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Women in International Assignments:
The Australian Experience

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INTRODUCTION

Businesses are increasingly operating within an international environment, where the human and financial costs of failure are more serious than the domestic arena, and expatriate failure is reported to be a persistent and recurring problem for multinational corporations (Scullion, 1994). The successful implementation of global strategies depends heavily upon the existence of an adequate pool of nationally and internationally experienced managers with a diversity of talent. Adler (1993a, p55) has argued that “the option of limiting international management to one gender is an arm-chair ‘luxury’ that no company can afford”. Given the need to develop global teams with a variety of different perspectives and leadership competencies (Limerick & Cunnington, 1993; Dunphy & Stace, 1992), barriers to the appointment of women expatriates have become a critical issue for consideration by management practitioners and academics.

Recent research has found that internationally successful Australian organisations do not experience the expatriate problems highlighted by the international literature, because these firms are generally not multinational corporations and therefore do not face the same complex issues (Yetton & Craig, 1995). Yetton and Craig found that, because few of the internationally successful companies send employees overseas, they do not require the same skill levels required by multinational corporations. However, research for the Karpin Task Force found that Australian managers tend to have a cultural mind-set which fails to recognise the need for changes in management styles, and values homogeneity (Barraclough & Co., 1995). This suggests that the management development process is not viewed by senior management as a strategic issue, and that it is “haphazard, unsystematic and uncoordinated” (Barraclough & Co., 1995, p573).

The success or failure of an international assignment depends on the sensitive handling of the various phases of expatriation, including selection, training, ongoing support and repatriation, with total family involvement vital at all stages of the process. Premature repatriation is a common and costly problem, which may be

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caused by the expatriate’s inability to adjust, their personal or emotional maturity, their inability to cope with larger responsibilities, or family problems (Tung, 1982; Schuler, Dowling & Smart, 1988). However, while the most significant cause of failure is the spouse’s inability to adjust (De Cieri, Dowling & Taylor, 1991), selection efforts still tend to focus primarily on technical competence (Mendenhall, Dunbar & Oddou, 1987; Stone, 1991).

Management in the international arena was a major focus of a recent Australian Task Force, commonly referred to as the Karpin Committee, after the name of its chairperson. Commissioned in 1992, the task force reviewed the country’s preparation of managers for work and leadership. Its final Report (Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills, 1995) identified globalisation as the most significant environmental trend affecting Australian managers. Research for the Task Force confirmed that the manager of the future would require international experience, language capabilities, experience of managing cross-culturally, and an understanding of cultural nuances pertaining to social, economic and political relationships overseas (Boston Consulting Group, 1995).

The Karpin Report argued that businesses should capitalise on the benefits of gender diversity, as a key lever for enhancing global competitiveness. Within the Australian private sector fewer than 3 per cent of women occupy senior management positions, and the number appears to be declining (Still, Guerin & Chia, 1994). If Australian business is to tap the full range of business potential, then women managers need access to, and experience in, senior national appointments and international placements, as an integral component of management development.

GENDER DIVERSITY IN GLOBAL MANAGEMENT

Women have traditionally represented a small proportion of expatriates. Adler (1984) reported that women constituted less than 3 per cent of overseas appointments by North American organisations. They were estimated to make up 5 per cent in 1992, 10 per cent in 1993 and 12 per cent in 1994, with an expected rise to 20 per cent by the year 2000 (Swaak, 1995). Women expatriates tend to
work in large companies, predominantly in the banking, electronics, petroleum and publishing industries (Dowling & Schuler, 1990). A disproportionate number work in English-speaking countries (Antal & Izraeli, 1993).

The international human resource management literature has given scant attention to women as expatriates, probably because international assignments have long remained a male preserve. Adler and Izraeli (Adler, 1987, 1993a, 1993b, 1994a; Adler & Izraeli, 1988, 1994) have found that, while organisations may be prepared to promote women through their domestic managerial hierarchy, few women are given opportunities to expand their career horizons via access to international careers.

Reasons for the existence of the ‘glass border’ (Mandelker, 1994) include stereotypical assumptions about women as managers. Organisational culture may affect the numbers of women chosen for overseas assignments, with taken-for-granted assumptions that equate management with masculine leadership styles, thereby forming a blind spot (Adler & Jelinek, 1986). Rather than deliberately exclude women, companies may not even contemplate the possibility of considering them (Adler, 1994b) and, despite formal equal employment opportunity policies, informal policies and practices may adversely affect women (Harris, 1995; Smith & Hutchinson, 1995). Because of the uncertainty associated with international appointments, managers tend to select those most similar to themselves, which may discriminate against women, who are often perceived as different and unpredictable (Antal & Izraeli, 1993).

Women may miss out on international appointments because they lack mentors, role models and sponsorship, or access to appropriate networks (Adler, 1987; Harris, 1993; 1995), all of which are commonly available to promising men. McCauslan and Kleiner (1992) contend that women need teamwork skills, which men tend to learn early and keep exclusive. Furthermore, women’s employment concentration in the service industry, and in particular functions such as human resource management, may further limit their international career prospects (Hall & Bright, 1994).
A common organisational assumption is that career velocity is a reliable indicator of top managerial potential. Despite family commitments, men tend to have continuous career paths, while women are more likely to have interrupted careers, which may be interpreted by some employers as a lack of ability or commitment. This may in turn discourage women, reducing their confidence and ambitions. Chusmir and Fronczak (1990) found that women see fewer opportunities in international management than men believe are available for women, and this negative perception further reduces the likelihood of their being considered for an international assignment.

Companies may presume that women in dual-career relationships do not want an international posting, or that such women would incur partner-related problems on international assignments (Adler, 1987; Antal & Izraeli, 1993). Perversely, they may also be reluctant to send single women, assuming that they are more vulnerable than men to harassment, security risks and other dangers. Thus myths prevail about women’s availability, suitability and preferences for international appointments, alongside organisational misconceptions that foreigner prejudice will render women ineffective (Adler, 1987; Harris, 1993). However, studies show that women expatriates experience discrimination less from foreign countries’ cultural prejudices than from Western expatriate men (Adler, 1987; Stone, 1991; Westwood & Leung, 1994). In reality, because there are so few, women may be automatically assumed to be exceptionally able, with high visibility and memorability, and therefore accorded special treatment in business dealings (Adler, 1987; Napier & Taylor, 1995).

Australian research on women’s careers has tended to concentrate on employment status, barriers to entry to managerial positions, and strategies to overcoming the glass ceiling in senior appointments (Still, 1993; Sinclair, 1994; Smith, Crowley & Hutchinson, 1994), with a dearth of empirical research on international management appointments of women. In 1995 the authors were commissioned by the Australian Research Council to investigate the organisational and cultural barriers to women managers’ global placements. This paper reports on findings from an exploratory survey undertaken as part of a larger research project.
METHOD

The survey involved gathering baseline data on the number of women currently employed as expatriates in Australian private sector organisations. An expatriate was defined as someone employed by an organisation on an international appointment, in a country other than Australia, for six months or more. A questionnaire sought to identify organisational attitudes to international placements of women, as well as organisational policies and practices commonly associated with the recruitment, selection and management development of expatriates.

Early in 1996 an eight-page questionnaire was piloted and then mailed to Human Resource Managers of the Top 1000 Australian companies by employee size, with a cover letter explaining the purpose and context of the research. The survey asked for details of the industry, location, functional areas, and job levels of male and female expatriates, together with their marital status and educational levels. Details of organisational staff development processes were sought, and respondents were asked to rank the management competencies and criteria considered important for international appointments. The survey also requested detailed information about premature repatriation and the employment of women as expatriates, and included questions designed to test attitudinal support for common myths surrounding the employment of expatriate women, using Likert scale responses.

A response rate of 24.7 per cent was achieved. Three quarters of respondents (n=186) had no expatriate appointments, but several of these companies expressed an interest in the survey, reporting that they anticipated making international assignments in the future. Sixteen per cent of respondents (n=40) had only male expatriates and 9 per cent (n=21) had both male and female expatriates in post.

RESULTS

Categorised in accordance with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) industry classification, employers of expatriates were predominantly in the manufacturing
industry (50 per cent), followed by finance/property/business services (16 per cent) and resources/mining (15 per cent). Thirty eight per cent of the sample of employers of expatriates had fewer than 1,000 employees; 36 per cent employed 1,001-3,000; 16 per cent employed 3,001-10,000; and only 10 per cent employed more than 10,000. The number of expatriates employed by companies in the sample totalled 1,239, of whom 6 per cent (n=78) were women.

Expatriate Appointments

By industry classification, the majority of women expatriates were employed in the finance/property/business services sector (50 per cent), with less predominant representation in the manufacturing industry (18 per cent), wholesale and retail trade (12 per cent), communication (10 per cent), and resources/mining (6 per cent). Male expatriates worked predominantly in the manufacturing industry (35 per cent) and finance/property/business services (32 per cent). Sixteen per cent were employed in resources/mining, 7 per cent in communication and 6 per cent in the wholesale/retail trade.

Women expatriates were employed predominantly in companies of 1,001-3,000 employees (44 per cent), while 23 per cent worked in smaller companies of up to 1,000 employees. Equal proportions (16 per cent) of women worked in organisations of 3,001-10,000 and over 10,000 employees. Their male counterparts were also predominantly employed in organisations of 1,001-3,000 employees (44 per cent), with 27 per cent working in companies of over 10,000 employees and similar proportions in companies of up to 1,000 (15 per cent) and 3,000-10,000 (14 per cent). Note that, because not all sample respondents stated their organisation size, this analysis is based on the figures which were provided.

By function, expatriate women were employed predominantly in Finance/Accounting (48 per cent), with smaller representation in Information Systems (13 per cent), Engineering (9 per cent) and Marketing (9 per cent). For men, Finance/Accounting (29 per cent) was the most common function, followed by Engineering (23 per cent), Production (14 per cent), Marketing (12 per cent) and Information Systems (4 per cent). In accordance with the ABS occupational
classification of management, women constituted 6 per cent of all expatriate managers in the sample, with 4 per cent at senior management and 7 per cent at middle management levels. Within all other ABS occupational job classifications, men and women appeared to be equally represented in proportion to their numbers of total expatriates.

Based on information known to survey respondents, the vast majority (70 per cent) of women expatriates were single, and none of these had family dependants. Of their male counterparts, 18 per cent were single, the majority of whom (93 per cent) had no dependants. Less than a third of women expatriates were married, compared with over three-quarters of men, while 27 per cent of married women had dependants, compared with 79 per cent of married men. Professional qualifications represented the highest level of education for the majority of both male and female expatriates. Only 2 per cent of women had secondary schooling completion as their highest level of education, compared with 12 per cent of men. In contrast, 26 per cent of women expatriates had a postgraduate degree, compared with 12 per cent of men.

Eight per cent of expatriate destinations were unspecified by respondents. From the countries specified, the most common assignment for Australian expatriates was in Asian countries (50 per cent), followed by 19 per cent in English-speaking countries of Britain, North America and New Zealand, 10 per cent in continental Europe and 2 per cent in Africa. Women constituted 4 per cent of all Asian placements, 12 per cent of assignments in English-speaking countries, 9 per cent in continental Europe and 7 per cent in Africa. No women were reported to be working as expatriates in the Middle East or South America, although 5 per cent of expatriates were employed in these areas.

Employment Of Women As Expatriates

Nineteen per cent of companies reported that women had refused opportunities for international appointments. The most common reason was reported to be family commitments, closely followed by dual-career issues of spouses, and dissatisfaction with the position or location offered. Most companies provided no cultural
adaptation preparation or other types of support specifically for women expatriates, although several reported that their briefing did cover issues specific to each expatriate’s individual circumstances. However, one company reported giving more careful pre-transfer support and counselling to women, while another reported providing women with more liberal leave policies before and after the assignment.

Based on their experience of employing women, just over a third (38 per cent) of all respondents reported that no country was inappropriate for women expatriates. However, Middle East countries such as Saudi Arabia and the Arab Emirates were most commonly identified (31 per cent) as locations inappropriate for women expatriates, followed by Japan (14 per cent), and India and Pakistan (10 per cent).

Only one organisation identified any particular advantage it had experienced as a result of employing expatriate women, citing the choice of a woman facilitating acceptance by the Pacific Islands community. By contrast, 18 per cent of respondents had experienced difficulties while employing women expatriates. Factors commonly cited were dual-career conflicts, family commitments, host-country attitudes towards women, maternity leave overseas, and adaptability. However, there appeared to be no difference between men and women in terms of the reported failure rates of expatriate appointments.

Responses concerning attitudes to, and support for, women as expatriates showed that just over half (53 per cent) of respondents disagreed with the statement, *most women do not want international appointments*, although 39 per cent were uncertain. Fifty-nine per cent disagreed with the statement, *organisations prefer not to send women on international appointments*, and 33 per cent were uncertain. Half (51 per cent) of the sample companies disagreed with the statement, *foreign prejudice renders women expatriates ineffective*, but 41 per cent were uncertain. Although two-thirds (66 per cent) of respondents disagreed with the statement, *women face resistance from head office when seeking international management appointments*, 10 per cent agreed.

Over three-quarters (78 per cent) disagreed with the statement, *women are acceptable in international business in certain roles, but not in top management*
appointments, with 18 per cent uncertain and 4 per cent in agreement. Almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of respondents disagreed with the statement, *given a male and female candidate of equal merit, it is still preferable to appoint a man as an expatriate*, while 10 per cent agreed. Half of the sample companies (51 per cent) agreed with the statement, *women expatriates are inappropriate for certain countries*, while 18 per cent disagreed.

**Staff Development Processes**

Over half of expatriate employers in the sample (56 per cent) reported that they considered international assignments to be important for a senior management career, although 70 per cent did not include overseas experience as part of formal staff development programmes. Likert scale responses indicating the importance attached to management competencies for expatriates showed that functional/technical skills were identified by all companies as important. Communication skills were identified by almost all (98 per cent) as important, followed by management experience and organisational skills (96 per cent each), cultural sensitivity (94 per cent) and networking ability (91 per cent). Language skills were considered the least important (61 per cent).

Ranking of criteria for selection of expatriates were primarily the employee’s emotional maturity, followed by employee willingness to relocate, their ability to cope with greater responsibility, their spouse’s willingness to relocate, their family circumstances, and formal qualifications. Rated much less important were experience of living in another country, previous international experience, age and marital status. Gender was cited as of least importance.

Over three quarters (77 per cent) of companies in the sample identified potential for international appointments through performance appraisal, while management development programmes and career counselling were used by 45 per cent and 31 per cent of companies respectively. Few employees (91 men and 8 women) were currently participating in programmes directly oriented towards international placement.
Expatriate selection methods included internal advertising (used by 53 per cent of companies), candidate self-nomination (47 per cent), external advertising (12 per cent) and a recruitment agent (8 per cent). However, over three quarters (77 per cent) relied on an informal approach to preferred candidates. No respondents reported using psychological tests for expatriate selection. Thirty-nine per cent of companies included spouses as part of the formal selection process, two of whom tested the spouse for cultural adaptability.

**Family Involvement And Support**

Pre-appointment support for expatriates included an orientation trip to the country of destination (provided by 71 per cent of companies), language training (55 per cent) and cultural adaptation training (55 per cent). For spouses, such support included a reconnaissance trip (provided by 56 per cent of companies), cultural adaptation training (50 per cent) and language training (47 per cent). For expatriates’ family members, support included cultural adaptation training (provided by 35 per cent of companies), language training (26 per cent) and an orientation trip (19 per cent). Less than a third (30 per cent) of organisations in the sample assisted an expatriate’s spouse to find work in the new location through networking, educational and job search assistance, and occasionally by employing the spouse in the company.

Ongoing support for expatriates while overseas included accommodation (provided by 98 per cent of companies), regular updates about the company (68 per cent), regular updates about Australia (53 per cent), financial support for schooling (45 per cent) and domestic services (37 per cent). Mentoring was the least mentioned support, offered by just under a third (31 per cent) of companies in the sample. Repatriation support in the form of a guarantee of continued employment of the expatriate was provided by just over two-thirds (69 per cent) of companies. Sixty per cent offered debriefing, 47 per cent offered rebriefing on the organisation, 29 per cent engaged the services of repatriation experts, and 26 per cent offered counselling support.
DISCUSSION

In private sector organisations, Australian women expatriates appear to be less well represented than their North American counterparts, and still face a 'glass border'. One can only speculate on whether this border is disappearing, since this survey appears to offer the first snapshot of such women. Because women's representation in international appointments appears to be greater than in senior management positions nationally, this might suggest grounds for cautious optimism. However, although the survey findings suggest that gender is regarded by Human Resource Managers as of little consequence in the selection process, the percentage of women expatriates is very small. Moreover, mirroring the national context, women appear to be concentrated at middle rather than senior management levels. This contradicts the high degree of employer support accorded in the survey to women in senior management appointments overseas.

Postings differ for women and men in geographical terms. Women tend to be concentrated in the 'safer' (i.e. less risky in terms of posting) English-speaking countries of the UK, North America and New Zealand, whereas men are located more commonly in Asian countries, which constitute increasingly important trading partners for Australian business. While the survey reveals reasonably strong employer support for women as expatriates, a marked reluctance to send women to the Middle East, India and Pakistan is apparent. Yet companies can ill afford to take the high moral ground in pursuing equal employment opportunity policies for women in international assignments, by sending them to countries where women's status and acceptance is low, if such a move is likely to jeopardise business opportunities. However, employer reticence to send expatriate women to Japan is more surprising, given the literature which confirms that traditional attitudes to such placements are misplaced (Adler, 1987; Napier & Taylor, 1995).

While female and male Australian expatriates tend to work in similar sized companies, their industry representation differs. Women expatriates are concentrated in the finance/property/business services sector, while men are located predominantly in both manufacturing and finance/property/business
services. Women are less well represented than men in resources/mining, an industry traditionally of great significance to the Australian economy. However, this comes as no surprise, given the very small proportion of women in the sector generally (Smith et al., 1993). Although women and men predominate in the Finance/Accounting function, women appear to have a higher representation than men in Information Systems, a function which is growing rapidly in importance to business.

Women expatriates appear to be better qualified than their male counterparts, suggesting that, as in the national arena (Marshall, 1984; Still, 1993), expatriate women have to be particularly well qualified to reach prestigious managerial levels. It is conceivable that organisations take extra care to ensure that women are appropriately qualified to operate in other cultures, to minimise the risks traditionally associated with international appointments. This is critical if, as the international literature indicates, female expatriates are presumed automatically by host country nationals to possess exceptional calibre (Napier & Taylor, 1995).

The finding that the great majority of women expatriates are single supports other research that, unlike men, women in senior positions are much more likely to be divorced, or to have never married (Still, 1993). Single status may reflect the demands of a corporate career culture which militates against women forming long-term personal attachments, due to the complexities associated with dual careers and multiple roles (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1980; Lewis, 1992), which are compounded by an international posting. Reasons given to employers by women for refusing international appointments suggest the need for organisational consideration of more flexible work and family policies, not only in response to child care responsibilities but also to elder care. Even though most women expatriates appear to be single, they may well incur additional responsibilities for ageing relatives, as people live longer and women tend to assume the greater share of elder care.

It is interesting to speculate why companies appeared to be more knowledgeable about the educational qualifications and marital status of women expatriates than those of men. This could be due to the small number of expatriate women, making
it easier for Human Resource Managers to be conversant with their personal details. Alternatively, companies may be more diligent in ascertaining women’s marital status, to minimise the likelihood of premature repatriation, which commonly arises from spousal failure to adjust (Black & Stephens, 1989). Although spouse involvement in selection for international relocation has been identified as a critical factor in ensuring a successful placement (Brett & Stroh, 1995; Smith, 1994), such involvement appears rare. This suggests there is room for improvement in organisational procedures which take greater account of the work/family nexus, by spouse involvement in selection, pre-appointment and ongoing assignment support.

While the research shows that many companies consider international appointments necessary for a senior management career, preparation for expatriation rarely appears to be integrated into management development processes, and few employees are participating in programmes targeted towards overseas work. Although mentoring is particularly important for women’s career development (Dreher, 1990; Kram, 1985; Limerick, Heywood & Daws, 1994), it appears to be rarely provided for expatriates. This suggests that, in the absence of mentors as role models, the potential for women to have increased representation in developmental positions such as overseas assignments, may be somewhat limited. This would appear to run counter to the Karpin Report prescriptions that women’s talents must be harnessed, and that international placements will play an increasingly important role in the development of tomorrow’s managers (Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills, 1995).

Expatriation recruitment and selection processes appear to be haphazard rather than systematic, with a reliance on informal approaches to preferred candidates. Such ad hoc methods are likely, even if unintentionally, to perpetuate indirect discrimination in favour of men as expatriates, who have traditionally been regarded as the obvious choice for overseas postings. Instead, formal systems for evaluation of potential candidates would be more conducive to discarding stereotypical assumptions, thereby encouraging greater diversity in the recruitment pool. Because of the kudos associated with international assignments, and their significance for senior management development, overseas appointments therefore
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need to become an integral element of systematic staff development programmes, to which all employees have equal access and support.

Although foreign language skills have been identified as critical for senior management careers (Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills, 1995), these do not appear to be regarded by employers as critical competencies for Australian expatriates. This suggests support for the view that Australian organisations underestimate the complexities of operating in an overseas environment (Stone, 1985). However, employers do appear to attach importance to expatriates' interpersonal skills such as effective communication and cultural sensitivity, which are capabilities commonly attributed to women (Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills, 1995). Judging from the number of women currently employed as expatriates, however, these abilities do not appear to have been capitalised upon by Australian companies. Many appear uncertain about women's acceptability and inclination for, and potential effectiveness in, expatriate appointments, despite their apparent rejection of the view that foreign prejudice renders women expatriates ineffective.

CONCLUSIONS

While the results of this exploratory survey are of limited generalisability, due to the relatively low response rate and small sample size, they do suggest some trends in respect of selection, placement and development for international assignments. The Karpin Report identified the profile of tomorrow's senior manager as either male or female, with a graduate or postgraduate qualification, and a wide range of ethnicities and citizenships. S/he would be the product of a major development programme, with a global focus derived from regular travel and domicile in two or more countries. This survey suggests that Australian companies are making little progress towards this end, and multicultural experience, gender diversity, and expatriate preparation are not yet integral components of management development programmes. Therefore, Australian business has yet to embrace the ingredients necessary for the global change process.
The cultural barriers which militate against senior management appointments for women nationally also appear to operate in the international arena. Explanations for this 'glass border' are being explored in detailed interviews with employers of expatriates, as part of the larger research project. Yet, because global competition is increasingly intense and a diversity of perspectives is likely to be beneficial for business success, organisations now need to capitalise on the benefits that women offer to international assignments.

The international management literature confirms that women can and should play a more significant managerial role in diverse national cultures, and greater employer familiarity with this literature might result in a reconsideration of the risks associated with overseas placements of women. Companies therefore need to abandon outmoded assumptions and placement processes, and choose the best person for the job on the basis of merit, even if this challenges the customary appointment of men as expatriates. If Australian companies do not offer women access to global career development, their careers will be limited to the national arena, thereby restricting the achievement of their full potential, with long-term implications for effective business functioning.

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