational choice.

Introduction

International experience via expatriation enhances competency and career development and provides a foundation for leadership roles (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2014) by profoundly influencing leaders' worldview and strengthening their ability to create collaborative environments (Cassiday, 2005). Women have long been acknowledged as highly successful expatriates bringing competitive advantage to their employing organisations (Tung, 2004). While we do not have fully comprehensive, rigorous data on expatriate gender diversity, regular benchmarking surveys carried out by major relocation consultancies provide a proxy measure. Women hold just a quarter of all organisationally-assigned expatriate positions (Brookfield, 2016). In the oil and gas sector, a major user of expatriates (Air Inc., 2017) and the focus of this study, women comprise at best 15% of the expatriate workforce (Shortland, 2009). This is important and requires further study because a lack of expatriate gender diversity hinders organisations' performance as well as women's ability to reach leadership positions (Shortland & Perkins, 2016). Hence, gaining an understanding of the factors that potentially reduce or block women's participation in organisationally-assigned international mobility is of clear relevance to individuals, businesses and academics.

Research to date on female expatriate participation has focused primarily on the impact of women's careers and families, host country reception and employer support pre-, during and post-expatriation (Shortland & Altman, 2011). This paper goes beyond prior female expatriate research by addressing the effect of different assignment types on women's decisions to undertake organisationally-assigned expatriation. It considers the advantages and disadvantages of long-term, short-term, rotational and commuter expatriate assignments, examining assignment type features such as length, pattern and accompanied/unaccompanied

status on current female expatriates' decisions to undertake their organisationally-assigned expatriation. In this context, expatriation is defined as “the transnational movement of employees by multinational corporations” (Berry & Bell, 2012:10) where the “key binding activity to expatriate is taken by the organisation and the legal decision of employment is made by the current work contract partner, usually in the home country” (Andresen, Bergdolt, Margenfeld & Dickmann, 2014: 2308).

This study is set within the context of rational choice theory. Drawing upon the discipline of economics, this suggests that men choose to focus on market work and women on family work, with this rational decision on the division of labour enacted co-operatively to maximise lifetime earnings (Becker, 1981). As such, women are presumed to make lifestyle choices prioritising home and family (Hakim, 2000). Women's choices are, however, constrained by context (Bruegel, 1996) and in contemporary society, women face the dichotomy of managing domestic life and family relationships, and achieving success in the labour force (Chafetz & Hagan, 1996). As such they may employ modified approaches to rational choice such as ‘satisficing’ (Chafetz & Hagan, 1996; Crompton & Harris, 1998a, 1998b) whereby they attempt to achieve good outcomes for both their work and family lives.

This paper considers the application of modified approaches to rational choice theory as applied to women's expatriate deployment in a variety of assignment types, highlighting their career and family life outcomes. It proposes further research on women's assignment type choices and implications for practice to assist employers in increasing expatriate gender diversity. It contributes to knowledge by proposing a model: this helps us to understand the ‘actual choices’ women make to maximise all or some of their career and family life options

via their choice of assignment types undertaken; and it can be used to guide future research and practice. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. Which assignment types do current female expatriates view as attractive/unattractive for their careers and/or family life and why?
2. Which assignment types do current female expatriates prefer and thus choose to undertake and why?

Literature Review

Expatriate gender diversity

Academic research highlights the value that women have brought to expatriate assignment outcomes and, as a consequence, the organisational advantage that flows from their deployment abroad (Bhatti, Sundram & Hoe, 2012; Cole & McNulty, 2011). Research also shows that women hold substantially fewer of the highest international positions than men despite female expatriates having similar socio-economic backgrounds and equal, if not higher, educational qualifications than their male counterparts (Berry & Bell, 2012). Yet, women only hold 25% of all expatriate positions industry-wide and their participation appears to have levelled off (Brookfield, 2016). In sectors such as oil and gas, their representation is only 7-15% (Shortland, 2009). International assignments provide necessary competency development for job advancement and leadership (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2014). If women are potentially excluded from the leadership pool because of their lack of international assignment experience, men gain a competitive advantage over them (Lansing & Boonman, 2011). As expatriation becomes of increasing importance in global talent management and in

improving firms' performance, low gender diversity is, without doubt, a severe hindrance (Shortland & Perkins, 2016).

Given there is no consensus as to whether women are more, equally or less keen than men to work internationally (Stroh, Varma, & Valy-Durbin, 2000; van der Velde, Bossink & Jansen, 2005) it cannot pre-supposed that the low proportion of organisationally-assigned female expatriates rests simply upon their willingness to go. Thus, the extant literature has concentrated on a number of factors that potentially contribute and combine to reduce women's ability to work abroad. These include: gender bias in selection processes (Harris, 2002); perceived negative host country receptivity (Paik & Vance, 2002); lower access than their male corporate colleagues to support networks (Linehan, 2001), mentors (Linehan & Walsh, 1999) and role models (Shortland, 2014); dual careers, male career prioritisation and male family power (Dupuis, Haines & Saba, 2008; Harvey, 1998; van der Velde *et al.*, 2005); difficulties faced by male 'trailing spouses' (Punnett, Crocker & Stevens, 1992); and children's education, health and welfare concerns (Dupuis *et al.*, 2008). Very little, however, has been written specifically on the types of assignments offered by employers and the effects that these might have on women's willingness and ability to engage in different lengths and patterns of expatriation. In Mayerhofer, Hartmann and Herbert's (2004a) research, those women who undertook unaccompanied, flexible assignments requiring frequent travel placed their family ahead of mobility, choosing to give up their assignments to address family needs.

Women's choices

Rational choice theory proposes that individuals behave in a rational economic sense to achieve their aims or to maximise or optimise their desires; workers act in a rational manner to maximise their lifetime earnings. Co-operative exchange can lead to personal or mutual

advantage, hence any division of labour within the family such as specialisation in market or family work is deemed to be efficient (Becker, 1981). In earlier generations women focused their success on domestic and familial roles (Chafetz & Hagan, 1996). As societal norms have changed, women's role in the labour force has increased even though women still maintain a larger share of domestic duties (Piotrkowski, Rapoport & Rapoport, 1987). As Chafetz and Hagan (1996: 200) argue "women increasingly behave as economically rational actors to the same extent as do men, yet are unwilling to abandon the socio-emotional rewards of romantic relationships and children". This suggests that if women no longer focus their attention entirely on domestic work, but seek to achieve both career goals as well as home life fulfilment, they require effective work-family life strategies to achieve both of these goals. In the context of international mobility, a 'maximiser' strategy (Chafetz & Hagan, 1996) implies an assignment type choice that provides both the strongest career and home life outcomes.

Drawing upon a modified version of rational choice theory, Chafetz and Hagan (1996: 201) propose the concept of 'satisficing': under this approach, women attempt to achieve a "reasonably high level" of both career and family outcomes "rather than attempting to maximize one to the substantial exclusion of the other ... that women will increasingly attempt to orient their lives around achieving some 'success' in both spheres". Drawing upon Chafetz and Hagan's (1996) modification of rational choice theory, Crompton and Harris (1998a, 1998b) posit that women who are unwilling to maximise career goals at the expense of family relationships will engage in satisficing behaviour to reach a high career level combined with child bearing and raising their families. However, they point out that while satisficing can be effective in certain professions (for example, medicine) it is difficult to achieve in industry at managerial levels where there is less flexibility in the working patterns

available to them. Potentially though, in the organisationally-assigned expatriate context, the selection of a particular international assignment type, such as long- or short-term mobility or that which includes flexible travel schedules, might present women with a 'rational choice' of international career and family unity options that enable satisficing as a consequence of the chosen length and pattern of mobility.

Rational choice suggests that work-life decisions are based upon detailed economic considerations (Becker, 1981). Yet, women's work choices are typically based upon incomplete information (Corby & Stanworth, 2009), and their employment decisions are constrained by family context (Bruegel, 1996). Today, the expatriate family (traditionally heterosexual, two parents, accompanying children) has extended to encompass single parent, split families (including elder care) and same sex partnerships (McNulty, 2014). As such, it can be argued that women in industry must make compromises when they try to balance their careers with family life (Corby & Stanworth, 2009). Women's decisions to undertake particular international assignment types might therefore represent an 'irrational choice' theoretically but one which provides them with an appropriate career and/or a family life compromise for their own particular context.

Assignment types

Organisations place emphasis on long-term assignments in relation to the strategic deployment of individuals (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl, & Kollinger, 2004b). These assignments are used for knowledge and technical skills transfer, new start-ups, to transfer corporate culture and train local people, and deliver potential for maximum return on investment (PWC/Cranfield, 2006). Long-term expatriation supports adaptation, relationship building and cultural understanding (Adler & Bartholomew, 1992). Such assignments are

usually offered as accompanied postings (ORC Worldwide, 2009) with family support acknowledged as providing a stable home base (Cappellen & Janssens, 2010a), setting the foundation for acceptable work-life balance (Meyskens, Von Glinow, Werther & Clarke, 2009). In hostile/remote locations, which either present danger to – or lack of facilities for – partners and families, unaccompanied assignments are offered with trips home to maintain contact (Shortland, 2016a). However, leaving partners and children behind can lead to stress and work-family conflict (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2011).

Demands for project work, mergers, divestitures, start-ups, and restructuring require short-term assignments (Cappellen & Janssens, 2005). These are also used for senior management transferring commercial and operational philosophies and for early career and graduate populations (Perkins & Shortland, 2006). While short periods of work abroad provide some international experience and career growth (Hamori & Koyuncu, 2011), they do not lead to cultural competence (Adler & Bartholomew, 1992). Typically between one and 12 months in duration (Collings & Isichei, 2018), short-term assignments are usually undertaken unaccompanied (Shankaran, Murray & Miller, 2011). They reduce: the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ syndrome (Konopaske & Werner, 2005; Starr & Currie, 2009); problems of re-integration on repatriation (De Cieri, Sheehan, Costa, Fenwick & Cooper, 2009); and dual career and children’s education concerns as assignees do not move their families abroad due to the short timescale (Forster, 2000). However, expatriates suffer from family separation and lack of family support (Starr & Currie, 2009). For example, research into four to six month assignments in the military found that projects that required work-family separation resulted in work demands conflicting with family life with consequences that were neither beneficial

to families nor the projects. Work satisfaction declined and turnover intentions increased over time (Andres, Moelker & Soeters, 2012).

Unaccompanied rotational assignments are common in exploration in the oil, gas and mining sectors (Air Inc., 2017). They typically involve working regular fixed shift patterns followed by long rest periods off work (Collings & Isichei, 2018). Rotation usually involves working in remote locations unsuitable for family life, and so few women participate in this type of expatriate assignment (Shortland, 2016a).

Commuter assignments involve unaccompanied, frequent international mobility to service short-term assignments and projects on an irregular commuting basis (ORC Worldwide, 2006). Such assignments may require individuals to work concurrently on numerous tasks, in different locations and with flexible travel schedules. This may result in gaining learning, development, and networking opportunities (Demel & Mayrhofer, 2010) and career growth (Hamori & Koyuncu, 2011). Indeed, Meyskens *et al.* (2009) propose that commuter assignments give high goal congruence (the extent to which the goals of the multinational match those of its subsidiary, a factor considered necessary for assignment success) and medium levels of work-life balance, offering the highest potential for assignment success and family life. However, commuter assignees are required to cross cultural boundaries at short notice and for short time spans (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004a), gaining only superficial cultural awareness (Adler & Bartholomew, 1992). Although the use of commuting combined with virtual working can help to reduce family disruption (Cappellen & Janssens, 2010b), frequent travel and family separation are known to be stressful (Welch, Welch & Worm, 2007). Stress affects health and wellness causing anxiety, fatigue and exhaustion (Demel & Mayrhofer, 2010) and negatively affects employee turnover and performance

(Ivancevich, Konopaske & DeFrank, 2003). Repeated mobility causes family conflict (Welch *et al.*, 2007), straining and ultimately destabilising nuclear-centred families (Carnoy, 2001).

Method

This research is set within the oil and gas exploration and production sector, a relevant and appropriate industry in which to examine the effect of assignment types on women's expatriation for several compelling reasons. The sector employs and deploys large volumes of organisationally-assigned expatriates compared with other sectors (Air Inc., 2017) and has lengthy and global experience of managing international assignments (Markus, 2015).

Although women hold a low percentage share of oil and gas expatriate roles, given the large volumes of expatriates employed in this sector, there are relatively high numbers of female expatriates (Shortland, 2009) enabling a sound numerical base upon which to conduct research. In addition, the sector uses a variety of assignment lengths and patterns to service both accompanied and unaccompanied expatriate roles (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004b) and is championing action to increase expatriate diversity to address its talent needs (Permits Foundation, 2012).

This case study research began with the project proposal presented to International Assignments Managers (IAMs) in 18 global oil and gas exploration and production organisations at a members' meeting of the UK Oil and Gas Industry Peer Group. Two IAMs agreed for their firms to participate. Company 1 employed approximately 12,000 people in 20 countries, with 40% of its global workforce being female; 3% of its employees were organisationally-assigned expatriates, of which 8% (27) were women. Company 2 employed

around 6,000 people in 30 countries, with 28% of its global workforce being female; 10% of its employees were organisationally-assigned expatriates, of which 11% (66) were female.

The two IAMs agreed to be interviewed in depth and facilitated interview access with 12 other HR professionals with expatriate responsibilities (three in Company 1 and nine in Company 2). Details of their roles and responsibilities are given in Table 1. The IAMs contacted all 93 current female assignees on behalf of the researcher to advise them of the study, and the researcher was then given their contact details to approach them directly by e-mail. Access to host country line managers and male expatriates was not given due to resource pressures. Semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes) were carried out with both IAMs and with the 12 other HR professionals (30-60 minutes). All were UK-based (excepting Company 1's HR – East Asia manager).

(Table 1)

All of the 93 current female assignees were e-mailed to collect personal and assignment type data identifying personal and work profiles, types of assignments currently undertaken (length, pattern, accompanied/unaccompanied), any previous assignments carried out, and willingness to undertake different assignment types in future. They were invited to comment on these issues in their e-mail responses and record their willingness to be interviewed about their experiences. Of the 27 women e-mailed in Company 1, 19 (70%) replied; 11 (58%) agreed to be interviewed. In Company 2, 52 of the 66 women e-mailed responded (79%); 44 (85%) agreed to be interviewed. Of the 71 e-mail correspondence participants, 55 were willing to be interviewed and 26 were selected using stratified sampling (Collis & Hussey, 2009). Eight women interviewed were from Company 1, representing 30% of its female expatriate workforce; and 18 were from Company 2, representing 27% of its

female expatriate workforce. Current assignment types (length/pattern), accompanied/unaccompanied status, sending/receiving locations, previous assignment types undertaken, occupation, seniority (grade), and personal factors (marital/family status, age) were taken into consideration in the stratified sampling. In-depth semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes) were carried out with these 26 current assignees, whose profiles are summarised in Table 2.

(Table 2)

The IAMs facilitated setting up the interviews for the researcher. All interviews took place on company premises in a private room, by telephone if the assignee/HR professional was abroad or face-to-face when assignees were in the UK on a rotational off-shift or on leave. All interviews were taped with permission and then transcribed. The qualitative data from the assignees' e-mail correspondence, and the HR and assignee interviews provided independent data sources and collection methods which enabled a triangulated research approach ensuring validity (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). One person coded all qualitative data from these three sources first using Microsoft Word; this was followed by analysis using NVivo 8, coding afresh to reduce the danger of sole researcher coding drift.

Rational choice theory (Becker, 1981) informed the inductive approach taken to coding qualitative data with template analysis used (King, 2004). Patterns were identified from observations of themes within the data and grouped into assignment type choice coding trees (for example, Reason\Pattern\Timing; Location\Country factors\Lifestyle; Location\Career development\Multiple assignments) with the aim being to develop or refine theory, based around the issues that women raised as affecting their choices to accept or reject particular assignment types. Careful interpretation of the data gauged the importance of each

issue and ensured that the main themes and references made reflected the respondent population, not merely the concerns of one individual. Confidentiality was preserved: neither individuals nor companies were named; locations were generalised to a regional level.

Findings

In both firms long-term assignments averaged between two and three years, but could stretch to five. Company 1 offered extended international transfers – longer-term positions as ‘US local hires’. Short-term assignments typically lasted six months in each firm. They were used relatively infrequently to provide temporary/maternity cover or to meet urgent skills shortages/project requirements. Both organisations operated graduate development programmes with six month short-term assignments abroad. Rotation was widely used in both firms and involved 28 days on shift (12 hours’ work per day; seven days a week); followed by 28 days off shift at home. International commuter assignments were used occasionally by both firms for project work.

As Table 3 shows, 51 women were on long-term assignments with three on extended international transfers; 12 were on short-term assignments (nine of whom on a graduate scheme); and five were on rotation. Thirty-four women had completed one or more previous assignments with their current employer, typically either long-term or short-term assignments, although two had previously undertaken rotation and one a commuter assignment.

(Tables 3 & 4)

E-mail respondents were asked about their future intentions, specifically would they definitely undertake a particular type of assignment, maybe do so, or would they not be

willing to go on it at all and to comment if they wished to do so. As Table 4 shows, accompanied assignments were more likely to be undertaken than unaccompanied and accompanied long-term assignments were the most popular option: 74% said that they would definitely undertake an accompanied long-term assignment and 39% would go on an accompanied short-term assignment. This compares with just 20% and 17% respectively who would definitely go solo on such assignment types. Rotational and commuter assignments are unaccompanied status by definition. Yet, while 25% would go on rotation, only 14% said they would definitely undertake a future international commuter assignment. To understand the factors that influenced women's current and intended assignment participation, the qualitative data analysis explored how each assignment type contributed to female assignees' career potential and family life.

Long-term Assignments

The assignees reported that undertaking long-term assignments enabled them to contribute effectively and meaningfully to the business. They were able to work through at least one or even several business cycles, gaining experience and knowledge, thereby adding value and becoming more entrenched in the way the business operates:

“...the projects can be very lengthy so if you want to see something through from exploring for a block, to getting the block, to drilling a well, you can be five years in ... I am keen for long-term assignments”. (F, Co. 1, married/partnered, accompanied, current long-term assignee)

Long-term assignments were well-recognised within their firms. They created stability and provided the time needed to adapt to the host country business environment and local

culture and thereby enabled assignees to: plan and achieve involvement in a wide range of issues; gain cultural understanding; build strong work relationships; and deliver on projects/goals. This facilitated their impact on the business and consequent career value. Long-term expatriation also deepened assignees' professional and personal experiences:

“You get to dig in. You get to truly immerse yourself in the culture ... not only learn but give back and you are not seen as a short-term fix”. (M, Co. 2, married/partnered, accompanied, current long-term assignee)

“There is a corporate memory that needs to be captured ... rather than a short sharp shock in anything, I like to be able to contribute value, rather than just have a toe dipped in ... the longer you are in a place the deeper your experiences are from a professional and a personal point of view”. (U, Co. 2, married/partnered with children, accompanied, current long-term assignee)

Multiple long-term assignments were considered to be particularly helpful in providing a broad base of experience, with positive career outcomes:

“You have proven again and again that you can perform in an area that is outside of your home country ... and if you can handle that, it puts you into a different place in people's esteem”. (L, Co. 2, married/partnered, unaccompanied, current long-term assignee)

Long-term accompanied assignments were considered particularly attractive in relation to home life and social aspects. They enabled the women to be assimilated within local society, make friends and build a social life, creating a good work-life balance. They

also provided stability for children and enabled the creation of a home and home life for those with accompanying spouses/partners/family as well as for singles:

“...you actually get involved in life here and have a much better chance of enjoying it when you set up a social network and interact with the expats and local people. You really throw yourself into life otherwise you are just living in temporary existence”.
(K, Co. 2, married/partnered, accompanied, current long-term assignee)

Married/partnered assignees were, in the main, unwilling to undertake long-term assignments on unaccompanied status. Those who went solo spoke of family separation, loneliness and marital difficulties caused through frequent long periods of absence:

“It isn’t funny to be away from your partner for weeks or months at a time. I mean, there was a time when I hadn’t seen my husband for two months; you know whether it is a relationship between spouses or ... between a mother ... and a child, two months is a long time to not see your loved ones”. (F, Co. 1, married/partnered, previously on an unaccompanied long-term assignment)

Long-term assignments were available in most of the firms’ countries of operations (although for some remote and hostile locations only unaccompanied rotational or commuter assignments were offered). This meant that women had some choice as to the locations to which they might expatriate. Assignees were keen to gain different cultural experiences, seeking environments where they could learn from local people. There were some limitations though – for example, mothers spoke of making choices based on facilities that they deemed essential for their children, including good medical and local child care. Dual career

opportunities for partners and elder care issues also factored into long-term assignment location choices:

“(Central Asia) ... the medical facilities are arguably not good enough with children so that is a big kind of no, no really. (Indian sub-continent), well I might struggle to get my partner to be persuaded to go”. (S, Co. 2, married/partnered with children, accompanied, current long-term assignee)

“The distance from my parents is a big one, because mum’s got Alzheimer’s and my dad has got his own health issues ... but ... I can take additional unpaid leave to spend with my parents.” (O, Co. 2, married/partnered, accompanied, current long-term assignee)

Short-term Assignments

Assignees reported that they could benefit from a developmental perspective when undertaking short-term assignments. These gave career contribution, providing organisational objectives were well-defined and project-based work was clearly delineated. Graduate trainees reported short-term international placements achieved career development. They gained technical skills, first-hand experiences of foreign operations, and exposure to different working environments and learning opportunities, as well as making useful contacts:

“It gives you a chance to deliver a project and so it will go on your CV that I have delivered this project, and I have been involved during this development”. (P, Co. 2, married/partnered now with children, previous unaccompanied short-term assignee)

Short-term assignments were also regarded by both the HR experts and the assignees as providing a useful ‘taster’ of international experience, helpful to making long-term assignment participation decisions:

“I was quite nervous about going, but once I had experienced ... the six months, it gave me the confidence ... if I hadn’t had that early short-term assignment, I probably would have been more reluctant to undertake something longer”. (W, Co. 2, married/partnered now with children, previous unaccompanied short-term assignee)

However, while recognising their career potential and acknowledging that several short-term postings over a sustained period might provide sufficient international experience and recognition of performance to be considered for promotion, the assignees did not feel that short-term assignments created as great a career contribution as long-term assignments:

“...when they are thinking about who would be a good person to have in ... a role overseas, they don’t necessarily or would jump to the conclusion that because you have done a short-term assignment, unless they have had direct interaction with you, and they see that you are a high-calibre person, I don’t think they necessarily you fit into the frame”. (L, Co. 2, married/partnered, previous unaccompanied short-term assignee)

Specifically, the assignees identified a number of disadvantages in undertaking short-term assignments: the short time span would not provide sufficient time to learn fully, plan, build relationships, gain business understanding, and deliver on goals. Hence, it was suggested there might be less organisational benefit derived from such an assignment type due to time constraints precluding the assignee from adding value, with a consequent detrimental

effect on meeting individual career goals. Limited assignment timescales hindered graduate trainees' access to the most useful developmental work experience, thereby reducing opportunities for gaining professional experience and cultural understanding:

“So you feel that every time you get to the point where you understand how things work and can deliver things you are changed and moved to a different place. So in the long scheme of career development, it's not as successful as it could be. And some managers don't give you the work or as much responsibility as if they knew you were going to be there longer term.” (T, Co. 2, single, current unaccompanied short-term assignee, graduate scheme)

Short-term assignments were typically offered on unaccompanied status, potentially providing a feasible international mobility option for married/partnered women to gain career contribution while supporting dual careers. However, the women who were married/or partnered, and who had taken up unaccompanied short-term assignments, spoke of difficulties with their relationships and social lives:

“...the expectation of me ... as a graduate was that we were all single and footloose and fancy free ... but we ... have long-term relationships, and we have all of the same stuff going on”. (L, Co 2, married/partnered, previous unaccompanied short-term assignee)

Short-term assignees reported that although their firms would consider accompanied assignments, uprooting partners to go with them was not practical. For those with children short-term assignments were not considered feasible given the potential for family disruption:

“So it is family reasons really, for a short-term assignment, you don’t go there with your family and even if there was the option to do that I wouldn’t force a six-month move on a toddler. I don’t think it’s fair”. (A, Co. 1, married/partnered with children, accompanied, current long-term assignee)

The HR experts concurred that accompanied short-term mobility was not feasible for mothers and difficult for partners given the short time scales involved. A further issue that made short-term assignments an unattractive choice concerned the difficulties in establishing local friendships in a short time frame, especially when undertaking a series of short-term assignments in succession. This led to poor work-life balance while on assignment.

Rotational Assignments

The HR experts said that rotational assignments were used primarily to perform functional roles and to transfer knowledge. Rotational assignments were not regarded as particularly career-enhancing by assignees although it was acknowledged they could provide: *“very good experience in projects and in operations” (R, Co. 2, married/partnered, previous rotational assignee with another company)*. Particular problems in decision-making were identified as inherent. Assignees said this acted as an inhibitor to delivering organisational goals effectively and, as a consequence, in this assignment type providing good career contribution:

“I am disappointed in it because everything takes so much longer ... I can’t make any major decisions without discussing it with (rotational partner) and (she) is out of contact for a month and that delays my decision for a month and if she doesn’t agree then that is another X weeks of discussion. It is very hard to make any significant changes”. (Q, Co. 2, married/partnered, current rotational assignee)

In effect, working just one month in two affected detrimentally the value that a rotational assignee could bring to the role and, as a consequence, the relatively low career contribution that such a working pattern could provide. Rotational assignees also commented on lack of management contact: *“Typically you are not in the office on the other month”* (A, Co. 1, married/partnered now with children, previously a rotational assignee with another company). Rotational assignees also commented on lack of management contact and invisibility: *“you are not in the eyes of the company”* (C, Co. 1, married/partnered, current rotational assignee).

With respect to lifestyle, rotational working created two different lives, one while on shift; then 28 days off enabling a stable home life and time to pursue leisure and study opportunities. The time off in-between shifts was viewed as a major work-life balance contributor to the assignment type choice:

“Rotation is a totally different animal, because you work for 28 days straight...and then you have 28 off with no work. So it is two lives, so you cannot compare (them)”.
(H, Co. 1, divorced/widowed with children, previous rotational assignee)

Rotational assignments were also chosen as they were helpful to women in dual career relationships. They could combine their careers through rotational working with those of their husbands/partners who were based in the home country or on their own assignments: *“I had one beforehand and I saw an advantage as I could balance it with my partner”* (N, Co. 2, married/partnered, previous rotational assignee).

However, the HR experts considered rotation incompatible with motherhood: “*Women just choose not to become involved ... as mothers*” (HR – East Asia, Co. 1) and so did the women assignees:

“I certainly wouldn’t do it now that I am pregnant, but to be honest, once (my first child) arrived and I got back to work ... I think that was the point when I stopped considering rotation as a possibility. But I had to have it ticked on my career forms all the way through right up until he was born”. (D, Co. 1, married/partnered with children, accompanied, current long-term assignee)

Commuter Assignments

The HR personnel reported that commuter assignments were used to service foreign operations as needed. Few assignees had undertaken commuter assignments or planned to do so. They explained that not being based in the host location meant that they were not fully associated with the delivery and outcomes of the role and the local teams, leading to low career contribution:

“...to go to (West Africa) for one week every month ... there was never enough time when you got there to get to know anyone ... that was pretty difficult. I would rather have been (there), I think than do the commute ... on rotation”. (R, Co. 2, married/partnered, previous commuter assignee)

Commuter assignments were considered disruptive and unsustainable by both the HR experts and the female assignees. Assignees spoke of the personal upheaval associated with continual mobility and poor work-life balance. The lack of clear business schedules and

logistics prevented planning and enjoying a family/social life in both the home and the host country, and commuting was stressful and tiring:

“We used to travel practically every two weeks back and forth to (West Africa) to do these negotiations and after a while it takes its toll ... your ... life outside of work, you are not able to plan properly, you can't make commitments.” (X, Co. 2, single, previously commuting regularly within a long-term assignment)

Discussion

This study examines current female expatriates' actual experiences of undertaking four different assignment types to find out how each is considered beneficial or detrimental to women's careers and family life. Drawing upon their lived experiences, the findings provide an insight into female expatriates' decision-making, enabling links to be made with rational choice theory (Becker, 1981) and potentially helping to explain some of the factors that underlie low expatriate gender diversity.

The findings indicate accompanied long-term assignments as women's preferred choice as these give the greatest career contribution and provide the highest levels of home life stability whether women are single, partnered or have dependent family. Accompanied long-term assignments are by far women's most popular choice for any potential future mobility. Women report all forms of flexpatriation as disadvantageous in some way. Short-term assignments provide career development but to a lesser extent than long-term assignments, and are considered disruptive to family life. Rotation provides good functional experience but is not particularly career-enhancing. It has good work-life balance and home life outcomes that suit some single and partnered women, but not those with children. Career,

work-life balance and family life benefits are not reported by women with commuter assignment experience. Female expatriates' experiences indicate downsides that suggest why relatively few choose to undertake flexpatriation now or would consider doing so in future.

There are some difficulties in relation to attempting to maximise fully both career and family outcomes in an international assignment context. Family members are stakeholders in the assignment decision (Lämsä, Heikkinen, Smith & Tornikoski, 2017). Hence, dual careers, and children's education and upbringing play a part in women's long-term assignment type choice. All of the married/partnered women were in dual career relationships and all factored their husband/partner's work opportunities into their choice of assignment type. As a result there was a mix between the woman taking the lead career on this assignment, a job role equivalent to that of her husband/partner, or an expatriate career opportunity that was secondary to that taken by her husband/partner. Going forward the women acknowledged these lead/equivalent/follower roles could change. Short-term assignments, rotation and commuting enabled both partners to address career issues, but were not considered as conducive to supporting personal relationships as long-term assignments.

All of the female expatriates with children in this study were on long-term assignments as this assignment type was considered to be the least disruptive environment for their families. Some long-term assignees demonstrated evidence of satisficing behaviour (Crompton & Harris, 1998a, 1998b), attempting to reach high levels of career and family life outcomes if not necessarily the maximum for both. They did this, for example, by selecting long-term assignment locations with low cost, high quality childcare (East Asia, Caribbean) or terms and conditions to respond to family needs such as housing close to the worksite which enabled more time to be spent with children (North Africa). Other actions included

rejecting destinations deemed unsuitable for children's welfare (such as countries with poor security and health) and partner employment, and negotiating leave for elder care responsibilities. As Shortland (2016b) notes, women may opt for long-term assignments in less career-enhancing destinations considered more appropriate for child rearing.

Short-term assignments have potential to provide career contribution but assignees report them as insufficient to gain business/cultural understanding (Adler & Bartholomew, 1992) and enable goal delivery (Meyskens *et al.*, 2009), unless goals are clearly defined and achievable within an assignment's short time span. This suggests potential for a satisficing strategy (Crompton & Harris, 1998a, 1998b) but, when family outcomes are taken into account, this does not appear feasible. Even when accompanied short-term assignments are offered, women believe it too disruptive to move partners/children so they undertake them alone. Aligned with the literature, solo female short-term assignees report home and family life disruption, lack of family support while away (Starr & Currie, 2009), poor work-life balance (Meyskens *et al.*, 2009) and stress from family separation (Brown, 2008). Thus, home life/family stability is poor. In this study, few women currently undertake short-term assignments or plan to do so; those undertaking them compromise their family life for potential career outcomes.

IAMs report rotational working as widely used in their firms, aligning with oil and gas industry practice (Air Inc., 2017). Used in remote and challenging host locations, rotation is highly male-dominated (Shortland, 2016a). With so few women undertaking this assignment type, this helps to explain low expatriate gender diversity in this sector. The few women with rotational experience in this study report gaining some functional knowledge but little career enhancement due to shared role ownership and low management visibility. Home life though

is predictable, planned and highly stable. Long off-shift rest periods lead to good work-life balance and dual careers can be accommodated well. Of all the solo assignment types, rotation appears to have potential to be popular with women, although it does not suit mothers with dependent children.

The case study organisations offer relatively few commuter assignments which are typically in challenging host destinations. Very few women undertake them or are willing to do so. While the literature suggests that commuter assignees can gain learning/development and networking opportunities (Demel & Mayrhofer, 2010), achieve high goal congruence (Meyskens *et al.*, 2009), and gain career growth (Hamori & Koyuncu, 2011), the female assignees report few such benefits. They regard international commuting as giving low career contribution as their work input is not closely associated with the role performed as they have no host country operational base. In contrast to Meyskens *et al.*'s (2009) prediction that commuter assignments provide medium levels of work-life balance, the assignees report the opposite: international travel is stressful and tiring (Welch *et al.*, 2007), disruptive to life with their partners, and incompatible with raising a family. This suggests a contrast with Fischlmayr & Puchmüller's (2016) findings that female international business travellers maintain their main family caretaking roles during periods of international mobility.

There is increasing evidence that lengthy expatriation is in decline (Morley, Heraty & Collings, 2006); traditional three to five year expatriate assignments are being shortened to two or three years (Konopaske & Werner, 2005). Accompanied status is declining (Brookfield, 2014). Organisational emphasis is increasingly focusing on the use of 'flexpatriate' mobility including short-term and commuter assignments (Air Inc., 2017; Collings & Isichei, 2018). In the oil and gas sector, the use of rotation is increasing (Air Inc.,

2017). Evidence from this study suggests that these trends are likely to be detrimental to expatriate gender diversity.

Implications for Practice

Mindful that the assignment purpose, cost constraints and organisational objectives all play a part in determining the length of assignment used, organisations seeking to improve expatriate gender diversity should try to ensure that long-term assignment timespans are sufficient to build career capital and mitigate the effects of disruption of moving families abroad.

Unaccompanied flexpatriate assignments assist dual career couples to manage both careers but are incompatible with motherhood. Organisations increasing their use of rotational and commuter assignments should consider how these might provide greater individual return on investment and communicate their career benefits effectively. Short-term assignments may be offered accompanied provided the disruption of moving their partners and families for short periods is considered worthwhile. As women's track record as effective expatriate managers is very good (Tung, 2004), organisations need to be mindful of losing out on this valuable source of talent through shortening long-term assignment lengths and increasing their use of flexpatriation.

Implications for Theory

Figure 1 draws upon modified forms of rational choice theory (Becker, 1981) including maximising and satisficing strategies (Chafetz & Hagan, 1996; Crompton & Harris, 1998a, 1998b) and compromise (Corby & Stanworth, 2009) and introduces the notion of 'sacrifice' in women's expatriate work-life choices. Long-term assignments are depicted with the highest levels of career potential and, if accompanied, home life/family stability. The expatriate

women in this study do not follow the prediction of rational choice theory of focusing on family work through economic expediency (Becker, 1981) and home-centeredness by preference (Hakim, 2000). Contrasting with expectations of women as secondary earners with low levels of family power (Harvey, 1998), these female expatriates centre their attention on market work and career goals while also prioritising home and family. Accompanied long-term assignments present what appear to be the ‘rational choice’ for women – they offer potential for a ‘maximiser’ strategy (Chafetz & Hagan, 1996) to address both ‘market work’ (represented by good career outcomes) and ‘family work’ (represented by a positive work-life balance through family life, unity/stability). The assignees spoke of the importance of long-term commitments needed in the oil and gas industry; this focus might suggest an industry-specific feature of this model, further helping to explain long-term assignments as women’s preferred choice.

Short-term, rotational and commuter assignments are undertaken solo. They all enable women to pursue an expatriate career and thus gain international experience, and help them to juggle dual career partnerships, but they result in family separation. Short-term assignments provide the best career potential of these three flexpatriate assignment types but result in home/family life compromise. The regular shift patterns applying to rotation make this solo form of flexpatriation the most attractive in respect of work-life balance but the quid pro quo is that women’s careers are compromised (Corby & Stanworth, 2009). Commuter assignments with their low career outcomes and family disruption require women to make a sacrifice to both their career and family life.

(Figure 1)

Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study is set in the oil and gas industry within two medium-sized exploration and production firms. Further research is needed within different industry sectors/firm sizes to test this model as a predictive tool of women's future assignment type participation. Relatively few women in this study have direct experience of short-term and commuter assignments, reflecting their limited use in the case study firms. Few have also undertaken rotation, meaning that the data in respect of flexpatriate assignment types are limited; further research into women's experiences of these assignment types is therefore needed to test this model.

This study was cross-sectional in design and so was unable to examine the specific career and family outcomes from the women's current assignment participation. Longitudinal research is required to address this limitation. A longitudinal study could also examine the effects of organisations' increasing use of alternative assignment types and any shortening of assignment lengths on expatriate gender diversity. A comparative study is also needed to examine male and female expatriates' experiences of undertaking different assignment types and their career and family outcomes. In this context, the views of spouses of those undertaking various assignment types could further our knowledge of expatriates' assignment choices. Consideration of expatriates' assignment type intentions in relation to non-traditional family situations could also help us to understand further expatriate gender diversity.

Conclusions

The model derived from this study extends our understanding of female expatriation by helping to explain and predict women's choices to participate in traditional and alternative assignment types. Long-term assignments are forecast to be the assignment type of choice for

women's future international mobility. Women's willingness to engage in flexpatriation is hindered by the compromises or sacrifices required in career and/or family outcomes.

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Table 1: HR Interviewees' Roles and Responsibilities

<i>Company 1</i>	<i>Company 2</i>
International Assignments Manager (IAM)	International Assignments Manager (IAM)
HR – Learning and Development	HR – Function Head
HR – Resourcing	HR – Graduate Scheme
HR – East Asia	HR – Resourcing
	HR – Development
	HR – Recruitment
	HR – Training
	HR – Performance
	HR – Learning and Development
	HR – Training and Development

Table 2: Expatriate Interviewee Profile

Individual	Location		Current assignment type (length/pattern)	Assignment type		Work-related factors		Personal factors		Age band
	Home region	Host region		Current assignment status (accompanied/unaccompanied)	Previous assignment type(s) within current firms	Occupation	Grade	Marital status	Family status	
Company 1										
A	Western Europe	East Asia	Long-term	Accompanied		Engineer	Middle	Married/partnered	Children	40-44
B	North America	Central Asia	Long-term	Unaccompanied	Long-term	Engineer	Senior	Divorced/widowed		50+
C	Western Europe	North Africa	Rotation	Unaccompanied		Geologist	Middle	Married/partnered		30-34
D	Western Europe	East Asia	Long-term	Accompanied	Long-term	Geologist	Middle	Married/partnered	Children	30-34
E	East Asia	Western Europe	Long-term	Unaccompanied		HR Manager	Middle	Single		35-39
F	North America	East Asia	Long-term	Accompanied	Long-term	Geophysicist	Middle	Married/partnered		35-39
G	East Asia	North America	Long-term	Unaccompanied	Long-term	Engineer	Junior	Single		30-34
H	North America	Western Europe	Long-term	Unaccompanied	Rotation	IT Specialist	Middle	Divorced/widowed	Children	50+
Company 2										
I	Western Europe	Caribbean	Long-term	Accompanied	Long-term	Geologist	Middle	Married/partnered	Children	40-44
J	Western Europe	North America	Short-term	Unaccompanied		Graduate Trainee	Junior	Married/partnered		25-29
K	Australasia	West Africa	Long-term	Accompanied		Analyst	Middle	Married/partnered		40-44
L	Western Europe	Australasia	Long-term	Unaccompanied	Long-term Short-term	Business Development Manager	Middle	Married/partnered		30-34
M	Western Europe	Central Asia	Long-term	Accompanied	Long-term	Commercial Professional	Middle	Married/partnered		40-44
N	Western	Middle	Long-term	Accompanied	Rotation	Engineer	Middle	Married/		35-

O	Europe Western Europe	East Australasia	Long-term	Accompanied		IT Specialist	Middle	partnered Married/ partnered		39 40- 44
P	Europe Western Europe	Western Europe	Long-term	Accompanied	Short-term	Economist	Middle	Married/ partnered	Children	25- 29
Q	Australasia	Central Asia	Rotation	Unaccompanied		Communications Specialist	Middle	Married/ partnered		30- 34
R	Europe Western Europe	Australasia	Long-term	Accompanied	Commuter	Performance Manager	Middle	Married/ partnered		30- 34
S	Europe Western Europe	North Africa	Long-term	Accompanied	Long-term	Commercial Manager	Senior	Married/ partnered	Children	35- 39
T	Europe Western Europe	East Asia	Short-term	Unaccompanied	Short-term	Graduate Trainee	Junior	Single		< 24
U	Europe Western Europe	North Africa	Long-term	Accompanied	Long-term	Lawyer	Middle	Married/ partnered	Children	40- 44
V	Caribbean	North America	Long-term	Accompanied		Lawyer	Middle	Married/ partnered	Children	40- 44
W	Europe Western Europe	East Asia	Long-term	Accompanied	Long-term Short-term	Geologist	Middle	Married/ partnered	Children	35- 39
X	Caribbean	West Africa	Long-term	Unaccompanied	Long-term	Commercial Manager	Middle	Single		40- 44
Y	Europe Western Europe	Central Asia	Long-term	Unaccompanied		Commercial Manager	Middle	Married/ partnered		40- 44
Z	Europe Western Europe	Central Asia	Rotation	Unaccompanied	Short-term	HR Manager	Middle	Married/ partnered		40- 44

Table 3: Assignment lengths/patterns undertaken

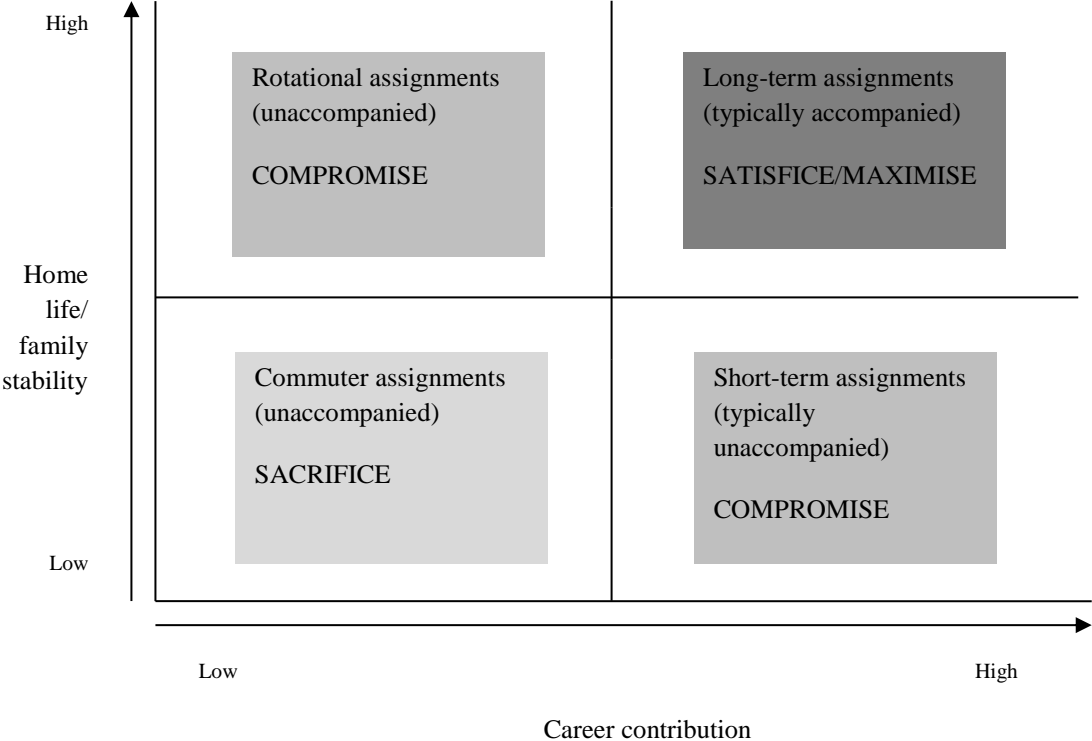
Assignment length	Current assignment	One previous assignment	Two previous assignments	Three previous assignments	Four previous assignments
Long-term	51	12	9	4	1
Extended international transfer	3	1	-	-	-
Short-term	12	18	3	3	-
Rotational	5	2	-	-	-
Commuter	-	1	-	-	-
<i>n</i>	71	34	12	5*	1

* Some women had both long-term and short-term previous assignments.

Table 4: Future willingness to undertake particular assignment types

Type of assignment	Would be undertaken in future								
	Definitely		Maybe		Not at all		No opinion		
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Long-term accompanied	70	52	74.3	15	21.4	1	1.4	2	2.9
Long-term unaccompanied	71	14	19.7	20	28.2	37	52.1	-	-
Short-term accompanied	70	27	38.6	36	51.4	5	7.1	2	2.9
Short-term unaccompanied	70	12	17.1	33	47.1	25	35.7	-	-
Rotational	71	18	25.4	29	40.8	20	28.2	4	5.6
Commuter	70	10	14.3	31	44.3	26	37.1	3	4.3

Figure 1: How international assignment type choices affect current female expatriates' careers and family lives and predict their future assignment type participation



Likelihood of women's future assignment type participation

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 Lowest career and family life outcomes – sacrifice – women least likely to undertake
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 Increase career outcomes – family life compromise
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 Increase family life outcomes – career compromise
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 Highest career and family life outcomes – satisfice/maximise – women most likely to undertake