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Article information:

To cite this document:

Arup Varma Linda Russell , (2016), "Women and expatriate assignments", Employee Relations, Vol. 38 Iss 2 pp. 200 - 223

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/ER-02-2015-0019>

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Women and expatriate assignments

Exploring the role of perceived organizational support

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Received 3 February 2015
Revised 1 July 2015
2 September 2015
Accepted 7 September 2015

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is twofold – first, to explore the role of perceived organizational support (POS) during the three critical stages of the female expatriate experience, with a view to explaining the disproportionately low numbers of females in expatriate roles; and second, to offer specific suggestions to multi-national enterprises to help them create a level playing field so females can compete for expatriate assignments.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors draw upon the theory of POS to explore how the perceived lack of support from their organization during the critical stages of expatriate assignments affects women's interest, and potentially their performance, in expatriate assignments. The authors develop and present relevant propositions.

Findings – This is a conceptual paper that offers a process model of the impact of POS on the three stages of selection of females for expatriates.

Research limitations/implications – From a theoretical perspective it is clear that POS can play an important role in the willingness of females to accept international assignments. Thus POS can be a critical determinant of the potential levels of female participation in expatriate assignments. Previously, scholars have argued that the low numbers of female expatriates may be a result of a lack of interest on their part, or because they may not be welcomed in many countries. However, subsequent theses have argued, and many studies have shown, that females can be equally successful. The proposed process model helps to better understand how organizations might dismantle the barriers faced by potential female expatriates, by addressing the key issues at each stage.

Practical implications – Multinational enterprises need to ensure that they are drawing from their full pool of talent, if they are to compete effectively against other multinational enterprises. By paying attention to the suggestions, and adopting and executing the propositions, they will be able to avoid the possibility that their qualified female employees may withdraw from the organization if they believe that they are not likely to be considered for expatriate assignments, simply because of their gender, even though they are interested.

Social implications – From a societal perspective, it is indeed critical that qualified females are provided the same opportunities that are made available to males. Given that roughly half the population is female, multi-national enterprises that fail to treat their female employees fairly will be seen as poor corporate citizens.

Originality/value – This is the first paper to address the critical issue of low numbers of females on expatriate assignments by drawing upon the tenets of the theory of POS. The authors offer several propositions to help multinational enterprises understand the impact of the gender imbalance in expatriate assignments, and offer suggestions on how organizations might improve the participation of females in expatriate assignments.

Keywords Women, Cross-cultural management, Expatriates

Paper type Conceptual paper



Introduction

The need for expatriates to serve in international assignments for multi-national enterprises (MNEs) continues to grow (see, e.g. Tung and Varma, 2008) as globalization increasingly impacts how countries around the world do business. In this connection, a 2009 Mercer report estimated the number of expatriates worldwide at close to one million (see Firth *et al.*, 2014). We believe, given worldwide trends, that this number will continue to grow significantly, at least for the foreseeable future. For purposes of this paper, we define “expatriate” as an employee sent to another country specifically for a long-term work assignment. While we acknowledge the term “expatriate” includes other types of work assignments abroad including, for example, short-term roles, commuter assignments, as well as self-initiated expatriate employees, the focus of this research is on assignments which last at least two years (Stroh *et al.*, 2004). Ironically, while the number of expatriates worldwide continues to grow, the amount of females currently employed in international assignments lags significantly behind male expatriate figures, despite the increasing numbers of women in the workforce in general, and the growing numbers of females in management positions around the world. While one recent report stated that, by February 2013, approximately 23 percent of international assignees worldwide were women (Global Relocation Trends, 2013), others noted that the actual number hovers closer to 13 percent (Maurer, 2013; Mercer, 2013).

In this connection, Adler (Adler, 1984b; Jelinek and Adler, 1988) was among the first scholars to address the issue, reporting that, globally, only about 3 percent of expatriates were female. While current statistics show a moderate increase of females in global roles, stagnation in the last decade confirms that a significant deficit of females still exists, when it comes to expatriate assignments. Over the past 30 years, the percentage of females in international assignments has either risen 20 percent (Global Relocation Trends, 2013) or, worse yet, as the Mercer report suggests, has not increased at all, in the last two decades. Indeed, over the years, several scholars have reported the percentage of females in international assignments to be between 12 and 15 percent (e.g. Altman and Shortland, 2008; Stroh *et al.*, 2000; Tung, 1998), confirming the disappointing finding that females are not treated equally when it comes to global assignment opportunities.

The demand for highly qualified employees in the international workplace is anticipated to continue to grow and MNEs not already struggling to send the right people on international assignments likely will, if they continue to turn a blind eye to the fact that roughly half of their qualified workforce is being overlooked for possible international assignments. Among previous attempts to address this critical issue Varma *et al.* (2001) addressed this from a supervisor-subordinate relationship perspective by drawing upon Graen’s leader-member exchange (LMX) theory to explain why the numbers of females in expatriate positions remains so low, and how organizations might address this.

In this paper, we draw upon the theory of perceived organizational support (POS) to explore the reasons for the continued imbalance between male and female employees when it comes to selection for expatriate assignments. It should be pointed out that both LMX and POS are theories that address the supervisor and subordinate exchange. However, as Wayne *et al.* (1997) have argued, POS and LMX “have unique antecedents and are differentially related to outcome variables” (p. 82), making it important that these theories are studied separately to understand how each might affect the expatriate selection process, specifically as it relates to females. Accordingly, in this paper, we focus on the connection between POS, female employees and selection for

expatriate assignments because, simply put, if female employees do not show interest in, or undertake expatriate assignments, the numbers of females working in global roles will continue to significantly lag behind their male counterparts. Clearly, this ongoing imbalance potentially limits the quantity and quality of employees that MNEs can send on expatriate assignments and can, consequently, limit the growth and success of the organization itself. However, if MNEs can create a culture whereby female employees have increased opportunities to develop into mid and senior-level management roles, they will end up having a larger pool of qualified candidates from which they could select for international assignments. These organizations should, thus, experience greater employee retention, both in the home country and across the globe, and also enjoy success from a bottom-line perspective.

In the following sections, we apply the tenets of POS theory to three key facets of global mobility programs – pre-assignment training, role information and social support while on assignment, and finally, the repatriation phase. In essence, we are arguing that by designing programs specifically geared toward potential female expatriate candidates, organizations will be able to increase the number of female expatriates applying for, and succeeding in global roles, and staying on with the company at the end of the assignment.

Expatriate selection and training

First, it is easy to see that an increase in the number of females applying for expatriate positions will lead to a greater number of females selected for international roles. We believe that, at the pre-departure stage, high POS will lead to more women applying; during the assignment, high POS will lead to better performance; and upon repatriation, high POS will lead to lower turnover. Next, the awareness of the availability of programs to support female expatriates through the three stages should lead to an increase in the number of applications. So, for example, a female manager who is interested in an expatriate assignment maybe reluctant to apply because she may feel that she would be at a loss when on assignment due to lack of knowledge regarding the new location's work and social norms. Once she becomes aware that there are targeted programs in place, she would be more likely to apply for the expatriate assignment. Clearly, the support of the organization through all phases of the expatriate experience is critical for females who have decided to accept an assignment and just as significant for females in MNE's who might be considering an expatriate assignment, as this is likely to impact their decision on whether or not to pursue the expatriate opportunity. In the following sections, we discuss several specific issues that can help MNEs modify their expatriate selection and management practices such that the most qualified candidate(s) are selected, irrespective of their gender.

Historical considerations

In her early research on female expatriates, Adler (1984a, b) explored and debunked several myths about women and international opportunities; including the idea that other cultures would not accept women in their expatriate roles, and that women themselves were not interested in foreign assignments. Adler also identified another key factor inhibiting global work opportunities for females – the reluctance on the part of companies to send women on international assignments. This reluctance was, in part, due to the mistaken belief that women do not want to go on international assignments, or, as we note above, if they do go on the assignment, they will experience

resistance from host country nationals (HCNs) (Adler, 1984a, 1987; Caligiuri and Cascio, 1998; Varma *et al.* 2001). However, substantial research exists to confirm that female expatriates are as successful as males, on their assignments, and in some cases are even more successful than their male counterparts (Adler, 1984a, 1987; Cole and McNulty, 2011; Harrison and Michailova, 2012; Jelinek and Adler, 1988; Selmer and Leung, 2003; Varma *et al.*, 2006).

Referring to organizational reluctance to send women on foreign assignments, Adler argued that it was the decision-makers, primarily males in senior-level leadership positions, who were responsible for the low numbers of females in expatriate assignments, as they often assumed that women did not want to go on such assignments (Adler, 1984b). Thirty years have passed – however this statement remains relevant to understanding, in part, how the make-up of the current international workforce continues to be determined in most MNEs.

Three critical expatriate assignment phases

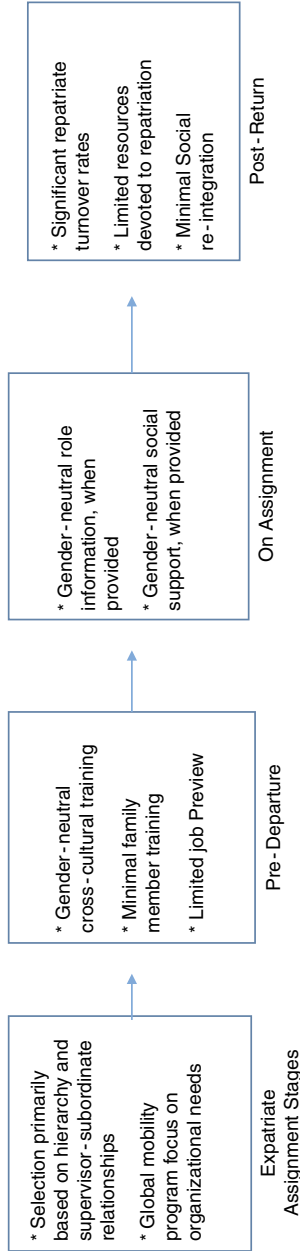
According to the extant literature, three key factors seem to have the most impact on the number(s) of women on expatriate assignments. First, the quality and amount of pre-assignment training (Vance and Paik, 2002) provided to individuals going on expatriate assignments – clearly, the better the training, the better the chances that the expatriate will succeed on assignment, or at least believe that he/she will succeed on the assignment. Next, the amount of role information and social support (see Varma *et al.*, 2011a, b) provided to the expatriate while on assignment seems to be a clear determinant of success and adjustment. Finally, the type of repatriation strategy offered by the MNE seems to play a critical role in determining whether or not an individual accepts the assignment (see, e.g. Stahl *et al.*, 2002).

Ironically, it seems that organizations come up short on all three facets, leading to high turnover among expatriates and repatriates. According to the 2013 Brookfield Global Trend “Services Report”, 76 percent of repatriates leave the organization within two years of returning to their home country. Indeed, the literature focussed on repatriation suggests that both employers and employees underestimate the significant difficulties associated with coming home (see, e.g. Black *et al.*, 1992; Hurn, 1999; Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007). In Figure 1, we present a summary of the current “state-of-expatriate-practices” detailing the three main facets of global mobility programs as traditionally executed.

POS and expatriate assignments

If female employees feel that they are not treated as well as their male counterparts, and/or if they perceive less support than their male counterparts in terms of career options and development toward career goals, this belief will spill over into how female employees believe they will be treated if they pursue and accept international assignments. The issue of gender is relevant here given that literature suggests that despite the increased presence of women in the workplace, there exists a pervasive correlation between the male employee and the profile or stereotype of management roles (Harris, 1995; Linehan and Scullion, 2004). In the following sections, we develop several propositions relating to the selection of females for expatriate assignments. Our arguments and discussion are informed by the tenets of a key theory – POS. An analysis of this theory and three main phases related to the expatriate experience (pre-assignment training, on assignment support, and repatriation strategies) will help MNEs better understand how to increase the number of females sent on expatriate assignments.

Figure 1.
A conceptual
framework of
generalized global
mobility programs,
focussing on the
three key stages
of the expatriate
assignment



Drawing from Organizational Support Theory (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986), the theory of POS proposes that employees formulate beliefs regarding the extent to which their organization values them, and cares about their well-being as individuals (Jawahar and Hemmasi, 2006), and the degree to which they will be supported by their organization when they need help to successfully accomplish tasks, as well as in difficult or stressful situations (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Thus, when employees experience high levels of POS, they are likely to exhibit higher levels of organizational commitment, job-related affect, job involvement, performance, and intent to stay with the organization. Conversely, low levels of POS would lead to lower levels of commitment, affect, performance, etc., as well as possible withdrawal from the organization. In this connection, Allen *et al.* (2003) have argued that:

[...] perceptions of supportive human resources practices [...] contribute to the development of POS, and POS mediates their relationships with organizational commitment and job satisfaction (p. 99).

Indeed, we believe that perceptions of supportive expatriation practices will lead to development of POS. In this connection, Eisenberger *et al.* (1986) have argued that POS develops over a period of time and through repeated interactions between employees and employers. Therefore, experiences in and around the workplace over time will largely determine whether employees perceive that they are valued, both by their organization and their superiors. Relatedly, Jawahar and Hemmasi (2006) have argued for the importance of POS as a relevant “specific construct” when addressing the failure of organizations to create policies and procedures which support the development of females for senior leadership roles.

When it comes to expatriate assignments, individuals need significantly more support and guidance from their organization(s), as opposed to those on domestic assignments. It is important to note here that research reveals that some expatriates may actually feel a significant disconnect from their home organization, and may adapt quite well to their host country by building quality relationships with their expatriate community. The impact of this disconnect has the potential to create significant concerns for both the MNE and the expatriate and is a topic worthy of further review. However, in the context of our model, we focus on the expatriate experience in which the employee on assignment is likely without a substantial local community from which to draw support. Indeed, working and living in foreign surroundings can sometimes create a heightened connection to the parent organization, as in many cases the home country organization is viewed as the most vital or only support system for the expatriate (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2009). Here, the perception of displacement puts the employee in the unique position of being extremely reliant on their home organization and if they do not feel they will be supported fully while on their international assignment, their likelihood of success, or even acceptance of the assignment, is significantly diminished.

As is clear, individuals working on expatriate assignments face a number of unique contextual issues. So, for example, working in another country requires a clear understanding of the customs and culture of that nation, learning the ins and outs of living in a new city, and finding a residence in a safe locality, etc. In addition to such critical social information, expatriates also need information about how to do their jobs, as well as critical workplace norms and practices, many of which might fall in the “unwritten” category. Another important aspect of POS to consider, as it relates to expatriate assignments, involves a secondary layer of perception held by the employee

toward his/her organization. As Liu (2009) notes, the concept of employee POS levels relates not only to their parent company, but also to the subsidiary or partner organization. Therefore, though an employee may have high POS with regard to the home country organization, their experience while on their international assignment will shape their perceptions of how they are viewed by the host country organization and can potentially either heighten or lower the expatriates POS toward their home country organization.

Clearly, for any employee contemplating asking for, or accepting, an international assignment, the level of POS is likely to play a critical role, both in the employee's decision-making process as well as the employee's potential success on the expatriate assignment. As we note above, to a potential expatriate, the level of POS takes on heightened meaning due to the additional challenges associated with international assignments, such as cultural, language, and technological differences, as well as being disconnected from the organization, in part, due to geography. Further, as we alluded to above, since employee POS as it relates to the home country organization is impacted by the host country organization (Liu, 2009), MNEs must seriously work toward influencing employee perceptions, while the employee is on assignment.

Of course, potential expatriates of either gender require such organizational support. However, given that females often encounter a "glass ceiling" even in domestic assignments, it is critical to acknowledge that females in the workplace may perceive the continuing low numbers of females in senior positions, as well as those assigned to expatriate positions, as a sign that their organization(s) do not support female employees. Supporting this idea, in a study conducted by *Insch et al.* (2008) participants in the study reported their belief that the "glass ceiling" they experienced in their home country impeded increased participation by females in international roles.

Further, research indicates that females interested in global roles needed first to break the "glass ceiling" in their home organization, in order to even attempt to break the "glass border", a barrier which exists between females and international work opportunities (Linehan and Scullion, 2001; Linehan and Walsh, 1999, 2000). Sadly, despite substantial research indicating a steady increase in the presence of professional businesswomen in home country organizations across many cultures, there continues to be a severe lack of females in senior management roles within those same organizations (Harris, 1993; Jawahar and Hemmasi, 2006; *Insch et al.*, 2008; Linehan and Scullion, 2004).

The impact of the supervisor on POS

An employee's immediate supervisor has the most critical impact on his/her POS, as the supervisor represents the organization to the individual employee and is often the direct conduit for most, if not all, of the employee's experiences. Since most key supervisory and senior-level managerial positions continue to be held by males and males continue to be gender-typed into managerial roles (Berkery *et al.*, 2014), this often leads to better and more favorable assignments and outcomes for male subordinates (see, e.g. Adler, 1994; Harris, 1995; Stroh *et al.*, 2000). It is also worth noting here that the number of female CEOs among Fortune 500 companies continues to be abysmally low – indeed, there were only two female CEOs in 1997 (Oakley, 2000), and there are only about 24 in 2015 (Catalyst, 2014). Clearly, there is a "glass ceiling" (Morrison, 1992) preventing females from advancing in the corporate world. Thus, if we are to see females succeed on expatriate assignments, we must see this start at the highest levels, as more females in senior-level management positions are essential to providing more opportunities for females both domestically and globally, especially within MNEs.

Next, according to POS theory, employees view supervisors as an extension of the organization – as reflective of the organization. Therefore, how the employee perceives their relationship with and/or treatment from their supervisor, will impact the employee's POS (Dawley *et al.*, 2010; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). In this connection, the continued disparity between males and females in senior leadership, and key supervisory roles, is likely to be a major stumbling block to increasing the numbers of women taking on expatriate roles. First, female employees who might be interested in expatriate assignments would see the low percentage of females currently employed both in senior-level domestic roles, as well as in international assignments, as reflective of the low levels of support the organization would provide them if they accepted an international assignment. Next, fewer females would express interest in a global role if they felt that their organization did not support development of women into senior-level domestic or international leadership roles. Indeed, given that the world is increasingly offering boundary-less careers (Stahl *et al.*, 2002), women who are interested in global careers may take their career capital to other organizations, if they feel they are not supported by their current employer/management (see, e.g. Jawahar and Hemmasi, 2006). Here, we would like to reiterate that MNEs must heed the warning in the previous statement regarding turnover intent. Clearly, turnover is costly on several levels for organizations, including the loss of institutional knowledge and continuity in the workforce, as well as the literal cost in terms of time and money spent on recruiting, training, and compensating the employee, only to have to begin the process all over again.

Clearly, POS plays a key role in employees' belief about their importance to their organization(s) and impacts their relationship with the organization. For female employees, levels of POS are likely to guide their decision whether or not to express interest in international assignments, as these assignments require even higher levels of organizational support. Thus, we propose:

- P1.* Female employees with high levels of POS will be significantly more likely to become interested in, and apply for expatriate assignments.

As we note above, in order to better understand how POS can impact female participation rates in expatriate assignments, it is important that we look at the three pivotal phases of expatriate assignments. Accordingly, we next discuss: pre-assignment training, on assignment role information and social support and post-assignment repatriation.

Pre-assignment training

As more organizations globalize and companies with already established programs of international operations continue to expand (Tung and Varma, 2008; Varma *et al.*, in press), the need for more formalized and specialized training for employees embarking on expatriate assignments becomes even more critical than before (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2001; Littrell *et al.*, 2006; Tung, 1998). Traditionally, pre-assignment training has included foreign language training, cross-cultural training, and preparation for the specific assignment (Thomas and Lazarova, 2014), though it has also been suggested that potential expatriates might benefit from meeting with HCNs from the designated assignment country, prior to leaving for their assignment (Caligiuri *et al.*, 1999). In addition, in some cases, pre-assignment training is also made available to family members though such training is mostly limited to cross-cultural and language training (Thomas and Lazarova, 2014).

In connection with POS and pre-assignment training, it is clear that if an employee has high POS toward the organization, he/she will expect that the pre-assignment training will provide him/her with the tools necessary to begin the expatriate journey and adjust to the new work experience with little or no difficulty. However, in cases where an employee has low POS, the opposite will hold true – in the sense that a perceived lack of support may cause the employee to feel hesitant about the assignment and less prepared, because s/he would be less confident about receiving appropriate and sufficient training. In this connection, Caligiuri *et al.* (2001) have noted that an employee's pre-departure expectations (of their host country and their success overseas) are strongly correlated with the ultimate success or failure of the assignment.

In this connection, Littrell and Salas (2005) have recommended that organizations should structure cross-cultural training to match potential expatriates' specific needs instead of providing generalized training to all expatriates. Such tailored training is essential for all potential expatriates, but specifically for females who might be interested in expatriate assignments, as they would have different requirements from their male counterparts. Indeed, scholars have noted that specialized cross-cultural training can be especially useful for female expatriates, and even more valuable to female expatriates who have spouses and children accompanying them, as often female expatriates experience greater stress, than male expatriates, during overseas assignment due to family concerns (Caligiuri *et al.*, 1999; Linehan and Walsh, 2000; Tzeng, 2008). Providing cross-cultural knowledge in areas such as educational programs in host country schools, child care resources, sports important to the local culture, key religious and cultural holidays, and social and community focussed opportunities for male spouses, can help to alleviate concerns the female expatriate may have about her family becoming acclimated to their surroundings. Further, in addition to the training already discussed, potential female expatriates would also benefit from receiving a thorough realistic job preview in order to supply them with a clear and more tangible idea of what to expect while on the expatriate assignment (Caligiuri and Phillips, 2003). Indeed, Wang and Hinrichs (2005) have suggested providing expatriate candidates with realistic expatriate assignment previews (REAPs), where REAPs provide a holistic perspective of the expatriate experience in order to help the employee determine if the assignment is a good fit for the employee (and family). Clearly, such training and information will better prepare females interested in expatriate assignments, and the awareness of the existence of such programs will significantly increase the number of women applying for expatriate assignments, as this will have a significant positive impact on their POS. As such, we propose:

- P2. Pre-assignment training will have a significant positive impact on female employees' belief that they will succeed on assignment – for those who have high POS prior to receiving this training.

Role information and social support

If a female employee is considering pursuing an expatriate assignment, she will need two types of reinforcement while on such assignment – role information and social support. Such support can come from various sources – support from HCNs, support from the home organization, from her family, and support from other, preferably female, current and former expatriates.

Role information. In order to succeed on expatriate assignments, individuals need important, relevant, role information relating to work styles, work conditions, and work

norms. As Black *et al.* (1992) have noted, HCNs can play a critical role in the expatriate's adjustment, by providing the expatriate important information about the rules, regulations, and practices at the local office. It is clear that by offering expatriates key information, HCNs can help them adjust and get up to speed more quickly in the new workplace (Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2002; Varma *et al.*, 2011a, b). However, HCNs are not always automatically motivated to offer help to their new expatriate colleagues, and indeed, depending on how HCNs feel about the expatriate, they may often withhold relevant information and treat the expatriate as an "outsider" (Carraher *et al.*, 2008; Florkowski and Fogel, 1999; Varma *et al.*, in press). In this connection, some researchers have argued that individual characteristics such as race, national origin, and gender are often the key determinants of whether an individual is categorized as "in-group" or "out-group," by HCNs (Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2002; Varma and Stroh, 2001b; Varma *et al.*, 2011a, b).

The concepts of "in-group" and "out-group" categorization emerge from within the LMX theory (Graen and Cashman, 1975), which suggests that supervisors do not treat all their subordinates the same – instead, they tend to categorize their employees into "in-groups" and/or "out-groups" based upon a number of factors such as gender, race, and similar interests (Dienesch and Liden, 1986; Varma *et al.*, 2001b). Thus, male supervisors, for example, are more likely to include male subordinates into their "in-groups," and exclude females from their "in-groups." Since "in-group" members are recipients of more guidance and coaching, higher ratings for the same level of performance, and better assignments, female subordinates would clearly be at a disadvantage when it comes to being considered or selected for expatriate assignments. Further, it is worth noting that international opportunities are not always publicly announced within organizations – instead, quite often, top management will identify suitable candidates for such openings. Not surprisingly, those selected are typically well-known to top management, and are similar in some way, or share attributes with them – in other words, they are part of the "in-group." As we noted earlier, most senior-level decision-makers are (still) men, hence it is very likely that such unadvertised expatriate positions will still be offered to male candidates. To address this very issue, Varma *et al.* (2001b) put forth a strategy to improve selection potential for females interested in international assignments. These scholars suggested that female employees engage in upward-influencing behaviors (Wortman and Linsenmeier, 1977), with the specific purpose of trying to get into their supervisors' in-groups, as this could improve the probability of being selected for expatriate assignments. In addition to factors like race, gender, and similar interests, perceived values similarity has also been shown to play a critical role in determining "in-group"/"out-group" categorization (Varma *et al.*, 2011a, b). In other words, when an individual believes that another individual shares his/her values, the target individual is more likely to be included in the individual's "in-group."

As discussed above, research on workplace supervisor-subordinate dyads has repeatedly reported that subordinates in the "in-group," or those that have higher quality relationships with their supervisor(s), experience more supervisory support and mentoring, more job satisfaction, and opportunity for advancement and/or better job assignments (Graen and Cashman, 1975; Jawahar and Carr, 2007), than those in the "out-groups" (Graen and Schiemann, 1978; Liden and Graen, 1980; Varma and Stroh, 2001a). Furthermore, research has shown that such categorization of subordinates is universal, and happens in countries around the world (see, e.g. Grodzicki and Varma, 2011).

In the case of expatriates, their national origin (and perhaps, gender) would be among the salient attributes first noted by HCNs, which would cause them to classify expatriates as the “out-group” (McGuire *et al.*, 1978; Toh *et al.*, 2004; Varma *et al.*, 2006), thus reducing the possibility that HCNs would share necessary role information with the expatriates. In addition, the expatriate also requires role information from the home country, and this is critical to the foundation of the employee’s international assignment and must be maintained throughout the employee’s international assignment (Mezias and Scandura, 2005). When it comes to female expatriates, the quality of role information provided becomes even more critical. Female expatriates may receive varying degrees of role support from HCNs, both supervisors and peers, depending upon the culture of the country they are working in. Thus, the female expatriate may feel excluded or unwelcome if the HCN supervisor is a male and/or is from a culture that views females both in and out of the workplace in a manner that differs from the home country. For example, in many South East Asian and Middle Eastern countries, women born into and raised within these cultures are, in large part, not treated as equal to men, and may be seen as fit only for roles of lesser status than men (see, e.g. Sinangil and Ones, 2003).

It should be noted, however, that early research by Adler (1987), specifically focussed on North American female expatriates on assignment in Asia, provides a different perspective of perceived gender-related cultural discrimination. Adler interviewed 52 women from North American countries who were assigned to expatriate roles in Asia – of these, 97 percent of the women reported they felt their assignment was successful and somewhat surprisingly, 42 percent reported they felt their gender put them at an advantage in the workplace, and was not an impediment to succeeding in their role. Adler’s research also indicated that the female expatriates felt that their interpersonal skills, high visibility in their roles, and the novelty of a woman in key international roles actually gave them advantage over their male counterparts in similar expatriate roles within the Asian cultures. It is important to acknowledge Adler’s findings for two reasons – first, to show that female expatriates are often successful in cultures where they may not be expected to succeed, and, second, to remind decision-makers that female expatriates can be as successful, if not more than, male expatriates.

However, females interested in expatriate assignments may not be aware of such research, and may mistakenly believe that they will face difficulties on their assignment(s), due to cultural differences, etc. In addition, the potential female expatriate may have had to self-promote or campaign for the assignment (Varma *et al.*, 2001), making her doubt whether she could succeed on her own. This is where the organization needs to step in and provide females interested in expatriate assignments with relevant information tailored to their needs, starting with role information. This, in turn, will lead to improved POS. As such, we propose:

- P3. MNEs providing role information programs tailored to female expatriates will see greater numbers of females applying for expatriate assignments

Social support. Next, as we noted earlier, expatriates require social support to help them adjust to the local culture and make a smooth transition to living in their new international community. Such support can come from various sources – from formal or informal mentors, available networks in the host country, peers and supervisors, and HCNs outside the workplace (Varma *et al.*, 2012). Of course, all expatriates will

encounter certain situational challenges-related to adjustment and integration into the host country, regardless of gender. These can include language barriers, different societal norms, living conditions, presence of other expatriates in the community, etc. Clearly, all of these factors can have a strong impact on the individual expatriate's adjustment to the assignment and the location, and can thus impact the success of the assignment (Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2002).

For the female employee considering an expatriate assignment, the topic of social support has several layers of additional embedded complexity. Some of the complexity arises from the fact that family concerns appear to play a larger role in females accepting international assignments, both due to concerns that the female expatriate will not receive much needed support from her family (Kraimer *et al.*, 2001) as well as her need for her family to have appropriate support when they accompany her to the host country. Supporting this idea, Mäkelä *et al.* (2011), have noted that female expatriates continue to take on the majority of home life responsibilities despite the increased challenges and demands associated with global assignments. These authors also discuss the difficulties faced by female expatriates in their attempts to build social networks during their international assignment, due in large part to a lack of time (most being taken by work and family obligations).

Likewise, it has been argued that social support from spouse and children provide a key affirming influence for the female expatriate (Caligiuri *et al.*, 1999; Harris 2004). Therefore, if female expatriates have spouses and/or children who do not exhibit supporting behaviors, the expatriate will most likely find it more difficult to succeed on the assignment (Linehan and Scullion, 2001). Relatedly, family concerns specifically relating to trailing (male) spouses can impact the female employee's decision regarding whether or not to pursue and/or accept an expatriate assignment (Varma *et al.*, 2011a, b). Here, a key issue of concern is the lack of career options for the trailing male spouse and potential difficulty finding social support systems for the male spouse (Harris, 1993, 2004). Research shows that trailing male spouses often receive less than adequate support from the female expatriate's organization, potentially contributing to higher stress levels and less adjustment to the new culture for the entire family (Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2002; Haslberger and Brewster, 2008). Furthermore, since a significant majority of expatriates continue to be male, it follows logically that most trailing spouses are female, thus making it even more difficult for trailing male spouses to build strong social networks and adjust within the host country (Altman and Shortland, 2008; Harris, 1993; Haslberger and Brewster, 2008; Linehan and Scullion, 2001).

Clearly, the quality of social support received by the expatriate and her family will be a critical determinant of the successful adjustment and performance by the expatriate. As such, the expatriate's organization needs to provide methods of social support that adequately meet the additional potential burden of family concerns that female expatriates may experience. The MNE needs to provide established social networks for females on international assignments, since there is little or no time for the female expatriate to create her own (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011). Given the importance of support for expatriates on assignment, we believe it is critical that the subject be explored in some more detail – addressing additional perspectives. Consider, for example, the need for support from HCNs, both the expatriate's supervisors and colleagues, as well as HCNs outside the workplace. Supporting this idea, Varma and colleagues (see, e.g. Varma *et al.*, 2011a, b, 2012) have argued that the social support

provided by HCNs, both supervisors and colleagues, is a key factor in determining the success or failure of expatriates. Taking this one step further, Caligiuri and Lazarova (2002) have noted that for female expatriates, other female expatriates can be extremely helpful in cultural adjustment especially since they share the same gender perspective of the workplace and the culture. Indeed, the literature is replete with suggestions for organizations to create formalized networking and mentoring platforms specifically for females currently in, or considering, international roles (Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2002; Harrison and Michailova, 2012; Shortland, 2011). In other words, female expatriates are needed to create opportunities for other females to take on international assignments. Clearly, when female employees see that their organization sends females on expatriate assignments, they are more likely to pursue such assignments.

One outcome of this would be an increase in POS levels for females who have interest in international roles, as they observe organizational investment in female peers who have already been selected for global roles. Next, when females see that the organization supports the female expatriates prior to, during, and after the assignment, they are more likely to pursue such assignments. The obvious benefit to the MNE from an organizational standpoint can be significant, in that females who have successful international work experiences can provide support and mentoring to subsequent females in expatriate roles and also provide the organization with someone who has already succeeded in a global role and potentially could do so again in the future. Thus, it is critical that organizations design and implement support systems specifically for female expatriates. This is even more important when it comes to female expatriates whose potential assignments may be in cultures where females may not be viewed as “equals” and their male colleagues in the host country may treat them as members of an “out-group” (Varma *et al.*, 2011a, b). As such, we propose:

- P4.* MNEs providing social support programs tailored to female expatriates and their families will see greater numbers of females applying for expatriate assignments.

Without both adequate role information and social support; including consistent, quality, connection with the home office, the female expatriate may feel disconnected from the organization, not only during her assignment, but equally as critically, once she comes back from the expatriate assignment. Of course, this is true for all expatriates, but given our discussion above, it is clear that this would be a critical factor preventing females from pursuing expatriate assignments. As such, we next focus on the topic of repatriation. As organizations expand into global operations and the need to send qualified employees on expatriate assignments continues to grow, these MNEs need to have properly planned and administered repatriation programs before they can have truly successful global mobility programs.

Repatriation

Much of the initial research on repatriation or “repatriation adjustment” (Black *et al.*, 1992) brought to light the failure of MNEs to address the challenges impacting employees returning to their home country after an expatriate work assignment (Allen and Alvarez, 1998; Black *et al.*, 1992; Black, 1992). Additionally, more recent research reveals a continued lack of significant movement on the part of MNEs in terms of creating effective repatriation strategies (Hurn, 2007; Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007; Nery-Kjerfve and McLean, 2012).

Indeed, the expatriate literature has addressed the importance of repatriation programs from numerous perspectives – high repatriate turnover (Allen and Alvarez, 1998; Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007), reverse culture shock, (Hurn, 2007; Nery-Kjerfve and McLean, 2012), distorted social and professional expectations of repatriates (Black, 1992), and perhaps the most important of all – a lack of job placement or career growth opportunities for the returning expatriate (Allen and Alvarez, 1998; MacDonaldd and Arthur, 2005).

In early research addressing repatriation issues, Adler (1981) and Black *et al.* (1992) noted that both organizations and returning employees underestimate the difficulties repatriates often face upon return to their home country. This failure to acknowledge potential repatriation problems may partly explain the apparent lack of attention paid to creating sustainable repatriation strategies on the part of MNEs, which often results in the repatriate's early departure from the organization, leading to significant knowledge drain. As of 2012, only 72 percent of MNEs had written repatriation policies, and over 40 percent of those with policies or programs waited until just six months or less from the end of a global assignment, to have the discussion with employees about bringing them home (Global Relocation Trends, 2013). Clearly, inadequate attention to repatriation strategies and policies results in significant costs for MNEs and employees – the organization suffers by losing key employees, “wasting” millions of dollars in costs associated with sending employees on international assignments, and replacement costs.

Related research by Hurn (1999, 2008) noted that upon return from an international assignment, employees, regardless of gender, often feel “marginalized,” or “warehoused,” because, very often, MNEs do not have an understanding of the skills and abilities the expatriate gained in their expatriate role, and do not have an appropriate position ready for the repatriate.

Taking this concept a step further, if a female repatriate returns from an expatriate assignment with no sense of a clearly defined career path, this could be perceived by the female repatriate as a continuation of the lack of career opportunities, and by extension, lack of organizational support that she may have felt prior to going on assignment. Here again, the importance of POS for selection for international assignments is once again obvious, and comes back with a vengeance at the repatriation stage. Female employees, who have a desire to explore a career path inclusive of international roles, will carefully observe how returning expatriates are treated, and how they are re-integrated back into the home organization. Regardless of the level of POS a female employee may have toward her organization, if she feels that the company does not support returning expatriates, and offers even less support to returning female expatriates, her POS may plummet and she may lose interest in a global assignment.

Additionally, a female repatriate with an already lowered POS due to a lack of perceived support throughout her global assignment would likely experience even lower POS, leading to greater dissatisfaction and perhaps disengagement from the organization. In this connection, Linehan and Scullion (2002) cite the lack of mentors and networking opportunities for females in MNEs, as both a deterrent to embarking on a global assignment, as well as a detriment to the quality of the female repatriation process. The female employee may have pushed for the international assignment in order to create more opportunity for advancement but if upon repatriation, she finds that the organization has no clear plan for her, she might then experience significantly lowered POS. In the same vein, if the female expatriate returns to the home country

organization and is placed in a holding pattern, or put in a position that is below her status when on her international assignment, or not allowed to use her newly found skills, she will experience frustration and her POS will be low.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the female expatriate likely has more complicated family concerns (Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Nery-Kjerfve and McLean, 2012) and it is thus critical that she feel that both she and her family are supported by the organization, throughout – before, during, and after the expatriate assignment. The female expatriate will likely experience similar concerns surrounding the family, upon returning to the home country; including culture shock, school placement for children, employment for her spouse, living arrangements and social re-integration, as she and her family experienced when embarking on the international role. Clearly, MNEs need to fully understand the impact of repatriation on their organization as a whole and must implement global mobility programs that include formalized repatriation programs, specific to female international assignees. Accordingly, we propose:

- P5. MNEs providing formal repatriation programs tailored to female expatriates, will have increasing numbers of females applying for expatriate assignments.

Figure 2 presents a conceptual model detailing the various components of our model.

Discussion

The growing trend of globalization will continue to impact how organizations conduct business, at least for the foreseeable future. As MNEs compete to grow their businesses around the globe, their need for the highest quality employees to send on international assignment will also continue to grow. This paper addresses the need for MNEs to not only expand their business into other countries, but also to expand their perspective on which employees can be sent overseas, by suggesting actions that MNEs can take to increase the possibility that their female employees would become interested in expatriate assignment roles, and thus increase the size of the pool from which the organization can draw.

As research indicates, close to half of the world's working population is female, and though there has been a significant increase in the number of professional women working domestically in organizations around the world, there is still a significant lack of women in key leadership roles (e.g. Inch *et al.*, 2008; Linehan and Scullion, 2004). More disturbingly, research shows the numbers of females embarking on long-term (two years or greater) expatriate assignments has only increased from 3 percent in the mid-1980s (Adler, 1984b) to somewhere between 12 and 15 percent in the last decade (Altman and Shortland, 2008).

As we noted earlier, Adler (1984a, b) disproved certain myths concerning the reasons for the lack of females in expatriate roles, showing that women were, indeed, interested in taking on overseas assignments, could be successful in global roles and that they could be accepted by other cultures in the workforce. She further suggested that the hesitation felt by decisions makers, in terms of sending females on expatriate assignments, were largely unfounded. By exploring the relationship between POS and female expatriates, we have provided MNEs with specific suggestions for actions which can help increase the number of females interested in, and accepting, expatriate assignments. We argue that female employees in MNEs may have low POS for a variety of reasons, and that this impacts whether or not female employees express interest in expatriate roles. Regarding the home organization, female employees may experience lower POS due to a lack of opportunity to advance into mid or senior-level

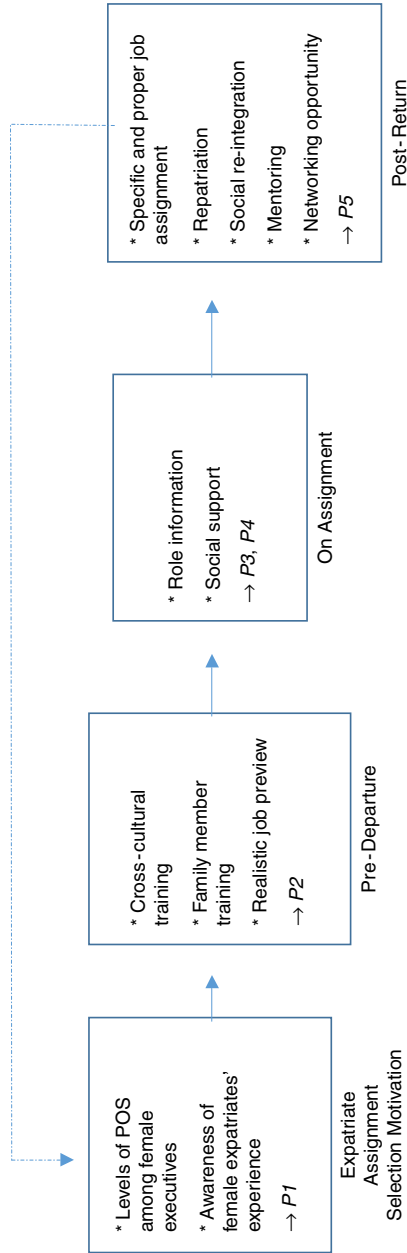


Figure 2. A conceptual model of the impact of perceived organizational support on the three stages of the female expatriate assignment (with related propositions listed in the relevant box)

management roles within the organization, thus believing they may have hit a “glass ceiling”. Additionally, female employees in many cases will have a direct supervisor who is male and may experience lower POS depending on how they feel they are treated by their supervisor (Dawley *et al.*, 2010; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Similarly, if the female employee feels she is part of the “out-group,” as characterized by LMX theory (Graen and Cashman, 1975), she is likely to experience low levels of POS, and would be less likely to pursue expatriate assignments.

The second key focus of this paper was to provide MNEs with suggestions to improve their global mobility programs with a specific focus on the unique needs of the female employee. Providing targeted support programs to female employees pursuing or embarking on expatriate assignments can impact the employee and organization in several aspects. Next, by focussing in on the three key phases of expatriation – pre-departure; on assignment role information and social support, and repatriation – MNEs can help increase the numbers of female employees applying for, embarking on, and succeeding in, international assignments.

At each of these three stages, female employees experience different challenges and obstacles from their male counterparts and therefore, organizations need to address the specific needs of the female employees in order to facilitate higher POS by the female employee, as well as increase the potential for greater numbers of females to take on global assignments and subsequently succeed in their expatriate role.

The factors affecting expatriates of both genders are undoubtedly complex, and global mobility programs in all MNEs should be continuously monitored, and modified, as necessary. Having said that, it is well-known that female employees face greater family-related challenges, cultural biases, lack of female mentors, and networking connections, both in the workplace and in society, in general. These challenges are magnified many times over in the case of females who may be interested in expatriate assignments. Thus, in order to ensure that all qualified candidates are provided fair opportunities, organizations need to ensure that all qualified employees are considered for appropriate assignments, irrespective of personal characteristics, such as gender, especially since these factors have no bearing on the individual’s ability to perform the job.

However, in the case of females who might be interested in expatriate assignments, organizations would need to make extra efforts to include them in the talent pool, since many of them might believe that they would not be considered for expatriate assignments, given the historical numbers. Thus, organizations need to create conditions whereby females are convinced that they would receive appropriate organizational support during all stages of the assignment. Once females perceive this support, they are more likely to express interest in, and apply for, such assignments. Consequently, all three phases of the expatriate assignment will provide them the best possible chance to succeed on the assignment, as well as upon their return to the home country, since they would believe that the organization supports them.

Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, it is clear that POS can play an important role in the willingness of females to accept international assignments. Thus POS can be a critical determinant of the potential levels of female participation in expatriate assignments. Previously, scholars have argued that the low numbers of female expatriates may be a result of a lack of interest on their part, or because they may not be welcomed in many countries. However, subsequent theses have argued, and many studies have shown,

that females can be equally successful on expatriate assignments. Our proposed process model helps to better understand how organizations might dismantle the barriers faced by potential female expatriates, by addressing the key issues at each stage.

Specifically, our model helps to re-conceptualize POS theory, by showing that it is not gender-neutral, and does not work the same way in all situations. On the contrary, we believe that POS is context-specific, and can be affected by the history of the individuals affected, as well as mediating and moderating variables. We hope that future conceptualizations and empirical examinations of this theory will take these factors into account.

Practical implications

In order for MNEs to succeed in the growing global workplace, they need to create and implement development and retention programs for high potential females in the home country organization. These organizations need to provide both decision-makers and female employees with programs and clearly defined career paths focussed on increasing the numbers of senior-level female managers which, in turn, will lead to creating more opportunities for females to take on expatriate roles for the organization.

Clearly, MNEs that want to draw from their full talent pool need to develop global mobility programs that are implemented at all stages – pre-assignment, on assignment, and post-assignment. In addition, organizations need to ensure that they provide appropriate pre-assignment training, and create conditions whereby female expatriates receive appropriate and targeted role information and social support, two factors that are critical for their success on assignments. Only when female employees are convinced that they will receive support at the same level as their male counterparts will they express interest in, and take on, expatriate assignments. So, for example, issues of children's education are relevant to both parents, yet very often it is the female employee who may be more concerned about the child's education and upbringing, etc., especially when the child or children are in their pre-teen years. Thus, organizations need to establish and implement relevant policies at the home office first, so that female employees are convinced that they will receive the appropriate type and level of support throughout their assignment period.

In order to achieve this, organizations need to create clear policies regarding expatriate assignments, which clearly and coherently address issues that are specific to female employees. So, for example, organizations need to ensure that all expatriate assignment opportunities are publicized in a manner that all qualified employees become aware of the opportunity. Further, given that females have been selected for expatriate assignments at much lower rates than men, it is critical that organizations inform qualified females in their ranks of their eligibility for the assignment, and detail the support that the organization would provide at each stage. Indeed, organizations would do well to specifically seek out qualified females for expatriate assignments, at least until the imbalance is significantly mitigated.

Next, MNEs need to have clear-cut repatriation policies, so that expatriates are convinced that their career paths would be well-defined post-assignment. While all of these issues are critical for all expatriates, these issues are magnified when applied to the female employee, as she is often at a disadvantage to begin with. If the female employee perceives a lack of support domestically, and believes that the support would remain at unacceptable levels while she is on the international assignment, it is clear that she would assume that she would be treated the same on her return.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, MNEs that do put such programs in place should make sure that the information about the existence of such programs is shared widely, so that potential candidates for expatriate assignments become aware of the programs. Also, where possible, MNEs should arrange for peer interactions of potential female applicants and female repatriates, so that they may share their own experiences with the programs.

Further research

We believe that our process model offers a number of possible research themes and streams. So, for example, scholars could identify organizations that do have clear-cut policies regarding organizational support at all stages, and compare the number of females in expatriate assignments at these organizations with the numbers at organizations that do not have such policies. Also, given that the numbers of females expatriates is still rather low, it may behoove scholars to conduct in-depth interviews and case studies with female expatriates who have spent time in countries where women were treated at the same level as men, and compare their experiences with female expatriates who worked in countries where women were not treated at the same level as men.

Given the importance of expatriate assignments for female careers, it is critical that researchers pay close attention to each stage of the expatriate process, and examine the impact of POS on each stage. Thus, for example, researchers should investigate how POS affects the motivation of females to seek expatriate assignments, how providing role information and social support during assignment affects their POS, and, finally, how POS interacts with the female expatriate's decision to stay with the organization on return.

Conclusion

In this paper, we address the issue of low numbers of females on expatriate assignments, by drawing upon the theory of POS. Given the fact that percentage of females in managerial positions is very low, even in domestic organizations, it is not surprising that very few female executives are considered for, and sent on, expatriate assignments. However, if this pattern is to be changed, organizations need to examine the practices and strategies that lead to this imbalance. As agents of the organization, managers themselves are often to blame, as they continue to mistakenly believe that females may not be interested in going on expatriate assignments and HCNs would not treat the female expatriate as well as they should. Ironically, while both these myths have been shown to be just that – myths, this does not seem to have had the expected impact on decision-makers in MNEs. Our paper is the first known attempt to explain the low numbers of female expatriates through the lens of the POS theory, applied to each distinct yet related stage of the expatriate experience – pre-assignment, on assignment, and post-assignment. For each stage, we explain how POS interacts with the female manager's decision to apply for expatriate assignment (or not). By paying heed to our suggestions, MNEs can increase the numbers of female applicants for expatriate assignments. Accordingly, the propositions we have put forth are intended to provide MNEs with specific, targeted, suggestions for programs that will increase the numbers of females in expatriate assignments, and help organizations draw upon their full pool of talent.

We want to conclude by acknowledging that one limitation of our paper is that we have presented a model that does not differentiate between assignment locations based on the gender balance in those countries. We hope that, in the future, researchers will include this distinction into their research models.

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