



# THE PURPOSE OF EXPATRIATION: WHY WOMEN UNDERTAKE INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS

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*Women international assignees have historically been successful, but they make up a relatively low proportion of organizationally assigned expatriates. By appreciating the factors that encourage women to undertake internationally mobile careers, organizations can widen their talent pool. Using a triangulated, qualitative research approach set within two case study firms in the oil and gas exploration and production industry, this article identifies contrasting views between female assignees and their organizations with respect to the purpose of expatriation and the factors women take into consideration in their decision to undertake it. This research is based on analysis of organizational policy; a survey of 71 women expatriates and in-depth, semistructured interviews with 26 female assignees (selected from the survey returns using stratified sampling); and interviews with 14 human resource professionals responsible for international mobility policy design and implementation. Career, family, and financial precondition effects are identified. From these, a model is proposed to link stated organizational assignment purpose with women's participation rationales, and recommendations for practice to increase expatriate gender diversity are set out.*

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## Introduction

**B**usiness activity today is increasingly global in its focus and international assignments are viewed as a critical factor in organizations' competitive success. In this context, multinational corporations are becoming increasingly dependent on mobile cadres of individuals to implement their globalization strategies (Perkins & Hendry, 2001). While organizationally assigned expatriate careers are, thus, of significance both to employers and their employees, women's relatively low share

of these opportunities comes into sharp relief. For example, in the 1980s, just 3 percent of expatriates were women (Adler, 1984). Although women's share of expatriate roles has increased, they make up only 16 to 24 percent of the current expatriate population (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2012; Cartus, 2012; Permits Foundation, 2012a). Explanations of women's low expatriate representation include negative perceptions of their availability, suitability, and capability; the presence of organizational and societal obstacles and barriers to their selection and deployment; suggested self-induced barriers

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including lower career commitment, self-esteem, and career potential reinforced by poor organizational and societal networks and other support systems; and women's unwillingness to engage in expatriate careers when the hurdles appear insurmountably gendered (Altman & Shortland, 2008).

This research study is set in the oil and gas industry's exploration and production function, which is noticeably male dominated. Understanding why women undertake organizationally assigned expatriation in an industry that epitomizes the masculine expatriate preserve brings to the fore women's motivations for so doing, especially given the potential for them to experience even greater discouragement to expatriate than in other more "female friendly" sectors.

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While the extant literature has focused since the 1980s on why women do not expatriate and the barriers they face in taking up organizationally assigned expatriate careers (Shortland & Altman, 2011), this article contributes new knowledge by examining in detail why women undertake such international postings; identifying the degree of correspondence between how women view the purpose of their assignments and the organizational rationale for sending them; and highlighting pointers for human resource (HR) professionals wishing to widen expatriate gender diversity. As such, the objectives of this research are to understand how women view the purpose of their assignments and to develop a model to represent the issues women take into account in their expatriate participation decision making. This study is part of a wider project on women's expatriation set within the oil and gas exploration and production sector.

### Literature Review

Expatriation refers to working abroad, outside of the individual's home country (Edström & Galbraith, 1977). While self-directed expatriation is becoming increasingly common as a career choice (Richardson & Mallon, 2005) and professional migrants present a significant potential resource to international organizations (Carr, Inkson, & Thorn, 2005), they do not hold corporate knowledge such as understanding of organizational processes (Hocking, Brown, & Harzing, 2004). Self-initiated migration also tends to result in concentrations of potential labor in

locations where visa regimes permit such activity, not necessarily aligned with employer demand (Sriskandarajah & Drew, 2006). By contrast, organizationally assigned expatriation addresses the movement of the highly skilled to meet specific employer demands and location requirements (Salt, 1992), and it provides support to the individuals involved (Bozionelos, 2009).

The need to understand what individuals see as the purpose of expatriation and why they accept international assignments is critical to attracting, motivating, and retaining key personnel to deliver organizational strategic goals. An understanding of gender diversity implications is also of particular relevance to organizations as they continue to forecast increasing their expatriate populations, year-on-year (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2012). Expatriate gender diversity makes sound business sense: Women's achievements as expatriates are widely reported (Shortland & Altman, 2011). They are even heralded as being more successful than men in their international assignments across a wide range of countries (e.g., Dallalfar & Movahedi, 1996; Napier & Taylor, 2002; Tung, 2004). This suggests that organizations are losing out by having so few female assignees. By appreciating the factors that encourage women to undertake internationally mobile careers, organizations can widen their talent pool.

### The Purpose of Expatriation

Expatriate assignments are of strategic significance to organizations (Morley & Heraty, 2004). They are used for a variety of reasons; for example, expatriates act as agents of control, aligning subsidiary operations with those of the parent, and as agents in knowledge transfer from the parent to the subsidiary and in the acquisition of host country knowledge (Delios & Björkman, 2000). The deployment of expatriates is of particular importance within international start-ups, partnerships, joint ventures, and mergers and acquisitions as they enable the transfer of learning, expertise, and other synergies (Briscoe & Schuler, 2004).

The purpose of expatriation is classified in a variety of ways. For example, Hocking et al. (2004) suggest a threefold framework comprising business applications (filling positions), organization applications (developing the organization), and expatriate learning (developing managers). Lazarova and Tarique (2005) focus on how the key purpose of an expatriate assignment rests on knowledge transfer. Novicevic and Harvey's (2004) role architecture links assignment purpose with value and uniqueness: job-based (low value and uniqueness); learning-based (low value but

high uniqueness); skills-based (high value but low uniqueness); and competency-based (high value and uniqueness). Assignment descriptors flow from the rationales that underpin expatriate use, for example, knowledge transfer and training assignments, employee or career development assignments, project management assignments, and skills gap or skills transfer assignments (CBI Employee Relocation Council/Deloitte & Touche, 1996).

Yet, the classification of assignments by purpose is not as clear-cut as theoretical frameworks and assignment descriptors imply due to the significant overlap in organizational purpose that takes place (Hocking et al., 2004). Adding to the complexity in understanding the rationale for expatriation, we know that individuals may view its purpose differently from their employing organizations (Thomas, Lazarova, & Inkson, 2005) but that there is little evidence on individual motivations for assignment acceptance (Collings, Scullion, & Dowling, 2009). Expatriation offers opportunities to gain global, professional, and personal experience as well as cultural competence (Adler & Bartholomew, 1992). It is also typically well rewarded. Yet, while the literature notes that monetary satisfaction and applicable benefits are necessary precursors of assignment take-up (Fish & Wood, 1996; Konopaske & Werner, 2005), we know that money is not a major expatriation motivator (Pate & Scullion, 2010).

#### *Expatriation as Part of Women's Career Paths*

While men are identified as following a career track that is linear in form, women's career paths are considered to be kaleidoscope, circular or spiral in nature, linked to their life stages. For example, Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) suggest that men's careers start with challenge; this is then followed by authenticity and finally balance. Women's careers also begin with challenge, but a linear pattern cannot be maintained, as women need to balance relational demands midcareer; finally, they focus on authenticity in late career (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). A three-stage female career model has been similarly proposed by Pringle and Dixon (2003). These authors suggest circular career phases beginning with early exploration and career focus, followed by rebalancing during childbearing years, ending with freedom to investigate alternative options in later life. A three-phase model is also presented by O'Neal and Bilimoria (2005) beginning with idealistic achievement, moving into pragmatic endurance, and culminating in reinventive contribution.

Women's "kaleidoscope" career path models provide a relevant theoretical framework to research why they undertake expatriate careers. The models predict that while women engage with organizational careers in their early working lives, this will decrease during child-rearing as their relational demands take precedence over career concerns. After child-rearing, the models predict little organizational career attraction and women's fulfillment derived from external or self-driven career activities. As such, it would be expected that women would view expatriation as integral within their early career stage, particularly in industries where international mobility is commonplace, with their interest in international mobility as a career intervention declining once they start a family. Yet women's career stages may not differ from men's through choice, but rather from constraint and compromise. For instance, corporate career contribution to managerial and professional women's overall life satisfaction declines with age (Lee, 1993). This may be linked to women perceiving fewer advancement opportunities available to them within organizations (Armstrong-Stassen & Cameron, 2005). Early on in their careers women believe that they can compete on similar terms with men; they expect similar treatment, equality of opportunity, and to be recognized on merit (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011). However, the absence of women in senior roles suggests that while men's corporate careers are viable, women's are less so (Sealy, 2010).

#### *Factors Influencing Women's Expatriation*

The extant literature indicates that international experience is a leadership prerequisite (Caligiuri & Colakoglu, 2007; Mendenhall, Kuhlmann, Stahl, & Osland, 2002; Orser & Leck, 2010). Hence, expatriate participation forms part of career development particularly at managerial levels in multinational firms (Linehan, 2000; Nicholson, 2000). Expatriation may be viewed as part of a linear career path, with expatriate assignments typically being undertaken in mid to late career (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2010). This suggests that women are less likely to hold career-enhancing organizationally assigned expatriate roles, as these are generally offered at the life stages when they have taken time out to rear their families or have opted out in search of authenticity and career fulfillment outside of the corporate environment (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). Indeed, the extant literature suggests women's tied status reduces their international mobility (Ackers, 2004) and that having children reduces willingness to take up assignments and even precludes

women's expatriation (Dupuis, Haines, & Saba, 2008; Hutchings, Metcalfe, & Cooper, 2010; Tharenou, 2008; Tzeng, 2006; Zhu, Luthans, Chew, & Li, 2006). Crompton and Harris (1998a, 1998b) suggest that women wishing to pursue a career and raise a family engage in "satisficing" decisions whereby they try to attempt to maximize both their careers and family life. In industry, though, this is difficult. As Corby and Stanworth (2009) note, women miss out on the best career potential, as they have to compromise their careers for their family life.

Self-initiated international mobility offers international exposure (Vance, 2005), cross-cultural experience, growth, excitement, and improved career prospects (Tharenou, 2003). It also provides accelerated development opportunities for men and women, although it appears to give "a deeper and more integrated experience for women" (Myers & Pringle, 2005, p. 421). It is therefore an attractive form of international working

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ing for women. For example, a trend among Japanese women in their twenties and thirties has emerged. Unable to gain managerial experience at home, they set out to gain career development through self-initiated migration, working abroad in countries such as Hong Kong (Clark, 1996) and others with large expatriate communities such as Singapore (Thang, MacLachlan, & Goda, 2002). However, in so doing they find themselves marginalized through cross-cultural differences between Japan and their chosen host location (Thang et al., 2002)

and, as Leung, Luk, and Lo (2000) find in respect of Chinese women who pursue such managerial careers, in violation of social norms with regard to traditional sex roles at home. Self-selecting expatriates may be viewed as "risk-taking" individuals (Kling, Alexander, McCorkle, & Martinez, 1999), potentially being seen as "explorers" although also less positively as "outsiders," even "refugees" (Richardson & McKenna, 2000). This is particularly the case when they take up positions in developing countries. Nonetheless, women may elect to go to such locations for philanthropic reasons; they report that the altruistic rewards that flow from making a positive contribution to their host country outweigh the difficulties that they experience (Fechter, 2008).

We know that women undertake self-initiated expatriation to gain professional and geographical mobility, achieve higher living standards, experience cross-cultural encounters, and achieve

self-discovery (Thang et al., 2002), but they also experience significant problems in so doing, in their self-driven, protean careers (Hall, 1996). The extant literature provides less detail on why women undertake organizationally assigned expatriation, how such female assignees view the purpose of their assignments, and its degree of correspondence to the organizational rationale for their posting. For instance, although the career benefits for women of accepting various types of international assignments are discussed, including making contacts with clients, customers, partners, and stakeholders, and gaining language skills and proving their competencies (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, & Herbert, 2004), emphasis has been placed, in the main, on the barriers women face in gaining access to the career-enhancing organizationally assigned international positions that deliver these valuable career outcomes (Linehan, 2000). Tharenou (2009) points out that women's participation in self-initiated expatriation is equal to men's, in sharp contrast to their share of organizationally initiated assignments. This may be because the former opens up career advancement opportunities that women find unavailable or inaccessible via organizational assignments.

The literature attests to long-standing uncertainty of career paths including expatriation and of employment continuity on repatriation (Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Forster, 1992, 1997; Tung, 1988). A lack of clear employer statements on potential positions and duties post-assignment is reported (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2010). Tharenou (2009) suggests further that female organizationally assigned expatriates are less satisfied with both expatriation and repatriation than their male colleagues, are less able to gain suitable career growth on return to their home country sending organization, and experience greater reentry difficulties than men. Despite this somewhat negative perspective, limited research in the oil and gas industry has shown that despite "macho" male cultures, organizationally assigned expatriation does provide women with high career contribution, friendship, and camaraderie (Shortland, 2011).

Assignments with the primary business driver of global leadership through planned career development are likely to result in long-term expatriate strategies (PWC/Cranfield, 2006). Yet, skills shortages necessitate the requirement for rapid deployment of individuals to meet short-term business needs with the demand for project work, mergers, divestitures, start-ups, and restructuring in particular requiring short-term mobility (Cappellen & Janssens, 2005). Short-term assignments address barriers to mobility such as dual

careers and concerns over children's education as employees are able to work abroad without having to move their families due to the short time scale of separation (Forster, 2000). This type of assignment also helps to support intentions to repatriate (De Cieri, Sheehan, Costa, Fenwick, & Cooper, 2009). Unaccompanied rotational assignments are commonly used in remote or hostile locations by the oil, gas, and mining industry (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2011). They typically involve regular working patterns (such as 28 days on shift, followed by 28 days off shift at home). By their very nature, they are unaccompanied. While traditional expatriation is typically a career choice, flexpatriate working is not—it is explicit in job descriptions at senior and professional levels. Research in the oil industry finds flexible assignments less disruptive than traditional long-term postings (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl, & Kollinger, 2004), although women are found to be more likely to give up such assignments if their family circumstances demand it (Mayerhofer et al., 2004). This suggests that different assignment time frames and mobility patterns could have an impact on women's concerns and priorities in assignment acceptance and their view of the assignment purpose.

Brookfield Global Relocation Services (2012) reports that 60 percent of expatriates are married, and 81 percent of married or partnered assignees are accompanied on their assignments. The timing and location of assignments can be problematic when couples expatriate and both partners wish to work abroad. Dual careers have historically caused difficulties for employers, and employees and have acted as barriers or disincentives to assignment acceptance (Harvey, 1997a, 1997b). Thus, couples may need to agree to prioritize one career (not automatically to the woman's detriment) or to accept assignments on an alternate, negotiated basis as circumstances dictate (Hardill, Green, Dudleston, & Owen, 1997). The literature suggests that spouses support each other such that assignments undertaken offer the best combination of career contribution to each partner (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004; Välimäki, Lämsä, & Hiillos, 2009). Flexible assignment patterns potentially enable women to balance their working lives with those of their spouses or partners if both cannot gain concurrent expatriate employment in the same location. Where couples are both employed by the same organization, Hakim (2000) suggests that such "co-working" arrangements lead to female partners undertaking less senior roles. Yet, the literature does draw our attention to examples of greater career equivalency (e.g., Lakhani & Gade, 1992).

### *The Oil and Gas Exploration and Production Sector as a Research Area*

Work permit and visa data collected by governments can provide an indication of the scale of organizational involvement in the movement of the highly skilled, for instance, via intracompany transfers or external hires into shortage occupations. However, as not all personnel require work visas, only a partial picture of volume is presented (Millar & Salt, 2007). Despite the lack of official statistics providing a definitive number of expatriates in the organizational context, Permits Foundation (2012a) estimates that employer-supported expatriation represents just below 2 percent of multinationals' workforces.

Survey research into various aspects of expatriation reveals a slow upward trend in women's participation as international assignees (Altman & Shortland, 2008). Yet, average female expatriate participation figures such as those reported annually or biennially in practitioner surveys by relocation management companies such as Brookfield and Cartus hide sectoral differences. For example, nonprofit or charity and governmental organizations record female expatriate participation at 30 percent; legal, consulting, and professional services, 27 percent; and advertising, media, and publishing, 25 percent. At the opposite extreme, construction and engineering record only 6 percent, and mining and oil 7 percent (ORC Worldwide, 2007). It is notable that while expatriate careers have proliferated, women's share of expatriate participation in mining and oil has risen only marginally—up from 5 percent in 1992 (ORC/CBI Employee Relocation Council, 1992).

Some two-thirds of work permits issued within extractive industries (mining, oil, and gas) relate to intracompany transfers (Salt & Millar, 2006). This demonstrates the emphasis placed by this sector on sponsoring the expatriation of known, highly skilled, and managerial personnel. Mining and oil organizations are major, and increasing, users of expatriates (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2009) and typically employ higher percentages of international assignees than multinationals in other sectors (Mays, Graham, & Vinnicombe, 2005). As major oil firms have large retail operations that do not typically involve expatriation, this suggests that the percentages of expatriates employed within the sector's exploration and production workforce are likely to be even higher. Because the oil and gas exploration and production sector employs such large volumes of expatriates, even though women make up a relatively small percentage share of its expatriate roles (ORC Worldwide, 2007), organizations in this sector

have some of the highest numbers of women in their workforces undertaking organizationally assigned expatriation. In addition, a number of multinationals within oil and gas are particularly active within lobbying organizations, promoting gender diversity as a business case within international assignments (Permits Foundation, 2012b). The oil and gas exploration and production sector, therefore, presents both a fascinating context and a viable research base in which to research why women undertake expatriation.

Set within the theoretical context of women's "kaleidoscope" careers (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007) and the industry context of oil and gas exploration and production, this study sets out to address the following research questions:

1. How do female expatriates view the purpose of their assignments?
2. Which factors influence women's decisions to accept an expatriate assignment and to what

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extent and why are these important to women's expatriate participation?

### Method

Case study research was conducted in two oil and gas firms with UK-based operations. Company A employed approximately 12,000 people in 20 countries, of whom 3 percent were expatriates; women made up 8 percent of its expatriate population. Company B employed some 6,000 people in 30 countries; 10 percent were expatriates, and women represented 11 percent of its expatriate population. The case study firms were considered to be representative of medium-sized oil and gas organizations, not unique or

extreme cases (Yin, 2009). In total, they employed 93 women expatriates (27 in Company A and 66 in Company B).

The research was facilitated by the HR manager who held responsibility for international assignments in each firm. These two "gatekeepers" were unwilling to involve line managers in their international locations due to time and cost constraints; they were, however, willing to grant access to relevant organizational policies and HR contacts (people on their teams with whom they had good working relationships) as well as all of their female assignees. First, international assignment policies were collected from the two case

study firms and analyzed. Given the considerable volume of material, a process of data reduction was necessary (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and descriptive commentaries composing a document inventory of only those policies relevant to the female assignee research subjects were drawn up for reference purposes. From these, summary tables were constructed and used to identify aspects of expatriate policy content, which, supported by the analysis of the extant literature, framed the development of the questions posed to the HR and expatriate personnel via the interview and survey research.

The two HR managers who held responsibility for managing international assignment policy and practice in each firm were interviewed in-depth. They were asked questions about a range of assignment issues including, at a general level, why international assignments were used in their organizations and to give illustrative examples, if possible, drawn from their female assignee workforces. In addition, 12 other HR professionals (three in Company A and nine in Company B) who held responsibility for other aspects of policy design and implementation relevant to expatriation (such as resourcing, learning and development, training and performance management) were identified by the two gatekeepers and in-depth semistructured interviews were conducted with them covering a range of assignment issues as part of the wider research project. These HR personnel were also asked to comment on the purpose of expatriate assignments in their organization.

All of the women expatriates employed by the two case study firms were surveyed by e-mail. Stratified sampling (Collis & Hussey, 2009) was used to identify a representative sample of 26 expatriates from the survey returns so that in-depth assignee interviews could be conducted. The sample ensured appropriate representation by length and pattern of assignment, un/accompanied status, sending and current host locations, previous assignments undertaken, and job roles. The research approach was thus triangulated by analyzing written organizational policy content; interview transcripts from HR professionals responsible for policy design and implementation; and those in receipt of the policy and its practical implementation, namely, the female expatriates who were surveyed supported with in-depth assignee interviews. The interviews were tape-recorded with interviewee permission sought and transcribed. To preserve confidentiality, no real names or personal data by which individuals can be identified are used; country data are generalized to a regional level. Details of the assignee participant profile are given in Table I. Participants came

**TABLE I Assignee Participant Profile**

Region	Company A						Company B					
	Assignees Interviewed (n = 8)		Assignees Not Interviewed (n = 11)		Assignees Interviewed (n = 18)		Assignees Not Interviewed (n = 34)		Assignees Interviewed (n = 18)		Assignees Not Interviewed (n = 34)	
	Home	Host	Home	Host	Home	Host	Home	Host	Home	Host	Home	Host
Western Europe	3	2	7	2	14	1	18	13				
North America	3	1	0	5	0	2	3	3				
East Asia	2	3	3	4	0	2	0	3				
Australasia	0	0	1	0	2	3	0	1				
Central Asia	0	1	0	0	0	4	2	0				
Caribbean	0	0	0	0	2	1	2	5				
North Africa	0	1	0	0	0	2	3	7				
West Africa	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1				
Middle East	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1				
Indian subcontinent	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0				
South America	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0				
<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Geoscience/ Engineering</b>	<b>Professional Nontechnical</b>	<b>Geoscience/ Engineering</b>	<b>Professional Nontechnical</b>	<b>Geoscience/ Engineering</b>	<b>Professional Nontechnical</b>	<b>Geoscience/ Engineering</b>	<b>Professional Nontechnical</b>	<b>Geoscience/ Engineering</b>	<b>Professional Nontechnical</b>	<b>Geoscience/ Engineering</b>	<b>Professional Nontechnical</b>
<b>Assignment type</b>	Current	Previous	Current	Previous	Current	Previous	Current	Previous	Current	Previous	Current	Previous
Long-term	6	2	7	4	3	15	17	17				
Short-term	7	4	7	0	14	7	24	5				
Rotation	0	0	1	2	2	5	9	11				
Commuter	1	1	0	0	2	1	1	1				
Extended transfer	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0				
	0	0	3	1	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A				

from 17 different home countries and worked in 17 different host countries.

Survey participants were asked to rate the importance of the following issues in relation to their decision to participate in their current expatriate assignment: gaining international experience; gaining cultural understanding; gaining professional experience; gaining personal experience; the potential to gain promotion in the host location; the potential to damage her career through assignment refusal; the potential to enhance her career through assignment acceptance; having a job to come back to on return home; and the potential to gain promotion on return home through undertaking the assignment. Each woman also had the opportunity to state and rate other career issues and was asked

Care was taken to ensure that the main themes identified from the research (and illustrative quotations) represented the respondent population and did not just reflect the concerns of particular individuals.

to record which, of all of the issues, was the most important to her assignment participation decision and why. Pilot testing indicated the requirement to reduce complexity in the survey design in recognition of survey participants' time constraints and various first languages, leading to use of a three-point scale (3 = very important; 2 = important; 1 = not important).

The semistructured interviews that were carried out with the 14 HR professionals (30–90 minutes) and the 26 female assignees (60–90 minutes) took place either in the United Kingdom, face to face, or where the interviewee was based abroad, by telephone. Assignees interviewed were asked to articulate the purpose of their assignments. They were invited to comment on the priority that they gave to the money; the benefits package; their career; and other factors such as location, lifestyle, and family when they decided to take their current assignments. In addition, they were asked about the extent to which they considered going on assignment as being crucial to their career development and progression and whether they considered particular assignments to be more career enhancing than others.

A high response rate (76 percent) was achieved from the survey. There were 71 responses from the total population of 93 women expatriates: 19 from Company A (70 percent) and 52 (79 percent) from Company B. Questionnaire returns were analyzed using SPSS to produce descriptive statistics that were used to set context for the qualitative data and subsequent evaluation of the research

findings. Qualitative data analysis was carried out using NVivo 8. The coding of the qualitative data from the interviews and the open comments sections of the survey formed the underpinning to a template analysis, with the coding trees representing themes (King, 2004).

The number of expatriates and HR professionals who commented on an issue was recorded; the total number of references that these sources made to each issue was also noted.

Interpretation of the data required analysis of the relationship between the number of sources and references made to a particular issue. For instance, where the number of sources and references were equal, each interviewee mentioned the issue once. Where the volume of references exceeded the number of sources, the data were examined to determine whether the pattern of responses was broadly even (most interviewees mentioned the issue a similar number of times) or whether the issue was of concern to just one respondent who mentioned it multiple times. Care was taken to ensure that the main themes identified from the research (and illustrative quotations) represented the respondent population and did not just reflect the concerns of particular individuals. Conducting a thematic analysis based on the coding template enabled the researcher to identify, analyze, and report on patterns within the data and enabled identified issues to be grouped. Analysis of the qualitative data drew out both consensus and difference between policy, organizational (HR) expectation, and employee experience. As rival explanations emerged from the data analysis, this helped to support the internal validity of the research (Yin, 2009).

## Findings

The first step of data analysis involved reading the international assignment policies from both organizations to identify references to any stated purpose. Company A's long-term assignment policies referred to addressing skills and knowledge transfers; the short-term assignment policy highlighted a similar purpose but with emphasis on time as it related to the transfer of specialist skills or knowledge for a project or to meet a specific business need. Company B's suite of policies did not mention assignment purpose at all. However, the HR experts in both firms indicated that expatriate assignments were used for similar reasons. As shown in Table II, the HR staff reported that assignments were used for the following purposes: functional (day-to-day) working roles, project-based roles, strategic development of business operations in line with organizational goals, or for employee development.



**TABLE II** How Women and HR Professionals View the Purpose of Expatriate Assignments

Issue	Interview/Survey Quotes	Issue	Interview/Survey Quotes
<b>Development</b> Development: 16AS (24R) 3HR (4R)	... it was part of the graduate scheme and the purpose for going ... was really developmental. <i>Linda, Australasia</i> As long as it links into my development and it works for my development and supports my career path, yes (I'll go). <i>Esther, Western Europe</i> ... the distinction between the performance and the development side for graduates is less clear-cut ... a lot of their objectives are actually development objectives. <i>Cliff, HR</i> ... they set up an office out here and offered (my husband) a job ... he said, "Well, we don't want to be living on opposite sides of the world and we can't survive on one income" ... because my department ... was being reorganized on a global scale, they managed to find something for me, so it is a development area for me, but it was also counted as part of the practicality that they needed (my husband)... <i>Olive, Australasia</i>	<b>Strategy</b> Strategic: 5AS (5R) 1HR (1R)	So it had a strategy element to it, but ... it didn't mean that I was responsible for strategy. It meant that we were following the strategy and making sure that the strategy continued to evolve... <i>Milly, Central Asia</i> They are definitely developmental assignments ... my ... manager would probably say that they were strategic... <i>Trish, East Asia</i> I would say it has turned out to be developmental ... it is performing a functional role, but it has strategic aspects especially about how we grow the business here. <i>Susan, North Africa</i> At the strategic level, typically, we would expect them to be people who could go anywhere. But they will be commanding huge jobs... <i>Sue, HR</i>
<b>Co-working</b> Co-working in dual career couple: 4AS (17R)	...it is more of a functional assignment...in these satellite offices we are just filling a role ... you realize that there is no oil in that basin and you're on to the next basin. You're just blowing and going, you're just working hard, working multiple projects... <i>Fiona, East Asia</i> I've been doing it for six years. I have not been doing the same job, as it has evolved and I have been promoted ... even though we are not drilling any more they ... still want an international person there to ... take care of the company's interests. <i>Cara, North Africa</i> ...the areas that we tend to find we need to fill with expats ... for reasons of ... worrying about locals, we have had issues in the past of fraudulent behavior. So we wanted to put an expatriate in that position... <i>Alexis, HR</i> ... the majority of our expats are actually working a role and the reality is we don't see any local who could do that role. <i>Sue, HR</i>	<b>Projects</b> Project: 20AS (33R) 2HR (4R)	... the assignment ... was a project-based assignment ... and the reason I was put up as a candidate. ... But ... it was very much development for me personally. <i>Di, East Asia</i> I came to ... develop my career path but ... I am assigned to a particular project ... and work with a project team. <i>Gina, North America</i> ... it is probably mostly project, but from my perspective, there is a developmental component to it because it is a new region. <i>Abby, East Asia</i> ... that is a good project and I would like to do that ... so if there is a break, it gives you that leap to go further. <i>Polly, Western Europe</i> ... for a specific project ... it is just that that person is needed ... their skills are needed ... <i>Alexis, HR</i> ... you know upfront it's got a finite piece of work to be done or project ... you need a specialist typically. <i>Sue, HR</i>

AS = number of assignees; HR = number of HR experts who commented on an issue; R = total number of references made to that issue.

AQ3

The HR experts said that expatriates filled functional roles usually when there were no local employees trained and available; project-based roles met the demands of new operations or filled skills gaps; strategic assignments applied only at the highest levels; and developmental assignments were primarily offered to graduate trainees. Despite the HR contacts suggesting a clearly demarcated purpose underlying the use of an expatriate assignment, the assignees reported considerable overlap. For example, of the 26 assignees interviewed, 20 noted a project-based nature to their assignment; 16 said it had a developmental purpose; 14 said they performed a functional role; while five reported performing a strategic role. As expected, the two interviewees undertaking graduate trainee assignments said that they were developmental. However, irrespective of seniority; occupation; current or previous assignment type; and whether they were undertaking functional, strategic, or project-based roles, all recognized, appreciated, and placed emphasis on the developmental nature of their assignments. Many also reported on intertwined and changing rationales during their expatriation:

My move ... was under the guise of a project-based assignment but there was a large personal development and career development aspect to it ... It has kind of morphed itself ... I am now no longer working in the role or the project that I was brought over to work on. (Di, East Asia)

Besides viewing their assignments as having a mix of business justifications, some women reported their assignment being driven by the expatriation of their spouses or partners. For example, four said their assignment purpose resulted from “coworking” (where the couple was employed by the same firm, with both partners employed as expatriates); while all four said they were “trailing spouses” (following their husbands who were offered their assignments first), one reported holding the lead career in terms of salary. The women spoke of couples having strong bargaining power and using this to achieve two expatriate assignments in the same location, at the same time, with the same company. While coworking was not a stated organizational assignment purpose, the HR managers responsible for international assignments in both firms reported their companies’ “guiding principles” were to keep couples and families together—“*we have got to work around accommodating that*”—and that this could mean creating an assignment for one partner if necessary.

The data suggest a mismatch between expatriates’ understanding of assignment purpose and the business reasons given by HR. In effect, the business drivers underlying expatriation, as articulated by HR, appear not to be implemented clearly in practice. Women assignees, therefore, interpret the purpose of their assignments as partly linked to business goals, but, given that these may lack clarity, they also place emphasis on their own career development and their spousal and family relationships. These findings indicate a potential contribution to knowledge: Female expatriates view their assignment participation purpose as linked both to career contribution opportunities and aspects of home and family life. To examine this in more depth, the qualitative and survey data were interrogated to explore the female expatriates’ reasons for current assignment acceptance.

#### *Career Contribution: The Value of Undertaking Expatriation*

Career development was the most frequently cited reason for assignment participation. As shown in Table III, 16 NVivo codes related to this, generating a total of 360 assignee references. For example, 29 assignees commented on the professional development gained through expatriation. Indeed, 81.7 percent of the 71 survey respondents recorded gaining professional experience as “very important” (median 3) to their current assignment participation. The assignees highlighted a range of issues, including the technical challenges offered in international locations that would not be experienced at home, gaining experiences at regional or operational level outside of headquarters, and the opportunity to gain exposure to new ideas and operations. The outcome was encapsulated as follows:

“Gaining professional experience ... will increase my knowledge and my employability everywhere.” (Joyce, Western Europe)

Similarly, 81.7 percent said that being able to gain international experience was “very important” (median 3), and 31 assignees commented on this. The key theme concerned the global nature of their industry and the requirement to understand different business approaches across the world. The ability to gain personal experience through expatriation was deemed “very important” (median 3) by 77.1 percent of the survey respondents, and 28 assignees reported that gaining personal development was a key reason for assignment acceptance.

Although only 44.1 percent said that gaining cultural understanding was “very important”

**TABLE III Career Development Reasons for Women's Expatriate Participation**

Issue	Interview/Survey Quotes	Issue	Interview/Survey Quotes
<b>Career growth</b> Career: 27AS (63R) 1HR (1R) CV-résumé: 2AS (2R)	Ultimately, general career enhancement is the main motivator through the assignment job itself and the prospects that will follow. <i>Fatima, North America</i> ... (expatriation) is a key factor in many career opportunities and recruitment criteria as we are a very internationally focused company. <i>Sally, Australasia</i> ... it would be good ... in terms of my CV. <i>Zara, Central Asia</i> They are deemed to be career enhancing ... <i>Alexis, HR</i>	<b>Cultural understanding</b> Culture: 20AS (28R) Immersion in local understanding: 14AS (21R)	... the oil industry is ... culturally diverse ... to get the most out of it one has to understand and participate with different cultures. <i>Naomi, Caribbean</i> ... if you are ... taking leadership positions ... it is not just the skills ... and the working style ... everything you have to deal with in your home country, you've got to learn that in another country. <i>Fiona, East Asia</i>
<b>Gaining experience</b> International experience: 31AS (45R) 1HR (1R) Objectives: 11AS (22R) Work experience: 15AS (30R)	The opportunity to work with diverse people and gain exposure early in my career is an excellent leverage for going forward. <i>Elsie, Western Europe</i> Many professionals from many different countries with the same goals and objectives is challenging me. <i>Zanna, East Asia</i> People don't know it but it is a bit different from the rest of the company. They don't realize that you get the kind of experience that you'd never get anywhere else. <i>Cara, North Africa</i> ... you need to have international experience and this is your opportunity to get it and if you don't take it, well where else are you going to get the experience that you need? <i>Alexis, HR</i>	<b>Doing something different</b> Time for change: 5AS (8R) Variety: 8AS (8R)	I enjoyed the challenge, because it is so big, so mammoth, so complex, and that is why I took the job and what I had been doing at corporate, I had been doing for four years, so it was time for a change. <i>Questa, Central Asia</i> ... rather than changing jobs and going to work for another company ... to shake things up a bit and get some variety ... career-wise and interest wise ... it's brilliant. <i>Olive, Australasia</i>
<b>Personal goals</b> Autonomy: 4AS (4R) Challenge: 12AS (21R) Prove yourself: 2AS (3R)	... there are fewer people, so you get more diverse things to do. I think you get more autonomy ... you might find yourself ... managing people who are out in the trenches in different countries, and ... I think that becomes more difficult to do, and ... to earn the respect of the people who work for you if you don't know what it's like. <i>Susan, North Africa</i> I did not know anyone ... and chose the position knowing very little about the country. Half the fun of being expat is taking these steps into the unknown. <i>Miranda, Caribbean</i> ... for me, first, the challenge. It was something that I had never done before. It was a challenge and I feel I will learn if I get that job, so this is a big motivation ... <i>Gina, North America</i> ... the idea was I would go out on that project to prove myself and then ... stay out in that asset ... <i>Polly, Western Europe</i>	<b>Development</b> <b>Learning:</b> 13AS (21R) Professional development: 29AS (43R) 1HR (1R) Personal development: 28AS (34R) 1HR (1R) Skills development: 6AS (7R)	... it is just a learning curve. I am like a sponge. I soak up everything ... I am exposed to and I am a chameleon also, I can adapt very easily. <i>Harriet, Western Europe</i> The opportunity to learn new things is of vital importance to me, as that is what keeps me interested in the job. <i>Jenny, North America</i> My current location offers many technical challenges that I would not experience elsewhere. This will enhance my knowledge and competency profile ... <i>Marilyn, North Africa</i> ... any experience outside of your own location is always deemed to be developmental, because you are seeing another perspective of the company's business. <i>Alexis, HR</i>

AS = number of assignees; HR = number of HR experts who commented on an issue; R = total number of references made to that issue.

(median 2), 20 spoke of the career benefits that flowed from gaining societal and organizational cultural understanding. Indeed, 14 explained the importance of immersion in local understanding of business dealings. They highlighted that to understand how business was done, it was necessary to operate within the culture at the local level, pointing out that such local understanding was a necessary prerequisite for promotion. In North Africa, for instance, the female assignees spoke of the need to build relationships with staff and other stakeholders as being a critical cultural competency required for a successful assignment (*"relationships are king"*). Overall, the assignees were positive about their cultural experiences, even when they encountered difficulties. For

*An unexpected issue affecting career outcomes potentially flowing from undertaking expatriation emerged from the thematic analysis of the qualitative data, namely, the profile and size of the asset where the expatriate assignment took place.*

example, when working in all-male local offices the problems that they had to manage resulted in valuable learning and development:

I was the only technical female working there and I was not accepted by the local male staff ... they were not going to take training from me. They would ... hide data ... so that I couldn't actually access it ... but ... I learnt. (Wanda, North Africa)

In addition to gaining professional, international, personal, and cultural experiences, the expatriates gave a number of other career development-related reasons for undertaking their assignments. These included the learning opportunities, skills development, challenge, autonomy, and variety that they presented—all factors that they believed helped them along their career track. In particular, working

on assignments where resources were stretched gave them greater levels of responsibility. Indeed, 27 assignees specifically indicated the value of expatriation to their career progression, noting that it was *"absolutely crucial,"* particularly *"...if you aspire to reach a ... fairly senior level."* Despite these findings indicating that international experience was considered to be a necessary leadership prerequisite and that high importance was placed on career progression, it was surprising that only 34.8 percent of the survey respondents recorded the potential to enhance their careers through assignment acceptance as "very important" (median 2) to their participation decision. Only 28.8 percent said that the potential to gain

promotion in the host location and 27.9 percent that the potential to be promoted on return home were "very important" (median 2). These data suggest that career enhancement and promotion are by no means considered as automatically secured through assignment acceptance. However, the assignees did not envisage damaging their careers should they turn down an assignment—only four survey respondents (7.7 percent) said that this was "very important" (median 1) in their current assignment participation decision. Having a job to return to, however, was thought to be "very important" by 35.8 percent (median 2).

#### *Career Contribution: The Effect of Asset Profile and Size*

In the oil and gas exploration and production sector, the upstream physical operations (wells, platforms, pipelines, and reserves and the backup functions servicing them either on- or off-site) based in, or linked to, a geographical location where oil and gas exploration and production takes place are described as "assets." An unexpected issue affecting career outcomes potentially flowing from undertaking expatriation emerged from the thematic analysis of the qualitative data, namely, the profile and size of the asset where the expatriate assignment took place (mentioned by 19 and eight assignees, respectively). As the qualitative data in Table IV indicate, the career contribution derived from an assignment depends upon the stage of—and revenue generated from—the oil and gas exploration and production asset. As such, this helps to explain why the survey findings suggest that career progression and promotion may not be viewed as an automatic conclusion of assignment acceptance. Some assets had high potential for career contribution, others had less: put simply, *"there are times when it is great to be in assets and ... when not so much is happening."* The potentially positive (or negative) career outcomes linked to asset stage were recognized clearly by assignees who had undertaken several assignments as well as by those on their first posting:

Those countries that are ... just about to bring on value to the corporate are the ones that get the attention and ... will enhance your career, whereas the ones that are going to be delivering bad news because they have been in production a long time and therefore present ... damage limitation rather than bringing glory for the company ... will not enhance to the same extent. (Una, North Africa)

Certain regions were identified as able to provide the most promising career prospects through

**TABLE IV** The Importance of the Host Asset's Career Potential for Women's Expatriate Participation

Issue	Interview/Survey Quotes	Issue	Interview/Survey Quotes
<p><b>Profile</b> Asset profile: 19AS (58R) 4HR (4R)</p>	<p>... when I was there ... there was a new find but the downstream business wasn't making much money ... It was "Why are we in South America?" ... So if you come back and say, "I've been to (South America)," they say, "Oh yeah, great" (sarcasm) but now if you come back and you say, "I have been to the (South American) asset," they say, "Oh wow! And what is that like, how interesting an asset, what project were you on?" <i>Polly, Western Europe</i></p> <p>If you were to go out to (North Africa) now ... it is still a vast asset, producing a tremendous amount of value ... but still people wouldn't necessarily say, "Ah, you are in the team that operated (North Africa)," because it is not as sexy. <i>Linda, Australasia</i></p> <p>... if you are in one of these sorts of outposts, where there are not many visitors from head office that can ... be a problem ... in a state of stagnation ... not kicking a lot of goals. <i>Karen, West Africa</i></p> <p>... some of the newer ventures like (Australasia), (South America), or some of the really core producing assets, like (North Africa) or (Caribbean) for example. (North America) for business development is also very good. <i>Julie, North America</i></p> <p>When you want a real career ... you would go to ... (HQ). <i>Cara, North Africa</i></p> <p>... we spend quite a lot of time explaining to them what the asset is like ... <i>Bobby, HR</i></p> <p>... there would be some ... light touch, soft option locations. <i>Sue, HR</i></p> <p>... she wasn't particularly enamored with being sent (to Central Asia) ... So she took some convincing that it was a good move. <i>Alexis, HR</i></p>	<p>Size of asset: 8AS (18R) 1HR (2R)</p>	<p>It is not so much the actual location, but the work that is being done in those locations ... the bigger the operation, the more experience you would get, because there would be more going on, and this is a very small operation that we have here and I have never felt particularly challenged at all. <i>Babs, Central/Asia</i></p> <p>(North African asset) and (Caribbean asset) seem to be popular, but I guess that is just because they are big offices ... Certainly the larger assets tend to have more developed functions, and there is a lot more scope for the asset being autonomous ... I think small assets tend to rely more on ... headquarters functions. <i>Olive, Australasia</i></p> <p>I would have put (Central Asia), if we do phase (X) some-time in the future, so we are undertaking another massive project out there, that again will come up in the rankings. There are other assets that we have, smaller assets, and assets that aren't in such a critical stage in their development, where you might get a growth opportunity, where you might be, say, one grade level or ... your job is to manage a discrete project but the next role that you are looking for, you want to manage a small business effectively or a business unit, some of these assets that aren't in such a critical stage of delivery or the small assets offer good opportunities to people to get that management experience. So, that would certainly be something that I would ... be looking into, if I were to go overseas again. <i>Linda, Australasia</i></p> <p>... if it's a smaller location the likelihood is ... that to progress your career you need to potentially go on another assignment. <i>Alexis, HR</i></p>

AS = number of assignees; HR = number of HR experts who commented on an issue; R = total number of references made to that issue.

their profile or size, including newer ventures such as Australasia and vast core producers such as in North Africa and the Caribbean. North America was also identified as being able to provide career opportunities through particular specialist job roles being sited there. However, the expatriates were mindful of the different stages in the exploration and production cycle and that as asset profiles changed, so did the career contribution that the asset could provide. Thus, being part of a new project enabled assignees to “ride the wave of the build up.” Working on exploration in a high-profile discovery, such as recent finds in South America, was exciting and attracted immense and positive attention: “They say ‘oh wow! And what is that like, how interesting an asset.’” Core producers were “not as sexy” but were still “vast ... producing a tremendous amount of value.” Accepting an assignment in a declining asset could lead to considerable problems in gaining future roles. Assets in decline, such as those in West and East Africa, were viewed as “outposts,” problematic as they attracted “few visitors from head office.” Thus, all in all, assets in exciting stages of development were considered to provide the greatest career contribution. Large assets and steady core producers were less high profile but, nonetheless, were viewed as offering a wider range of career experiences and also high management visibility:

... if you're going to the big ones, you will have visibility because where do senior management go if they can only go to two countries a year? They go to the big ones; they are not going to go to the tiny ones, are they? Unless there was a big, major problem ... So I have deliberately chosen big assets ... that was ... a strategic decision on my part ... (Susan, North Africa)

The assignees did point out that small assets could provide career opportunities, for example, to gain management experience. Once this outcome was achieved, though, further international mobility was needed in order to pursue career growth. Finally, the high value derived from undertaking assignments in headquarters' operations was highlighted, due to management visibility and range of opportunities available there.

#### *Assignment Contribution to Home Life and Family Stability*

Forty-five women (63 percent of the assignee respondents) were either married or partnered and 33 (46 percent) were accompanied on their assignment, 31 of whom by their husband or partner. Of the 26 assignees interviewed, 20 were married

or partnered. As indicated in Table V, eight commented on their partners' influence in their participation decision, pointing out that they would have prioritized their relationships ahead of expatriation if it had not been possible for their partners to relocate or work abroad with them, and would do so similarly in future. Nine assignees commented on the strategies they used to juggle their relationships with expatriate work citing: coworking (both partners working in the same firm), undertaking compatible roles (working in different firms), and trailing (working but with career detriment). The women spoke of the creative solutions that they used to enable both partners to work while maintaining their relationship such as through one partner undertaking rotation while the other was based in a location that was accessible to this type of mobility.

For coworking couples, the size of the asset was an important factor in the expatriation decision; larger assets provided a greater likelihood of both careers being accommodated beneficially. Coworking did not result in the women automatically undertaking less senior roles to their partners, particularly in larger assets with sufficient expatriate openings to accommodate couples with both partners in senior positions. Yet, although it was typically the case that their partners worked abroad (either through coworking or in compatible roles), managing two careers was not easy. Assignees spoke of enduring lengthy periods of separation when assignments did not coincide, working across large geographical distances and having to commute on weekends to be together when their assignments were in different countries, and having to negotiate with their company or respective companies to coordinate assignment timings. Decisions were taken to prioritize either theirs or their partner's career based on what was best for the couple or their family.

Unexpectedly, and in contrast to what might be expected from the “kaleidoscope” career model that provided the theoretical perspective for this research, 11 assignees reported on family responsibilities influencing their assignment participation decision positively. They gave examples of how expatriate housing close to the workplace combined with low-cost, high-quality child care (particularly in East Asia) enabled them to combine full-time work roles (in an expatriate capacity) with motherhood, which they said they could not have done in their home countries where long commutes and hours of work could not easily be combined with child care responsibilities. Examples were even given of women stating the underlying driver for taking up expatriation was having children:

**T A B L E V Family and Financial Reasons for Women's Expatriate Participation**

Issue	Interview/Survey Quotes	Issue	Interview/Survey Quotes
<p><b>Dual careers</b> Compatible roles: 4AS (7R) Co-working: 4AS (6R) Trailing 1AS (1R)</p>	<p>Being an expat works for me as my husband works offshore and so we have the opportunity to live and work anywhere. I accepted the job with (company) on condition it was an expat role. <i>Miranda, Caribbean</i> ... every opportunity that comes in ... especially if it requires moving location ... the two of us talk and we discuss the pros and cons and we ... go with that decision ... (my company) has come out very well but it doesn't necessarily mean that my career will drive the next move. <i>Dj, East Asia</i></p>	<p><b>Staying together</b> Partner: 8AS (16R)</p>	<p>It was "We want to keep you and your husband together and we think you are qualified enough for the job so you are going out there" ... I have been quite happy with how (company) has been able to move me around to be ... with my husband and I am extremely grateful. <i>Fiona, East Asia</i> ... it comes to that tricky decision point of where do I do the good job I want to do in a location where I don't necessarily want to be or do I do a job that may be a bit suboptimal, but with the UK base? ... It is the partner factor, because if that wasn't a factor at all then I would go overseas, definitely. <i>Julie, North America</i></p>
<p><b>Family</b> Family responsibilities: 11AS (14R) 3HR (5R)</p>	<p>... home help is affordable, good quality ... to a standard and level that we couldn't have in the UK or even the US ... I have a live-in maid ... I am paying the equivalent that I was paying in the UK ... just one day a week into a child minder ... for my maid to work full-time, six days a week ... I did turn down an opportunity to go to (South America) due to the safety and security issues for my family. My primary concern now ... is focused on suitability for my family and this comes before my career progression. A change from when I was in (North Africa) with no kids. <i>Wanda, East Asia</i> I would never push anyone into a rotational assignment ... we could accommodate it, because we didn't have any children, and then it's fine, you can do it as a woman. <i>Nina, Middle East</i> The 28 day on 28 off rotation is 98% dominated by men ... women just choose not to become involved with it, especially not as mothers ... child care issues are a big problem for short-term and rotational assignments for women, even up until their late 40s ... (but) childcare and societal practicalities ... are probably the same for both men and women. <i>Fallon, HR</i> I know ... a number of people who were unable to go on an assignment because they had aging parents. So it's not just a woman thing ... men as well ... just don't want to be away from dad or mum ... It's life changes that happen to people. <i>Donna, HR</i></p>	<p><b>Income</b> Money: 20AS (54R) 3HR (7R)</p>	<p>I would say 50-50 between the career and the money, because the job opportunity was fantastic and the money is great ... I am really lucky to have what I have got ... and a shed load of money for doing it. <i>Yvonne, Central Asia</i> I had two main drivers, they were career, and the opportunity to accumulate wealth ... It just allows you to ... make that step change in your lifestyle... <i>Linda, Australasia</i> The international assignment package, it is better than most other places, so it did play a factor in terms of accepting the assignment. <i>Xanthe, West Africa</i> ... if ... you can give up a few creature comforts then basically, they earn a lot of money ... you can build up quite a nice little nest egg ... It purely is the money because it is not for the environment. I am sure the work is probably interesting, but the working conditions must be quite hard. <i>Alexis, HR</i> ... certain people ... play the expatriate game ... they know that they are probably on two or three times the net salary that they would be on in the UK, and they can afford a lifestyle and education in a way in which they wouldn't have been able to ... They are on a good ticket. <i>John, HR</i></p>

AS = number of assignees; HR = number of HR experts who commented on an issue; R = total number of references made to that issue.

I was working part-time before I left, because we had three very young children ... so I was looking at either going part-time permanently and putting my career on hold really, which is effectively what you do in this type of job, and/or changing so that we could make things work for us. (Izzy, Caribbean)

*Mothers were less willing to expatriate to locations that they deemed unsuitable for family life (through remoteness or insecurity), even if this meant missing out on the best career potential offered by expatriation.*

A point to note concerned the assets where the women with accompanying children were employed. For example, seven of the interviewees had children with them, and it was notable that the women worked in countries with very affordable or high-quality child care (such as North Africa, the Caribbean, and East Asia) and in other regions with a “very pro-family” culture (such as Scandinavia). However, as explained by HR, their host operations were unlikely to provide the greatest career contribution, as they were not new projects, high-profile discoveries, or regional or central headquarters offering exposure to senior management:

We are a long way from the centre ... So for people in Asia ... you have your 30 minutes in the spotlight. But if you flunk it, it can take a year or two to get out of that. (Fallon, HR Manager—East Asia)

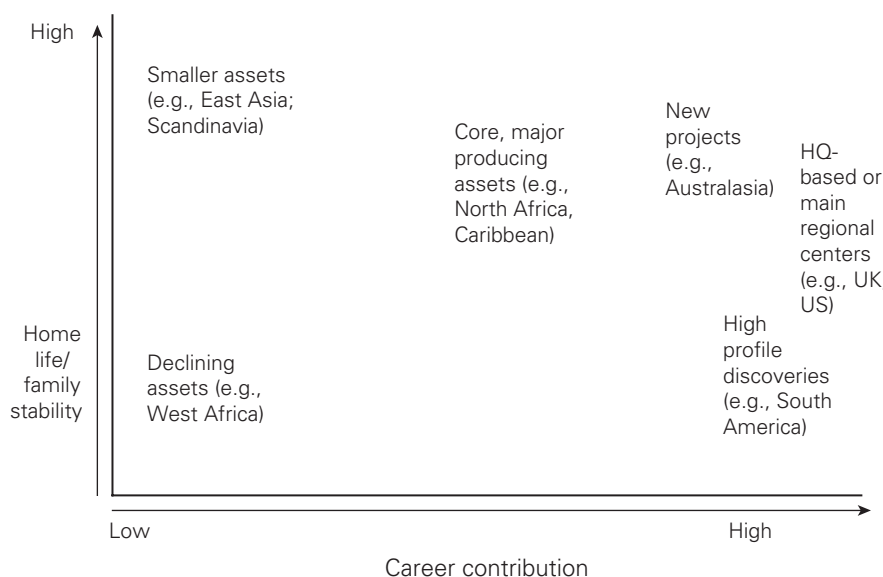
None of the interviewees in new projects (such as in Australasia) had children. Although

Australasian assets offered an attractive climate and lifestyle and no health or security concerns, the region was regarded as too remote, resulting in home-country family separation. One South American asset was especially well regarded for its career contribution, but women with children refused assignments there for security reasons.

The relationship between the asset profile or size and career and family outcomes as highlighted in this section is depicted in Figure 1. Mothers gained some career value from expatriation by accepting assignments in family-friendly locations such as East Asia and Scandinavia. While these assets were not the most career enhancing, taking up assignments in such locations did enable them to manage their family responsibilities relatively easily. Those women who accepted assignments in core producing assets, such as in North Africa and the Caribbean, were able to gain greater career benefits from the range of work roles and high management visibility, while potentially benefiting from affordable child care and from a wider range of work opportunities for coworking partners. However, mothers were less willing to expatriate to locations that they deemed unsuitable for family life (through remoteness or insecurity), even if this meant missing out on the best career potential offered by expatriation.

**Preconditions to Assignment Acceptance**

A final reason for assignment participation concerned remuneration and benefits: 21 assignees and three HR experts commented on this. Clear recognition of the earning potential and consequent financial attraction of assignment participation was evident. Less developed countries



**FIGURE 1.** The Relationship Between Asset Profile/Size and Career/Family Outcomes



with security, cultural, health, access, and other challenges attracted the highest levels of medical, health care, and security provision as well as financial payments. The latter appeared to encourage women's participation in particularly difficult locations. However, while monetary compensation was appreciated by assignees, if they rejected a location on grounds of health, security, lifestyle, spouse employment, and education being unsuitable for their families, additional incentive payments did not serve to change their minds.

Analysis of the qualitative data revealed that, while a suitably generous (or compensatory) financial package was expected as a precondition, it was not the main driver of women's expatriation. However, although the female expatriates did not regard financial inducements as providing the primary purpose behind their assignment participation decision, the HR experts referred to "the expat gravy train" and those "who ... play the expatriate game" with "two or three times the net salary" than they could earn at home, indicating that they believed that money was a primary driver of assignment acceptance.

### Discussion

The analysis of the qualitative data from the HR representatives indicates that they regarded a clearly demarcated purpose underlying the business rationale for using an expatriate assignment, namely, to fill positions, develop the organization, develop individuals, and transfer and exchange knowledge. This aligns with the literature (Hocking et al., 2004; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). By contrast, the assignees reported that they viewed their assignment purpose differently, as suggested by Thomas et al. (2005). They noted considerable overlap of a mix of business justifications and they placed emphasis on the developmental outcomes that flowed from their expatriation. This highlights a key difference between female expatriates' understanding of assignment purpose and the organizational rationale. While this misalignment does not necessarily represent a barrier to increasing expatriate gender diversity, a realistic portrayal of the career development opportunities inherent within expatriation could help to attract or increase numbers of women assignees.

Brookfield Global Relocation Services (2012) reports that 60 percent of expatriates are married, although this figure does not differentiate by gender and covers all industries. Nonetheless, there appears to be little difference between the marital status of the female expatriates employed in the case study oil and gas firms (63 percent were married) and those of wider industry. With respect to accompanied status, Brookfield (2012)

reports a higher figure: 81 percent of married or partnered assignees are accompanied (again an all-industry, non-gender-specific figure). Yet this compares with just 46 percent of the case study firms' female assignees who were accompanied on their assignments. This suggests that the nature of expatriation in the oil and gas industry might not be particularly favorable to accompanying spouses or partners. However, the variety of assignment types offered in the oil and gas exploration and production sector, including rotational working and other flexible assignment patterns (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl, et al., 2004), potentially might help to explain this difference. For example, couples might combine rotation and short-term assignments with maintaining relationships at home.

Nevertheless, the HR representatives were cognizant of the importance of keeping couples together. While this issue was not a formally stated assignment policy objective, international assignments were created for accompanying partners to serve this end and discussions held with the employers of their assignees' spouses in attempts to effect concurrent international relocation. Where both partners were employed by the same firm as coworking couples, Hakim's (2000) prediction that the women would undertake less senior roles than their husbands was not evident on expatriation. Larger assets presented the best opportunities for career-enhancing assignments for both partners, although couples did report that they had to negotiate whose career took priority (Hardill et al., 1997), with decisions based on the best career outcomes for each partner (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004; Välimäki et al., 2009). While these findings aligned with the literature, the biggest surprise concerned the influence of having children on women's expatriate careers.

Women's career path models (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006; O'Neal & Bilimoria, 2005; Pringle & Dixon, 2003) indicate that women undertake nonlinear careers. The adoption of Mainiero and Sullivan's (2005, 2006) "kaleidoscope" career as the theoretical framework for this research study led to the expectation that relational demands during child-rearing years would lead to women giving up opportunities for career-enhancing expatriation. This prediction was reinforced by the expatriate literature, which indicates that having children is a deterrent to expatriation (Dupuis et al., 2008; Hutchings et al., 2010; Tharenou, 2008; Tzeng, 2006; Zhu et al., 2006). Yet the findings from this research were to the contrary: Women assignees saw expatriation as enabling them to combine their careers with motherhood, and in some instances having

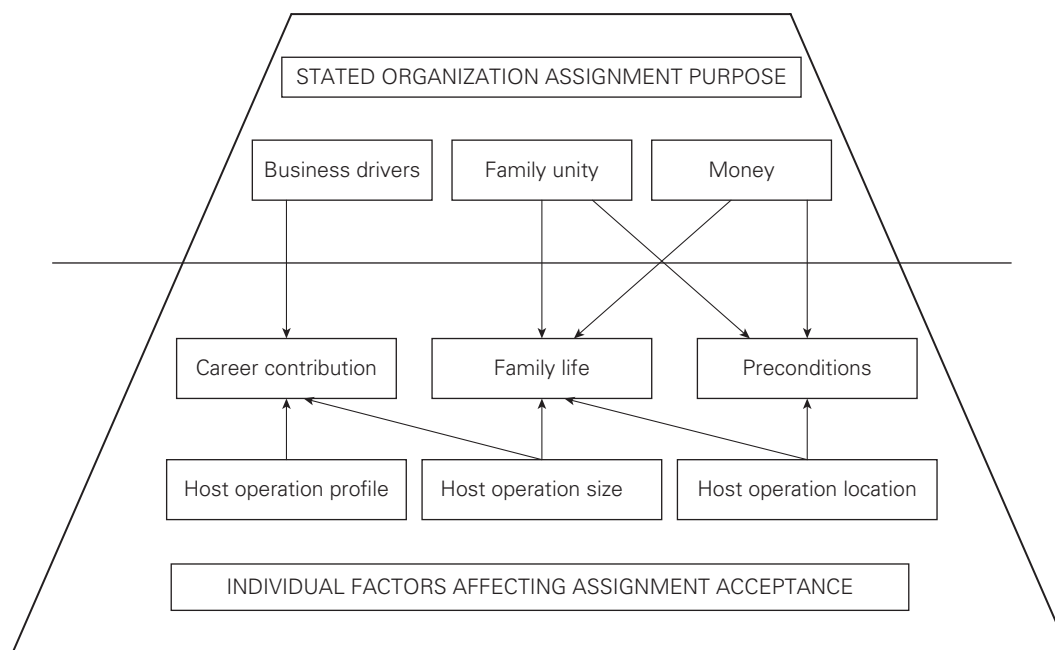
children even drove their desire to expatriate. This was due to organizational international assignment policy supporting such issues as housing, travel to work, and child care. These findings suggest that women's career path models, being set in a domestic home country context with a "kaleidoscope," nonlinear focus, may not be appropriate to predict and explain women's expatriate careers. This research, therefore, suggests that differentiation within career theory is required to recognize women's international careers.

The findings, however, did indicate that women who were accompanied by their children on assignment worked in countries with very affordable or high-quality child care and family-friendly cultures. The assets in these locations were not the most high profile and their career contribution was thus not the best to be found through an expatriate role. Nonetheless, there was career-enhancing value in these assignments, and the women assignees could manage their family responsibilities as well. This suggests that the female expatriates engaged in "satisficing" and pursued the best outcomes that they could in terms of combining their careers and family life, aligned with Crompton and Harris's (1998a, 1998b) study. The female assignees did not, however, gain the highest career potential possible through expatriation, indicating that their career decisions were constrained, they compromised, and they put their families first (Corby & Stanworth, 2009).

The findings indicate that the financial benefits of undertaking expatriation in the oil and gas exploration and production industry are attractive,

particularly in less developed countries where the incentives and premiums attached to expatriate work are high. The female expatriates' perspective that money is not the main motivator for going on assignment aligned with the literature (Pate & Scullion, 2010). The HR representatives, by contrast, did view the financial gains to be made from expatriation as an expatriation driver, suggesting tensions between the custodians and recipients of policy (Perkins & Daste, 2007).

In summary, while HR professionals identify clearly demarcated functional, project, development, and strategic business drivers underpinning the purpose of expatriation, they also recognize dual careers and offer assignments specifically to enable couples to cwork abroad. HR personnel suggest that generous compensation packages serve as an inducement to go on assignment. These factors are depicted as being "above the waterline" in the "iceberg" model of expatriation purpose presented in Figure 2. The issues that women take into account in their expatriate participation decision making are depicted "below the waterline," as they are not explicitly recognized by their sending organizations. Women assignees view the purpose of their assignments as primarily developmental while serving business purposes, which they view as an overlapping mix. Their expatriation participation decisions are based on an evaluation of the level of contribution that each assignment can make to their career, family life, and financial potential, although the latter is not the major driver of assignment acceptance.



**FIGURE 2.** The Purpose of Expatriation—Looking Below the Surface

The host location asset's profile (including its stage of development) and size, and their effect on career contribution, are of particular relevance in underpinning women's decision making. New projects, high-profile assets in exciting stages of development, large and steady core producers, and headquarters' operations provide the greatest career contribution through such factors as their visibility and exposure to senior management, their technical and operational challenges, and the range of experiences available within them. In addition, large assets provide greater potential work opportunities for partners. Location factors that affect family life and influence the level of financial reward are also taken into consideration. Hence, while there is some overlap between how women and HR personnel responsible for international assignment policy and its implementation view the purpose of expatriation, there are noteworthy areas of contrast, especially the level of emphasis women assignees place on their career development.

#### *Implications for Practice*

These findings have implications for employing organizations and female assignees. In terms of widening gender diversity in expatriation, there are a number of issues identified here that HR professionals can take forward. This study demonstrates that the career contribution provided by an assignment is a crucial driver behind women's willingness to accept it. It identifies that expatriation provides career contribution comprising professional development and international experience—particularly in the oil and gas industry, through the provision of understanding of its global nature. Personal development is also a key expatriation outcome, frequently being derived through exposure to different cultures. Cultural understanding is considered career enhancing through the development of understanding of local business dealings. While employers and assignees acknowledge that the link between assignment participation and promotion is not automatic, employers who can demonstrate clearly the career development outcomes of expatriation are more likely to encourage women's assignment participation. Hence, including developmental objectives within sections of organizational policy relating to the purpose of expatriation would highlight the career benefits from undertaking strategic, functional, and project-based international assignments.

A further point concerning the implications of employers' and assignees' contrasting views on the purpose of expatriation relates to a potential lack of alignment of assignment objectives.

Potential consequences of this include such issues as performance management, employee engagement, retention, and assignment or business achievement. Clarity of assignment objectives and their communication to potential assignees is, therefore, of importance.

How women view the host location asset's profile and its size are also important factors in their participation decision due to the level of career enhancement perceived for themselves and opportunities for working partners. Employers, therefore, need to consider carefully the image of the host location operation. Regardless of stated assignment purpose, those that appear (or are) unattractive in terms of career potential are less likely to encourage women to take up expatriate roles, especially if the career outcomes of so doing are viewed as negative or detrimental to their longer-term career progression.

Aligned with the extant literature, this research indicates that married and partnered women prioritize their relationships when accepting an assignment (Linehan & Walsh, 2000) and are cognizant of the problematic nature of managing dual careers (Harvey, 1997a, 1997b). Employers who recognize and address dual career and coworking concerns are more likely to increase expatriate gender diversity. Women assignees with children engage in "satisficing" behavior (Crompton & Harris, 1998a, 1998b) to maximize both career contribution and family life by selecting assignments that provide, as far as possible, career development as well as a suitable environment for their children. Yet career compromise is evident (Corby & Stanworth, 2009); where locations

are less suited to family life, for example, through security concerns or lack of accessible, affordable, quality child care, women put their family ahead of their career and accept less career-enhancing assignments but ones that meet their family needs. By having an understanding of these various factors that women weigh when considering whether to accept an expatriate assignment, employers can provide relevant information to aid women's decision making and potentially tailor compensation packages to address specific issues that act as barriers to assignment acceptance, for example, by addressing certain preconditions such as support for child care, medical, health, and security.

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*Regardless of stated assignment purpose, those that appear (or are) unattractive in terms of career potential are less likely to encourage women to take up expatriate roles, especially if the career outcomes of so doing are viewed as negative or detrimental to their longer-term career progression.*

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It is particularly notable that women do not necessarily opt out of expatriate careers when they have children, in contrast to women's "kaleidoscope" career path models (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006) and the expatriate literature, which suggests otherwise. Employers might, therefore, consider how to increase gender diversity in expatriation through including support for pregnancy and maternity in their international assignment policies, given that such policy provision is uncommon and that case-by-case action is more usually taken (Rosenzwaig, 2010).

### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

This study is set within two oil and gas firms, UK-based but with global exploration and production operations. They are not unique case studies (Yin, 2009) such as oil giants employing very large, peripatetic, expatriate populations, and, as such, their rationales for expatriation are potentially representative of other organizations within and outside of this sector. However, to develop the findings further, extension of this research into a larger number of oil and gas organizations and beyond into other industries (both masculine and feminine in ethos) is needed to examine the extent to which the findings are more widely applicable.

Representative data were obtained in this research. A very high survey response rate (76 percent) was achieved, detailed qualitative data analysis carried out based on 40 in-depth interviews with HR experts and female expatriates, and access to organizational policy enabled triangulation of written documentation and experiences of practical implementation.

The study went beyond the extant literature in its investigation and findings, creating a contribution to both academic and practitioner knowledge. However, to develop the findings further, a larger sample of female assignees within and beyond the oil and gas exploration and production sector could potentially identify additional differences (and similarities) in assignment purpose from the perspectives of assignees and their employers. A longitudinal study could also shed light on the changing nature of assignment purpose from the organizational perspective and on female assignees' rationales for assignment acceptance to determine any potential trends in congruence or divergence.

While these findings contribute to knowledge, career contribution, home life and family stability, and financial rewards vary by assignment length and pattern and by accompanied or unaccompanied status. Therefore, further research is needed to determine the effect of assignment type on women's willingness to engage in expatriation. Research into the personal backgrounds and circumstances of individuals could also be a fruitful exercise to determine whether "prior socialization" has an influence on decision making and whether this "premotivates" certain people to seek and accept international careers. Differences between men's and women's rationales for undertaking expatriation and a comparison of the respective influences of career, family, and financial concerns would be particularly pertinent in tailoring policy components to facilitate expatriation. Whether women believe that their motivations to expatriate differ from those of male counterparts, for example, in respect of issues to do with family and safety concerns, would also be relevant to this objective. Further research might also examine the potential consequences of the differences in organizational and assignee understandings of assignment purpose and the outcomes with respect to issues such as managing employee performance.

Women's career path models (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006; O'Neal & Bilimoria, 2005; Pringle & Dixon, 2003) predict that relational demands would result in them opting out of organizational careers once they have children. Hence, following this theoretical kaleidoscope career framework, it was anticipated in this research that women assignees would not participate in expatriation when they had children. Yet this was contradicted by the findings from this study. While it is acknowledged that the number of women assignees who were accompanied by their children on assignment was relatively low, it is notable that women spoke of having children as a driver for undertaking an expatriate career. Further research is needed to determine whether women's international and domestic organizational career paths differ and, thus, whether kaleidoscope career theory requires refinement or differentiation to take the context of an organizational international career into account.

### *Conclusions*

The findings suggest that the organizational rationale for an assignment is potentially less relevant to the women undertaking it than the career development opportunities and family stability that can flow from it and the financial benefits that underpin it. Women give a wide range of reasons underlying their expatriate participation, but they make their decision based on an evaluation of the level

of contribution that each assignment can make to their career, family life, and financial potential. While the misalignment of organizational and assignees' views on assignment purpose does not necessarily block women's assignment participation, it is notable that female expatriates regard their assignments as developmental—providing international experience, professional and personal development, as well as cultural exposure. This is the case even when the roles held are ostensibly to meet functional, project-based, or strategic company objectives. A career contribution effect is thus identified, with women preferring assignments in high-profile host operations, the headquarters or large host businesses that can provide a variety of experience, high management visibility, and consequently higher potential for career development and progression. A family effect is also identified, with dual careers and family issues influencing assignment participation, although not necessarily negatively, as might be predicted from theory highlighting the nonlinearity of women's careers. In addition, a precondition effect is identified—the financial aspects of undertaking an assignment play a crucial role in assignment acceptance.

The extant literature on women's expatriation has focused primarily on their success in a variety of different geographical locations (Shortland & Altman, 2011). The perspective taken here is different as it focuses on the profile and size of the host operation leading to career contribution as a factor that plays an important part in underpinning women's expatriation, as opposed to its country of operation per se. The assignment location and

size of the host operation are examined within the context of facilitating the management of women's family lives and the host location in determining necessary preconditions to assignment acceptance. This research indicates that host operations that may provide the greatest career contribution through an expatriate assignment do not always, for example, provide the child care opportunities or environment needed by mothers raising children or appropriate work opportunities for partners. As a result, women may accept expatriate posts in locations more suitable for their families at the expense of their careers or potentially not expatriate at all. Yet the identification of career, family, and precondition effects underlying why women take up expatriate assignments can provide the impetus for employer action to tackle conflicting issues and any negative effects on assignment participation. By aligning the support provided to address these three issues concurrently, the perceived positive outcomes derived from undertaking expatriation can be united to the benefit of female assignees, and, as a consequence, the potential is generated to increase expatriate gender diversity, leading to organizational advantage.

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### **Author Queries**

- AQ1 What is meant by “tied status”?
- AQ2 What is “its” referring to here? And to whom is “their” referring at end of the paragraph?
- AQ3 Is it okay to insert “who” as indicated in the quoted material?
- AQ4 Can we change the quote? If so, should this be “are challenging me” or “are challenging to me”?
- AQ5 The formatting has lost some of the text in the diagram. New projects should say eg Australasia; High profile discoveries should say eg South America. The HQ-based or main regional centers should say eg UK, USA. It should also show career contribution at the foot of the diagram.
- AQ6 In the diagram the formatting seems to have lost some of the text – I can’t see career contribution or host operation profile clearly here
- AQ7 Please complete reference. ORC Worldwide
- AQ8 Please complete reference. PWC/Cranfield