Extreme Expatriation: The Effect of Location Factors and Masculine Environments on Women’s International Assignment Participation in Oil and Gas Exploration and Production

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Abstract
Expatriation in oil and gas exploration and production involves relocation or frequent mobility to geographically remote, climatically harsh, even dangerous locations. Living in camps, compounds or offshore rigs typically involves family separation for lengthy periods with little respite from a highly masculine social ethos. Women undertaking such assignments can experience limited opportunities for fulfilling social lives. Even city-based solo expatriation can prove to be isolating. Yet, extreme geographical locations do not preclude women’s expatriation as benefits such as good career prospects, high monetary rewards and various forms of organizational support can potentially outweigh the disadvantages. Based on 12 interviews with solo expatriates, this chapter highlights the factors that influence women’s decisions to undertake single status expatriation and their experiences of living in highly gendered geographies. Organizational policy that supports female assignees can help to make extreme expatriation more attractive to women.

Keywords (separated by “ - ”) Women expatriates - Extreme environments - Organizational support - Expatriate camps - Single status - Oil and gas industry

AUTHOR QUERIES
Q1 Please confirm the author affiliation.
Introduction

Oil and gas exploration and production organizations are major, and increasing, users of expatriates (Brookfield 2009a). Expatriates are defined as individuals working outside the country of their nationality and being based in another country (BP 2010); corporate expatriation is instigated by an employing organization and distinguished from self-initiated expatriation (Berry and Bell 2012; Cerdin and Le Pargneux 2010; Howe-Walsh and Schyns 2010). The terms ‘international assignment’ and ‘expatriate’ are used interchangeably within the literature (for example, Tung 2004) although the term ‘international assignment’ encompasses a wide variety of arrangements going beyond traditional expatriation out and back from the headquarters sending location (Banai 2004). Types of assignments used typically include long-term (usually defined as over a year in length) and short-term (generally between 3 months and 1 year long). The oil and gas industry also uses ‘rotational’ working (Brookfield 2011a), particularly offshore and in remote locations (Inwood 2007). This type of expatriation is defined as rotation for a set period of time into another country (BP 2010).

The expatriate workforce has been and is today predominantly male (Adler 1984; Hardill 1998; Hutchings et al. 2012); women’s share of expatriation across all industries ranges between 16 and 20% (Brookfield 2010, 2011a, 2012; Permits Foundation 2012). In oil and gas, however, women’s expatriate participation is just 7% (Orc Worldwide 2007). Expatriation provides career benefits to individuals with international assignment experience considered a prerequisite to leadership (Caligiuri and Colakoglu 2007; Mendenhall et al. 2002; Orser and Leck 2010). Expatriation therefore presents significant advantages to those individuals who engage in it. Hence, it is not surprising to find women entering in increasing numbers what was historically a masculine expatriate preserve (Adler 1984; Julius 1982) and to see them increasingly taking up gender atypical employment roles (Watts 2009). Yet, women’s share of oil and gas expatriate opportunities has risen only marginally from the 5% recorded in 1990s (Orc/CBI 1992).

In the oil and gas industry, exploration and drilling involve ‘extreme’ expatriation: challenging geographical conditions beyond perceptions of traditional assignee environments, often with harsh climatic conditions and in remote locations. Camp and compound living is necessary in many such locations due to access and security.
factors, resulting in a restrictive environment whereby work and social life are inextricably intertwined. Such settings are highly masculine; women expatriates are not just in the minority but are highly visible. Yet, very little is known about expatriate compound life (Lauring and Selmer 2009). Studies on women’s expatriation provide only a patchwork of information by geography, having, in the main, addressed more traditional Western sending and receiving locations (Shortland and Altman 2011). There has also been little research into organizational support for expatriates (Kraimer et al. 2001) and studies of expatriate policies, terms and conditions rarely address specific concerns of women assignees based in non-Western host locations (Hutchings et al. 2008). The effect of extreme location issues on women’s willingness to undertake expatriation is unknown.

To address these under-researched issues, this chapter empirically examines the extent to which – and how – geographical location factors (such as climatic extremes, remote/distant environments, poor security, and health concerns) affect women’s willingness to undertake expatriation. It also examines the strategies female expatriates use to manage their home, family and social lives in the context of working alone in male-dominated environments and in extreme or remote geographical locations. This exploratory research into the intersection between gender and geography in expatriation is framed by Perceived Organizational Support, being set within the context of the international human resource interventions provided currently by employers and the actions that they might take in the future with regard to their international assignment policy design and implementation practice to increase expatriate gender diversity in remote and challenging host country environments.

**Context**

Organizations operating in remote or potentially unsafe locations establish expatriate compounds to provide an enclosed community for their expatriate workers and their families. Such environments offer security and facilities to enable family life to continue comfortably (Lauring and Selmer 2009). Coles and Fechter (2008) suggest that such an expatriate community acts as a ‘bubble’ and this brings pressure to conform to acceptable behaviors. Indeed, Lauring and Selmer’s (2009) study finds that national groups and ‘in-groups’ emerge in compound settings, norms of acceptable behavior are established (to which newcomers conform) and work and non-work boundaries blur. Expatriate compounds are highly gendered settings: men are the expatriates and in-compound support groups cater for wives (Coles and Fechter 2008; Lauring and Selmer 2009). Where female expatriates are employed, they lead separate lives from expatriates’ wives and do not (or do not wish to) involve themselves in wives’ in-compound support groups (Fechter 2008). Single expatriate women, in particular, face isolation and loneliness as social activities frequently revolve around children (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002).

Besides family-oriented compounds (typically servicing established drilling and production operations), the oil and gas industry operates camps where exploratory and early stage drilling operations take place. New discoveries are frequently in remote geographical areas or politically unstable locations. Camps are likely to differ in social ethos from established expatriate compounds as they are not usually inhabited by expatriates on accompanied long-term assignments, rather they are serviced via unaccompanied, rotational working (Inwood 2007). While camps are shut off, fenced and have a company infrastructure (Fechter 2008) and, as such, bear some similarity to compound life, the assignment pattern servicing them results in a differentiation between camp and compound social and gender structures.

Rotation patterns involve regular periods on-shift interspersed with time off-shift; for example 4 weeks on/4 weeks off, working 12 h days. Different groups of workers’ shifts may overlap completely, partially or not at all, depending on business need, for example working arrangements with joint venture partners. As there are relatively few women undertaking assignments
in the oil and gas industry (ORC Worldwide 2007) and, in particular, rotational working, the female population in such camp environments is low (Inwood 2007). Long hours working also limits opportunities for building social relationships (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002).

Forster (1999) reports that women assignees have fewer options in terms of geographical destinations, with their assignments typically based in established Western destinations. Even in developed countries, where assignees are undertaking long-term expatriation, city-based office locations and organizational cultures may not be conducive to these women building friendships (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002). More junior women colleagues may be uncomfortable socializing with them, while local women occupied with family concerns may view them as a threat through their foreign and single status (Napier and Taylor 2002; Taylor and Napier 2001). As Yeoh and Willis (2005: 211) report, female assignees experience “considerable strain holding together geographically separate spheres of productive and reproductive work across the transnational terrain”. Women assignees on single status would therefore be expected to be ‘self-oriented’ (to cope with the requirement for social adaptation) as well as ‘others-oriented’ (to develop strong friendships locally wherever possible) to reduce assignment stress (Mendehall and Oddou 1985).

In some societies, where new discoveries are of major importance to oil and gas, such as Russia and the Central Asian ‘Stans’, men’s superiority in the management hierarchy is highlighted (Harry 2006; Mellow 1998). Local culture demands that female expatriates modify their behavior and appearance to a greater extent than men (Coles and Fechter 2008) and building friendships with male host country employees may result in women assignees experiencing social stigma (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002). In contrast, Verma (2008: 184) notes that living away from home (from spouses/partners) allows men “an enormous degree of freedom”, placing strain on conjugal relations and trust. She suggests that men’s freedom of movement can be facilitated by host country’s reputations as sex tourism destinations; expatriates can become “sexpatriates”. Set against this backdrop, it might be questioned why women elect to undertake assignments in such locations. Fechter (2008) reports women go to make a positive impact on their host country, with the rewards of so-doing outweighing the difficulties. Despite the challenges of being accepted as ‘one of the boys’ and the high levels of confidence needed to cope in a ‘macho’ male culture, women report high career contribution, and the potential for friendship and camaraderie in exploration environments (Shortland 2011a). The expatriate experience potentially provides solo women with an opportunity for reflexivity, self-discovery and empowerment (Thang et al. 2002).

Given the expected difficulties faced by women on assignment in remote and gendered geographies, organizational support is likely to take on increased significance in their expatriate participation decision-making and ability to complete assignments once in post. While Perceived Organizational Support concerns “the extent to which the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being”, employers’ efforts to provide fair financial rewards and a meaningful and interesting job will also affect employees’ “emotional bond (affectionate attachment)” to their organization (Eisenberger et al. 1986: 501). Kraimer et al. (2001) note that in an expatriate context, organizational support comprises aid, affect and affirmation: aid refers to information or assistance to reduce expatriate stress; affect refers to supportive relationships; and affirmation concerns the assignees’ ability to cope with stress with reaffirming relationships. Social support is therefore expected to be of particular importance to expatriates and this may be provided by the organization, managers, co-workers and family members.

Organizational support for expatriation (including aid in the form of remuneration, allowances, benefits, preparation and training; and social support in post via relationships such as mentoring, coaching and networking) is articulated within international assignment policies. Certain aid elements (for example, housing and location payments) are viewed as 'knock-out fac-
tors’; without their provision, the assignment would not be undertaken (Warneke and Schneider 2011). Cost of living payments and healthcare are also cited as crucial (Sims and Schraeder 2005). While policy governing the provision of allowances and benefits to expatriates is typically determined by Human Resource staff (typically in the headquarters) the delivery of the benefits on assignment takes place at local level in the host country by line managers. This may create tensions where policy provision and implementation are not aligned (Perkins and Daste 2007). Notwithstanding this, the provision and delivery of expatriate allowances and benefits from the headquarters, the sending country or locally in the host country provides a supporting framework for expatriation: monetary satisfaction (Fish and Wood 1996), applicable benefits packages (Konopaske and Werner 2005), and tax, pensions and social security concerns being addressed (Suutari and Tornikoski 2001) are important to assignment take-up. If the package is inadequate or recessionary pressures have trimmed it back too far, expatriate assignments may be unacceptable (Hardill and MacDonald 1998). However, financial rewards are not a major motivator for expatriation (Pate and Scullion 2010) and are insufficient to “satisfy and commit expatriates to the organisation” (Tornikoski 2011: 61). Assignment support is generally acknowledged as more helpful to expatriates in creating a meaningful and interesting job. For instance, mentoring helps to provide career enhancement for women (Linehan and Walsh 1999); coaching provides a highly personalized form of training (Mendenhall and Stahl 2000) and networking helps to reduce women’s isolation as well as providing a career development intervention (Shortland 2011b).

Yet, remote geographies impact both employer-provided aid and support as well as the relationships that can reaffirm assignees’ ability to cope with working away from home. In other words, although expatriates based in remote and challenging environments may receive generous compensatory allowances, the nature of their assignment location restricts the type of benefits provided. For instance, company-provided accommodation (particularly in camps and compounds) is typically de-personalized and homogenous; everything is chosen and provided by the company (Gordon 2008). Supportive relationships may also be limited by the gendered nature of the work location, the overlap of work and social space, restrictions on family members accompanying the assignee, and cultural norms and security constraints limiting freedom of movement external to compound and camp life.

Tuan (1977: 54) suggests that as humans, we need both space and place; our lives “are a dialectical movement between shelter and venture, attachment and freedom”. While place represents security – and space, freedom – camp and compound life presents inhabitants with a restricted and restrictive corporate space, “marked off and defended against intruders” (ibid: 4). Freedom is therefore limited and although such corporate environments provide shelter and security, they do not provide the intimate and sentimental attachment – a centre of “felt value” (ibid: 4) – associated with the development of a sense of place. Tuan further suggests that it usually requires a period of lengthy residence to enable the creation of place.

Women who choose to expatriate to isolated destinations by themselves or who undertake city-based assignments, far from home on their own, require strategies to build social relationships, feelings of belonging and of home; to create a sense of place – a personal connection to a building, with a sense of privacy. Although places are always in formation, constructed by replication of daily practices, and hence are never truly finished (Cresswell 2004), short or intermittent assignments restrict ability to gain attachment to the surroundings, inevitably leading to a temporary and/or disrupted sense of place. Gordon (2008) suggests that personalizing corporate space (for example, with pictures and furnishings) can help to create a sense of place from depersonalized space. When individuals surround themselves with familiar objects, they attempt to make their place feel like home (Cresswell 2004). Yet, while long-term assignees typically receive allowances to transport goods and belongings around the
world, assignees undertaking short-term assignments are limited under corporate policy as to the volume of belongings they may transport (Brookfield 2009b, 2010, 2011b). Rotational assignees based in camp locations do not receive organizational payments for shipments; suitcases only would be the norm. As a result, apart from bringing small mementos with them, personalization of corporate space requires a different approach. For example, cooking and eating away from company-provided canteen facilities helps create a sense of difference and individuality (Gordon 2008).

The research study reported below examines the effects of challenging geographical locations and male-dominated environments on women’s willingness to take up expatriate roles where the conditions associated with international working are extreme, being far beyond usual perceptions of an expatriate lifestyle. The extant literature does not consider in detail women’s lived reality in such environments nor the extent to which organizations attempt to support women’s expatriation under such circumstances. As such, this study addresses these gaps in our knowledge. It highlights the issues that women face when undertaking international assignments to remote, unsafe, climatically extreme and masculine environments and it contributes to our understanding of how gender diversity in expatriation might be widened through organizational supporting policy and practice.

**Method**

This study’s analysis draws upon data collected from two oil and gas exploration and production case study organizations with UK-based operations whose female expatriate populations were drawn from 16 different home countries. The organizations were identified through convenience sampling (Saunders et al. 2007). The case studies were not considered to be unique or extreme cases (Yin 2009) as they were not oil and gas ‘giants’, rather they were representative of medium-sized oil and gas firms, employing under 12,000 employees with exploration and production operations based in 20–30 worldwide locations on all continents.

A triangulated research approach was undertaken comprising analysis of organizational policy supporting expatriation and its implementation in practice. To carry this out, relevant international assignment policies and other Human Resource policies that supported expatriation were collected from both case study firms. The information contained within these was subjected to data reduction (Miles and Huberman 1994) to generate policy summaries from which the elements of support relating to geographical location could be analysed.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews (30–90 min’ duration) were conducted with 14 Human Resource personnel who held responsibility for the design and/or implementation of company policies relevant to expatriation to establish how organizational policy, as written, was implemented in practice in the organizations’ various host countries of operation. In relation to location factors, the questions addressed where female assignees worked, how these host countries were classified in policy with respect to such issues as risk/health/isolation and the relationship between assignment location and women’s participation.

Supporting policy in respect of preparation and training, remuneration and benefits linked to extreme geographies, and social support were also addressed.

The two firms employed a total of 93 female expatriates: 27 in Company A and 66 in Company B, representing 8% and 11% respectively of the total expatriate populations employed. A ‘census’ survey of all of these women was conducted by e-mail, 19 replied from Company A (70%) and 52 (79%) from Company B; making a total of 71 responses (a response rate of 76%). The survey participants were asked to provide information on the lengths and deployment patterns of the assignments that they had undertaken and their home and host countries; they were also asked to give their views on the importance of a wide range of supporting organizational policy aspects of relevance to their assignments (including recruitment and selection, preparation and training, development, reward and assignee support).
Specifically, in relation to location, the assignees were asked whether the following host country factors acted as disincentives or deterrents to their participation in respect of current and/or any previous expatriate assignments: extreme climate (weather); limited facilities; primitive healthcare; high security; cultural restrictions (such as alcohol; dress); and any other location factors. Questions in relation to preparation and training addressed geographical factors concerned the training elements offered (language; cross-cultural differences; security; driving; country briefing and pre-assignment visits), whether the respondents undertook them and their importance to assignment participation. Survey participants were also asked to report on whether they received specific remuneration elements linked to location (for instance, foreign service premiums, rest and recreation leave, housing, security guards, home leave and flights for family reunification, club membership and so on). Again the participants were asked to state the importance of these policy elements to their assignment participation. Finally, in relation to assignment support, the survey asked for assignees’ views on the importance of mentors, female role models and women’s groups in their assignment participation decision-making.

To complete the data triangulation, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out either by telephone or face-to-face in the UK with 26 of the survey respondents, each lasting between 60 and 90 min. Stratified sampling (Collis and Hussey 2009) was used to identify these assignees to include appropriate representation by current assignment type; un/accompanied status; sending and current host locations; job roles; and previous assignments undertaken. Questions addressed how employers could better support women expatriates through policy and practice. Assignees were asked to identify elements in the assignment package that were critical to taking up expatriation and those most helpful in supporting them once on assignment. The advantages and disadvantages of undertaking particular types of assignment in different geographical locations were addressed. How location and lifestyle factors were prioritized in the assignment participation decision was explored. Support networks, (including mentors, role models and women’s groups) were also examined in terms of their contribution to facilitating women’s expatriation.

The Human Resource and expatriate interviews were transcribed and the data, together with the policy document summaries and the responses to open comment survey questions, were coded and analysed using CAQDAS software NVivo 8 during 2010/2011. Data were categorized within four themes using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006): the perceived benefits of undertaking ‘upstream’ expatriation which could be weighed up against the disadvantages of ‘extreme’ geographies; and women’s home, family and social life considerations which could be related to and set within the context of overlapping work and social male space.

With regard to research ethics, permission was sought and explicit agreement obtained from all parties before the interviews were taped and it was agreed that policy documentation would only be summarised briefly, not fully reproduced. All parties were guaranteed anonymity. As a result, participant numbers have been used throughout to ensure that the expatriates’ names, roles and job titles cannot be identified; and locations have been generalized as far as possible to a regional level. It was also agreed that interview transcripts would not be fully reproduced; hence only short illustrative excerpts have been used.

Survey Findings

The survey results revealed that the 71 women assignees worked in 17 host countries. Although 25 women (35%) were employed in the UK and the USA, reflecting the headquarters and main regional office locations of the two case study firms, it was notable that other expatriate destinations employed very few, sometimes only one female assignee. The majority (51 women, 72%) were undertaking long-term assignments, defined in organizational policy as a year or longer, most typically 2–3 years. However, other assignment types were also represented. These included:
short-term assignments, undertaken by 12 women (17%), defined as between 3 months and 1 year, although usually 6 months long; and rotational assignments, undertaken by five women (7%) working 28 days on shift, 12 h a day, 7 days a week; followed by 28 days off shift in their home country. There were also three women (4%) on extended international transfers in North America. Under organizational policy, provision was made for accompanied status for long-term assignments and extended international transfers; however, short-term assignments were typically undertaken on single status and rotational work was, by definition, unaccompanied. Table 23.1 lists the survey respondents’ host regions and their assignment lengths and patterns.

The survey population had considerable expatriate experience: 34 women (48%) had undertaken a previous expatriate assignment before their current expatriate role; 12 (17%) had undertaken two previous assignments; five (7%) said they had been on three; one woman had undertaken four. Their previous experience embraced long-term, short-term, rotational, extended international transfers as well as international commuter assignments (being based in the home country but flying to and from the host country to service an expatriate role). With regard to marital status, 45 women (53%) were married or partnered and 26 (37%) were single, divorced or widowed; 33 women (45%) were accompanied on their assignments while 38 (54%) were unaccompanied.

### Geographical Assignment Considerations

Expatriation in the oil and gas exploration and production sector frequently involves extreme geographical considerations. Assignment locations (other than the headquarters and main regional offices) are ‘upstream’, typically in developing or newly industrializing countries, often with security concerns and challenging climate and health conditions. The survey participants were asked to indicate whether location factors acted as a disincentive or as a deterrent to their participation in respect of their current and any previous expatriate assignments (see Table 23.2).

Security risks are inherent in many of the countries where upstream oil and gas exploration and production take place. Yet, the survey results indicated that only eight assignees reported security as an assignment disincentive. This can be explained by the emphasis placed within organizational policy and practice on the provision of security measures (security briefings, secure housing/compounds, guards, drivers and so on), helping to alleviate concerns:

I would be more hesitant to take up an assignment in a high security location, e.g. Nigeria, but I know the company would have adequate security arrangements in place. (6, North Africa)

The following quotations were representative of the attitudes of the female assignees who were prepared to work in potentially dangerous locations; they were aware of the threats involved but detached themselves from them on a day-to-day basis. However, once threat became reality their willingness to remain in such locations ceased:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 23.1 Host locations and assignment types of survey respondents</th>
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<td><strong>Current host region</strong></td>
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... you hear stories about safety and people ... go 'oh my God, (it) is this horrible place', but it just might have been that they were unlucky ... the week that they were there. Also ... it has had bombings ... and I think that people are still a little leery about traveling here... (63, East Asia)

I'm probably at just as terrorist risk in London as here but in the time I've been here there have been four bombings at places where I go and could easily have been at the time. One of the reasons I left (Caribbean) was that I was starting to feel unsafe – I had my apartment broken into whilst I was there alone at night and there was a shooting at the local supermarket and colleagues had been subjected to armed robbery. (22, North Africa)

Yet, only one survey respondent reported turning down a previous assignment on security grounds. She had young children and was unwilling to risk taking them to Brazil.

Eight women reported primitive healthcare in their host locations acted as a disincentive to going on assignment. While their organizations had set up clinics (or ensured that their employees had access to them), emergency treatment in hospitals was often simply not accessible particularly from field locations:

Road safety is appalling … Having the 4x4 and the driver mitigates that to some degree but I still feel like I am at risk every time I get in the car ... if you were in a car accident I think you’d have pretty much no chance of survival because you’d never get to hospital let alone receive any decent care once there. (22, North Africa)

Language barriers also acted as disincentives to assignment participation in respect of medical care:

... language is very much a barrier when visiting a clinic … as I always like to know what is going on ... and my Russian is not that good. (14, Central Asia)

Yet, healthcare was only rarely cited as a deterrent to expatriation; only one woman turned down an assignment for this reason.

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*It was a disincentive; but assignment was accepted

*It was a deterrent; assignment was turned down
Six women noted extreme weather as a disincentive to taking up their current assignment. Four, however, refused previous assignments due to excessively hot or cold climates. Those working in extreme climates noted the limitations this had on their preferred lifestyle:

… here the heat is such that you wouldn’t go running unless you go very early in the morning or very late in the evening. (56, East Asia)

I don’t mind the summer so much, but in the winter … it is so cold, you just can’t go out. (50, Central Asia)

The women reported on the generous financial assistance given by their organizations to encourage assignment participation in extreme climates:

… had an extreme climate in winter but the uplift on the salary made up for that. It made up for a lot of things! (29, Central Asia)

Cultural restrictions were cited as disincentives by just three women in respect of their current assignments and two said that they had refused assignments for this reason. In the main though, female assignees believed that living and working within a different culture was part of the attraction of expatriation:

Abiding by the dress code is part of the deal and helps the individual fit in with society. Respecting cultural and religious differences … is again part of the package and not a hardship. (38, North Africa)

Remote environments did affect women’s assignment participation decision-making particularly if they had concerns about elderly parents in their home country or the assignment necessitated single status away from family members and the distance between the home and host locations precluded regular visits back:

Every location where we drill … are remote, and we even consider them sometimes as hardship. I mean, I don’t think we have any like in the middle of Paris or in London! … If you go on an international assignment, you go to Africa or you go to Alaska. (65, North America)

However, undertaking assignments in such distant destinations and willingness to carry out company duties in difficult and challenging locations was considered to be career enhancing and thus worthwhile:

… because sometimes it is hard to find people who want to take on these assignments in remote areas, it is often a positive thing for your career progression … that you are willing to do that. (25, East Asia)

The opportunity to make a difference to local people was also stressed:

… it is the kind of environment … where it is so easy to make a difference … We have villages with no running water … (26, Central Asia)

The women reported on financial assistance given by their organizations to encourage assignment participation in remote locations. They also reported on practical help providing further support to go:

… distance from home was the main disadvantage but then I have got an agreement where I can take additional unpaid leave to spend with my parents. (20, Australasia)

Facilities such as entertainment and cultural and social events in remote and isolated upstream oil and gas drilling sites are limited and local cities (if accessible) may provide little attraction. Yet, only seven of the survey respondents reported that limited facilities in the assignment location acted as a disincentive to their expatriation and just two had turned down a previous assignment for this reason.

Going Solo: Women Expatriates’ Lived Reality in Gendered Work Settings

I lived on a construction camp before … and there were 300 men and two women, and you just can’t go anywhere without being stared at … I carried my bag over my crotch, so I didn’t get grabbed. It was pretty grim, and in the evening, you don’t want to go in the bar in the camps because you just get hit on. (33, ex-Central Asia)

This quotation provides an example (albeit an extreme and negative one) of what life in a virtually all-male environment might be like. Once on assignment, one of the key issues faced by women assignees is how to build a home and
Managing Distant Relationships

Three of the women interviewed were undertaking assignments in North Africa and Central Asia on a rotational basis:

... we knew that it had a beginning, a middle and an end and that was something that I could personally cope with pretty well. (52, Central Asia)

However, managing relationships required effort and periods of separation could be difficult:

We find that it is difficult ... but it is workable ... He knows that when I am on shift and we can't ... discuss anything of any major importance really ... but when I am off shift ... we can effectively, but it is not easy. (26, Central Asia)

Nonetheless current assignees, and those with previous experience of rotation in isolated and insecure locations who had left partners/families behind, reported that this assignment type was preferable to longer periods of unaccompanied mobility:

... your life was quite disjointed but ... that would be easier to manage than a full assignment over there (North Africa). (69, Western Europe)

One woman left her partner at home while undertaking a 6-month short-term assignment. Although she considered this beneficial for her career, separation caused relationship problems:

... when you leave the office in the evening, and ... that was something that I could personally cope with pretty well. (50, Central Asia)

Two married/partnered women went on long-term assignments by themselves. Their locations were far from their home countries. They reported being very lonely on assignment and on difficulties rebuilding relationships on return:

... when you leave the office in the evening, and you come back into the office in the morning, there is damn good chance that you didn’t talk to another human being ... (10, Australasia)

Every time I come back, and I’ve been away for eight weeks ... the first two days are complete storming. It’s a nightmare! And then it’s okay but then I am dreading going back. (50, Central Asia)

| Table 23.3 Women assignees interviewed who were undertaking single status assignments |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Married or partnered | Single, divorced or widowed |
| # 10, long-term, Australasia | # 56, long-term, Central Asia |
| # 50, long-term, Central Asia | # 65, long-term, North America |
| # 26, rotational, Central Asia | # 45, long-term, West Africa |
| # 52, rotational, Central Asia | # 62, long-term, Western Europe |
| # 59, rotational, North Africa | # 69, long-term, Western Europe |
| # 3, short-term, North America | # 25, short-term, East Asia |
The female assignees on single status postings placed high levels of importance on: organizational policy providing flights home (on a quarterly basis); travel days (time off extending periods of leave to compensate for time spent in transit); rest and recreation leave (time spent at home to compensate for working in challenging environments); and company provision of telephone calls/Skype facilities to maintain family relationships.

Location Challenges to Building a Social Life

Those who undertook single status assignments were based in a variety of locations: cities, onshore camps and offshore rigs. Each location presented a distinct set of challenges. For example, some cities offered very limited cultural and social activities:

- The city … is really boring. I mean, they have got beautiful old cities, but we are not there … you’ve got nothing to do. (50, Central Asia)
- Socially as a single woman … this is probably not the best place to be … There are not many places to go and … the bars and pubs are very smoky … I do go out a lot, but… I wouldn’t say it was my perfect social life. (56, Central Asia)

World cities offered a wide range of cultural pursuits and, as such, were usually considered as attractive host destinations presenting the possibility of an active and enjoyable lifestyle. Yet, while cultural activities were taken up, these did not compensate for the loneliness experienced:

- I don’t call what I have here a life because I’m by myself. So … I go home and I am alone, and I am alone at the weekends, so I travel. So I go to museums, and I see as much as I can … but … I don’t have any friends here. (69, Western Europe)

Building a social life in a city-based location was considered to be more difficult than in more remote expatriate destinations for solo female assignees. City-based office staff already had their own social groupings and the female expatriates found these difficult to penetrate, especially where social activities were male-dominated:

- I feel more lonely here … than I felt … in the middle of the desert, because we … were … totally isolated and there was nothing else to do and we organized all kinds of stuff among the expats, and there was a lot more social interaction … This office is in a major city … there is no emphasis on having a social life centered around the office … it’s okay for a bunch of guys to go to the pub and have a couple of pints before going home. But that is not where I am going to make friends … (69, Western Europe)

In contrast, rotational workers were all on single status potentially making it easier to build relationships:

- … we’re all very close … It is such a small place, it is like a very, very small village … Really one of the big influences … is the friendship you get. It is like a family … and that is something that I would never get anywhere else. (59, North Africa)

Building friendships with local people working in the camps was also described as rewarding although this did require language competencies:

- I speak French fluently, so I had absolutely no problem working with the (North Africans) and I made very good friends. I was very inquisitive about their way of life, and I learnt so much about their culture… (69, Western Europe, previously based in North Africa)

Nonetheless, living in camps and insecure locations could present considerable challenges to women on single status assignments, restricting their ability to build social lives outside of their work environment:

- … there are … considerations about being a female ever, whereas if I was a man that would be quite acceptable. (26, Central Asia)
- … they provide you with a level of security and accommodation and logistics to ensure that your stay in is comfortable, and sometimes … it is restrictive. (45, West Africa)

The male-dominated nature of the oil and gas exploration and production industry, particularly in upstream drilling locations, means that there are very few women with whom to socialize. For some of the expatriates interviewed this did not present a problem as they reported preferring male company. However, for the majority, the
lack of female companionship and male social behaviors proved difficult:

… it was probably one of my most difficult experiences … it was predominantly guys who were working on sites and locations. It was a rough area (East Asia) … you just don’t get accepted because you are not the norm. (62, Western Europe)

There are a lot … who lead completely parallel lives. They have a life there and they have a life at home. They have relationships there and they have marriages and relationships at home, unfortunately. And I think … there are a certain population who are probably attracted to that lifestyle. (26, Central Asia)

This sometimes resulted in the female assignees distancing themselves from what was going around them by 'retreating' into their own solo space:

The expats … are all males, and so a lot of socializing is around men go into bars, and all that, and it doesn’t bother me. I just ignore them. But … it isn’t particularly female friendly. (50, Central Asia)

… socially, I kept myself to myself. I recharge my batteries by retreating … (52, Central Asia)

Working on offshore rigs was reported as being particularly challenging; there was no escape from the male-dominated work and social environment:

… when I went to the jobsite … I hardly see women. (65, North America)

Strategies to Cope with Living Alone

Working longer hours and at weekends was reported by all the single status female expatriates. Women undertaking both long-term and short-term assignments said that they had more time to devote to work because they did not have family responsibilities or many social engagements:

… you have more time on your hands … so you can come to work on a Saturday … So you tend to work. (45, West Africa)

If I was out here with a family I wouldn’t work the same hours that I work out here at the moment … there isn’t that much for me to do as a social life … and I will work hard… (25, East Asia)

Those on short-term assignments noted that the assignment length was too short to make developing friendships possible or worthwhile:

… because it’s such a short time, and I think they also feel the same way that you’ll be gone in however many months. So there’s not much point really in … striking up too much of a friendship. (3, North America)

Those undertaking unaccompanied long-term assignments identified rotational working as a means of reducing their social isolation through filling their time with work-related activities:

… you don’t ever have a day off, so you haven’t got time to be melancholy … whereas … sitting here in the evenings … and I have many weekends, but I don’t speak to anyone else, unless I’m on the phone. (50, Central Asia)

Women on rotation or who had experienced this assignment pattern agreed. However, long hours working was not felt to be a good strategy to cope with a poor social life, regardless of assignment type:

I prioritize work willingly even if not necessarily pleasurably. (10, Australasia)

…you have to pace yourself. You don’t want to fall apart after one week because you are working 15 hour days. (69, Western Europe)

A more fulfilling strategy (more commonly used by single status female assignees than those who were accompanied on their postings) concerned undertaking further study. Five women were undertaking Masters Degrees on-line or by correspondence with periods of face-to-face tutoring while at home; one woman was also taking a language course. This meant that much of their free time was spent studying:

I usually work in the evening after work, so at the moment it is quite a head down one … but in terms of socially I wouldn’t really say that I have had my life balanced out here. (25, East Asia)

The assignees enjoyed their studies reporting that their courses were extremely valuable to their future careers and being on assignment, with little social activity beyond work, enabled them to devote time easily to their further education.
was good – the organizations met the cost of
course fees for Masters Degrees and other training
(language, cultural courses and so on) – and
this was considered supportive and was very
much welcomed by assignees.

Female expatriates also spoke about the enjoyment
they gained from looking after new women
arrivals who were readily taken under the wing of
established assignees:

Often … when women are coming … I have got
my friends in HR, calling me and saying can you
look after her please? … A few of us do try to
make it easy for new women moving down. (59,
North Africa)

… we know who is coming … other women assignees
and get to know them … (65, North America)

This provided a source of social introductions
and the potential to build friendships for estab-
lished assignees as well as valuable support for
the newcomers, resulting in reciprocal benefits to
both groups:

… I learnt a lot from … her being able to provide me
with guidance and … if there were company func-
tions … she would … invite you … so that you
don’t feel left out. (45, West Africa)

Two female assignees mentored and coached
local female staff and/or other expatriates. This was
considered to be a self-development tool, a means
of helping others and a way of developing networks
and friendships. The assignees requested further
organizational support to assist with networking
and also in pairing new expatriate arrivals with
locals to help understand cultural implications.

Social activities were very limited in camp
locations and typically there were few women on
site to share in them:

There’s (name) and I … Now we only have two
weeks together on every shift … and obviously I
never see my (colleague as we work) back-to-back.
She is a woman, but we are never there at the same
time. (26, Central Asia)

Yet, single status expatriation, regardless of
location, was frequently misconstrued:

… there is, unfortunately, an attitude that single
status assignees have a whale of a time … partying
it up … and no acknowledgement … it is not. (10,
Australasia)

The assignees stressed the importance of man-
agement understanding the need for lone female
expatriates to balance their work and their social
engagements:

Don’t … ask them to skip the social engagement
… to meet a conference call, because that social
engagement is disproportionately important to
their state of mind. (10, Australasia)

Not surprisingly, very few assignees spoke of
the social activities that they engaged in. When
they did, they reported enjoying cooking for
themselves rather than eating company-provided
meals in the canteen’s male space. While they
reported that their male colleagues visited local
villages for a change of fare, cooking and eating
on-site with other women provided a sense of
occasion for the female assignees who were
unable to leave camp:

… you don’t take your stuff … you just live in a
room, like Butlins. (50, Central Asia)

Accommodation in camp locations was Spartan:

As a result of this, the women placed particu-
lar emphasis on the importance of the facilities
provided by their employers (gyms, self-catering
kitchens, etc.). Yet, women on assignments in
city locations also valued the facilities in their
accommodation and other support that they were
given to help create a sense of home. For example,
they preferred to cook for themselves, rather than
eating out (alone):

… they started giving us a small allowance … It is
cheap to eat out, but much more expensive to cook
for yourself, which I wanted to do. (3, North
America)

Human Resource staff recognized the impor-
tance of such support for female assignees and did
their best to negotiate with local line management
to help address women’s requirements to create a
sense of home, even differentiating between wom-
En’s and men’s needs in this respect:
... (for) the single female unaccompanied expats... the home is more important. We had an... engineer... and... her therapy was cooking, and they gave her initially a little apartment with an appallingly tiny kitchen... I intervened... I think (for) women your personal space is more important. For a bloke, it’s just about having a hot shower and a comfortable bed, and they’re not really that bothered. (HR – International Assignments)

Given the lack of (or very few) women expatriates with whom to socialize in the remote and isolated camp environments, women assignees commented on the need to be accepted by their male colleagues if they were to build effective work and social relationships and to combat extreme loneliness. They reported that this required them to demonstrate that “you are not too sensitive” if they were to be accepted as “one of the lads”. They concluded that expatriation to remote geographies with male-dominated social space may appeal to only a limited number of women:

... often it takes a special kind of character to be able to work like this... you can’t be too feminine... if you like your bit of luxury, you don’t get it there! (59, North Africa)

Discussion

This exploratory research provides fresh insight into the lived experiences of women expatriating to remote and challenging host country locations. It adds to the literature in finding that although geographical location factors influence women’s decisions to undertake expatriation these do not, in the main, preclude women’s assignment participation. The effect of the weather (too hot or too cold) was the main factor that appeared to influence their acceptance decision in so far as the female expatriates could pursue preferred leisure pursuits. It is notable that while the home normally “feels more intimate in winter than in summer”, as “winter reminds us of our vulnerability and defines the home as shelter” (Tuan 1977: 137), the solo female expatriates in this study working in intensely cold winters in locations such as Central Asia lived alone in Spartan accommodation in the cities or rotated into camps. As such they had little sense of a place that felt like home – a place where they could be themselves (Cresswell 2004).

Women undertake expatriate assignments in remote oil and gas exploration and production geographies for career growth and, for those working in functions such as corporate social responsibility and sustainability, to make a difference by helping to improve environmental conditions for local people. They work a variety of assignment lengths and patterns, yet regardless of the type of assignment undertaken (rotational, short-term or long-term), single status assignments are lonely and potentially damaging to existing personal relationships (although rotational working does provide extended periods at home enabling extended periods of home life with family). A further part of the price of expatriate existence is that mobility results in individuals suffering loss or disruption of the ‘feel’ of a place and its special character (Tuan 1977).

Despite this some women thrive on the challenge and sense of adventure that results from going solo and the self-discovery that flows from this.

Aligned with the limited literature on expatriate compound life, this research finds that unaccompanied female assignees working in such environments experience blurring of work and non-work boundaries and requirements to conform with local behavioral norms (Coles and Fechter 2008; Lauring and Selmer 2009). While their male counterparts experience a social life that revolves around the workplace with male colleagues and also have the freedom to leave camp and compound environments to seek social links and support external to the worksite (Verma 2008), women’s mobility is restricted to a greater extent by cultural and security considerations. This results in loneliness and social isolation due to lack of female friendship in these highly gendered settings. Even in city destinations (regardless of whether these are in developed countries or not) women undertaking unaccompanied mobility experience loneliness, finding it difficult to make friends, again aligning with the literature (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002). While lone female assignees in this research report all expatriate...
destinations (cities, camps and rigs) challenging as relationship building is hindered by overlapping male work and social space, this research suggests that extreme expatriation in remote and isolated locations may appeal only to certain characters such as those who are particularly outgoing. Added to this, in male-dominated environments gender comes to the fore and “women must find ways of navigating this tricky terrain” (Wright 2011: 247). Women cannot be ‘too feminine’; rather they have to operate as ‘one of the lads’ or as “a good bloke” (Watts 2007: 261) to be accepted and to be able to deal with masculine banter and social activities. It is notable that women who enjoy male company in preference to that of other women are more willing to take advantage of building social relationships within camp environments, particularly amongst expatriate employees.

In remote and insecure environments, access to a social life beyond the male-dominated workplace is difficult, sometimes impossible. This research finds that single status female assignees living alone in a male-dominated environment use four main coping strategies. As suggested by the literature, cooped up in camp, or with few city-based friends, they elect to work long hours (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002). They also work at the weekends to fill their time, and to relieve boredom and loneliness. Moreover, some lone female assignees undertake educational courses to improve their career potential, develop themselves personally and fill their spare time productively. These activities also provide positive learning and relationship outcomes (Linehan and Walsh 1999; Mendenhall and Stahl 2000). A further strategy involves catering for friends, rather than eating in the male-dominated canteen (Gordon 2008). This research suggests yet another strategy adopted by solo female expatriates: providing guidance and support to female newcomers and mentoring and coaching locals. These activities help to build social relationships and companionship, generating a sense of belonging within friendship groups.

Women’s ability to create a sense of place and of home is possible through bringing personal possessions and where accommodation provides facilities (such as self-catering and dining) enabling women to entertain friends (Gordon 2008). However, such accommodation is highly restricted in camp locations; private space (a furnished room) is homogenous with limited opportunity to personalize it and company space (canteens, bars and gyms) is male-dominated. While organizational policy does provide support in the form of aid, affect and affirmation (Kraimer et al. 2001), tensions are in evidence between policy design, implementation and assignees’ needs (Perkins and Daste 2007), particularly in respect of the provision of local facilities (such as accommodation, security, health and recreation) and practical support for work and non-work related relationship building. Nonetheless, women expatriates acknowledge organizational support and very much welcome what is provided.

Implications for Practice

Support systems are highlighted as being of significance to women’s assignment participation. In particular, the provision of health and medical care in remote locations is of concern to assignees in their decision to take up an assignment. Employer-provided clinics and access to emergency treatment are thus important support interventions. Security briefings, secure housing/compounds, guards and drivers are necessary to provide a secure environment. Yet, provision of this support may be insufficient by itself: language and cultural training are needed to enable assignees to understand what is happening around them, so that they can manage stressful health and security issues effectively. Assignees who undertake unaccompanied expatriation place value on being reunited with family and friends. Organizational policy providing flights, time off for travel, rest and recreation and other interventions such as company-subsidized telecommunications are viewed by female assignees as critical to their assignment participation. Consideration might thus be given within policy design to include more frequent fly-outs. Single status assignees might also be allowed to extend home
leave or business trips to their home country to enable additional periods of family reunification. While on assignment, employer support for education and further study lead to employee development. This provides an enjoyable and productive activity for expatriates; it is thus mutually beneficial for employers and assignees. Hence, education assistance is valuable as a support intervention. Employer action to assist assignees to engage in mentoring, coaching and networking arrangements also provides a mutually beneficial support mechanism; organizational, assignees and other employees all gain from such development. Female assignees entering male-dominated environments benefit from being linked to women already established in the host location, while the latter benefit from developing new friendships. Further, assistance with networking (with other expatriates and locals) helps to build familiarity and cultural understanding. Moreover, while such employer policy is gender-neutral, the provision of activities and facilities that recognize individuals’ desire to retreat or escape from overlapping work and social space in restrictive camp and compound environments is particularly helpful to female expatriates in building a sense of home and non-work related social relationships. Thus, provision of sport, recreation and self-catering facilities should be included in policy. Given one problem that female expatriates can encounter is sexual harassment, company policies should also address this. Finally, selection policy should also ensure the best person for the expatriate role, and care should be taken to determine one’s suitability for working in remote geographies. Assignees must be able socially to cope alone, be ‘self-contained’ and independent, and yet be able to develop friendships rapidly.

Women stated that they undertook extreme expatriation to further their careers and to make a difference to the lives of local people; longitudinal research might help to establish whether women’s expatriation does indeed help them to achieve these objectives. Further, this research was set within two medium-sized oil and gas exploration and production firms. Further research is needed within other industries, among organizations of different sizes, and across a wider range of potentially challenging locations to understand further female expatriates’ experiences and how they are supported by their employers. Moreover, male expatriates’ views on location issues could also be researched to establish differences between men’s and women’s experiences of extreme expatriation. Finally, further comparative research is also needed to examine how women build a sense of home and belonging in city destinations (in developed, newly industrializing and less developed countries) when undertaking expatriation on single status.

With respect to organizational support, further research is also required into that which provides the greatest benefit to women when they undertake expatriate assignments. In particular, research might examine the effects of international assignment policy and practice interventions in providing support to single status assignees, in particular to women expatriating solo. In this way, future research can help to establish whether and how organizational support through policy and practice can widen expatriate gender diversity.

Conclusions

Women comprise a relatively small proportion of the expatriate workforce. The literature has lamented this for decades and yet women’s representation in the elite ranks of career-enhancing expatriate positions has changed little. The oil and gas industry is a major user of expatriates in its exploration and production functions – yet here women are even more sparsely represented in internationally mobile roles than across the
wider industry. If greater female expatriate participation could be achieved in the high expatriate usage sectors, such as oil and gas exploration and production, it would be expected that women’s overall share of expatriation could potentially increase and with it their access widened to more senior positions, which frequently require such international experience. Yet, the locations in which industries such as oil and gas exploration and production operate are typically remote, male-dominated and even insecure. As such, they do not appear attractive to women assignees, particularly as the expatriate roles in such locations are frequently carried out on single status. Despite this, this study demonstrates that extreme geographical factors do not necessarily preclude women from accepting career-enhancing international assignments. It adds further to our knowledge of expatriation by revealing the lived reality of women who pursue careers in highly gendered work settings: their lives on single status assignments are, in the main, far from enjoyable; they frequently report loneliness and isolation and working long hours as a means of coping with this.

There is no doubt that women’s attempts to create a sense of place, home and belonging in such gendered geographies is taxing and, as a result, their assignment participation is hindered, even with organizational support provided. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the potential for remote and isolated geographical expatriate host locations to attract women expatriates should remain unchallenged. Women who report enjoying male company say they can build fulfilling social lives in male-dominated camp environments. Those who prefer to build friendships with other women do so by supporting, guiding, mentoring and coaching new female arrivals and locals. Perceived Organizational Support is important for women’s participation. Specific organizational policy and practice is required to identify and support female assignees and to assist them to develop their social relationships through provision of appropriate space and facilities. When the camaraderie of extreme expatriation is viewed as attractive to women and remote locations are not considered just to be a male pre-

serve, the potential for women to secure a greater share of expatriation becomes a real possibility.

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References


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