The Lavender Ceiling Atop the Global Closet: Human Resource Development and Lesbian Expatriates

Julie Gedro

DOI: 10.1177/1534484310380242

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://hrd.sagepub.com/content/9/4/385
The Lavender Ceiling Atop the Global Closet: Human Resource Development and Lesbian Expatriates

Julie Gedro

Abstract
This literature review will examine international assignments as career development opportunities and uncover multiple issues and considerations with respect to lesbians and international assignments. There is a clear interest in the fields of management and human resource management in the privileges, challenges, and opportunities of international assignments. International assignments serve as a function of HRD because they provide grooming for the most senior management positions in corporations. However, there is little to no research or exploration of the multiple considerations faced by lesbians who seek and engage in international assignments.

Keywords
international assignments, career development, lesbian

Introduction
As multinational corporations have proliferated, the need to recruit, staff, and develop employees who are capable of working abroad has become increasingly important. Dowling and Welch (2005) observe that international assignments help corporations achieve strategic objectives through multiple ways, all of which are related to HRD. These include position filling, as the organization has a need to fill a skills gap; management development, which suggests that moving people into other parts of the organization serves a training and development purpose; and organizational development, which suggests that international assignments help transfer knowledge, competence, procedures, and practices across the organization (p. 66).
International, or expatriate, assignments are HRD efforts for two different and complementary reasons. They are considered to be developmental for the professional who embarks on an international assignment, and they also involve predeparture as well as postdeparture training. Caligiuri and Colakoglu (2007) indicate that the future of multinational corporate competitiveness is contingent on corporations’ ability to adapt to an increasingly global business environment, and that expatriation is an important HR practice. This article focuses primarily on the career development aspect of international assignments. McDonald and Hite (2008) claim that the link between HRD and career development is already well established, and that the importance of career development as a shaping force in the workplace is critical.

There is a developing body of literature organized around issues of international assignments as tactical endeavors designed to enhance strategic capabilities of multinational firms, of international assignments as career development and professional enrichment activities, and of the gendered nature of international assignments. It has being suggested with increasing frequency that international assignments have become a necessary activity for those who seek upward career mobility (Altman & Shortland, 2008; Dickman & Doherty, 2008; Flynn, 2008; Harcar & Harcar, 2003; Insch, McIntyre, & Napier, 2008; Jokinen, Brewster, & Suutari, 2008; Vance, Paik, & White, 2006). Concomitant with the acknowledgment of the mutually beneficial impacts of international assignments for both employer and employee is an exploration of the factors that contribute to expatriate failure, or conversely, the factors that tend to facilitate expatriate success (Caligiuri & Colakoglu, 2007; Haile, Jones, & Emmanuel, 2007; Lee, 2007; McNulty, 2008; Welch, Welch, & Worm, 2007; Yeaton & Hall, 2008). It is clear that there is an importance of international assignments for upward career mobility. Much of the existing scholarship on expatriate assignments is intended to provide HR professionals with insights in order to lessen failure rates and mitigate other types of risks. To date, there is no information for HR professionals about issues related to the intersection of gender and sexuality and international assignments.

When it comes to lesbians in corporate America who seek upward career mobility through international assignments, there is no guidance offered by the business literature, the HRD literature, or literature in related fields. There are three reasons that this gap presents a pressing matter for management and for HRD scholars and practitioners. One, the financial costs of expatriate failure are substantive. Two, international assignments are becoming increasingly important for career mobility and success. Three, there are general risks, including physical risks for sexual minorities who travel abroad, particularly in countries that are unwelcoming.

**Purpose**

There is a persistent lack of research and exploration of issues related to lesbians in corporate America. This paper focuses on international assignments as career development opportunities. It surveys the existing literature on expatriate or international assignments (used interchangeably) so that the preliminary findings of this review set forth a proposed research agenda that will flow logically from this critical analysis.
(Torraco, 2005). The paper is intended to sensitize HRD researchers and practitioners who have aspirations to create inclusive and equitable organizations about matters related to lesbians in corporate America. There is a growing interest in the fields of management and human resource management in the challenges faced by women expatriates but there is little to no research or exploration of the multiple considerations faced by lesbians who seek upward career mobility through international assignments.

**Literature Review**

Torraco (2005) suggests that literature reviews address either mature topics, or new and emerging topics. According to Torraco, the topic of the literature review should address a need, and should justify why the topic is important and relevant. Lesbians are a double minority within the organization. They are a gender minority, and they are a sexual orientation minority. As the field becomes more critically aware of structural and systemic inequities within corporate America, and as it increasingly acknowledges responsibility for creating inclusive workplaces, an examination of lesbians and their career development challenges and opportunities with respect to international assignments fills a need within the field. Lesbians are an underexamined and, up until recently, a mostly invisible subset of employees within corporate America. Torraco suggests that when a topic is new and surfacing, a review of that topic is likely to lead to initial or preliminary conceptualization of the topic.

A literature review was conducted, using keywords designed to identify issues related to lesbians and international assignments. In order to acquire an appropriately focused yet inclusive set of results, I used the following databases: EBSCO Host, ProQuest, SAGE, and SAGE journals *Adult Education Quarterly, Advances in Developing Human Resources, Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources, Compensation and Benefits Review, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Education, Management Communication Quarterly, Management in Education, Management Learning,* and *Organizational Studies*. The following sets of keywords were used: lesbians and expatriate, lesbians and international assignments, and multinational corporations and lesbians. A search using EBSCO Host resulted in the following: For lesbians and expatriate, there were no results. For lesbians and international assignments, there were 3,236 results. Sixteen of those results involved the topic of expatriate assignments, one was on the topic of women and expatriate assignments, and none were on the topic of lesbians and expatriate assignments.

The remainder of the results consisted of a variety of unrelated and, for purposes of this paper, inconsequential information. For multinational corporations and lesbians, there were 10,259 results, dealing with themes of multinational corporations (but none to do with multinational corporations and lesbians), or with themes of gays and lesbians and tourism. A search using ProQuest resulted in the following: For keywords lesbians and expatriate, there were no results. For keywords lesbians and international assignments, there were two results but neither was on topic. For keywords multinational corporations and lesbians, there were four results but none was on topic. Because of the paucity of these results, and generally aware that there indeed does exist literature
on international assignments, I more broadly searched using keywords international assignments, which resulted in 46 articles that generally addressed the topic of expatriate assignments. Other than selected articles from the *Advances in Developing Human Resources* titled “Sexual Minority Issues in HRD: Raising Awareness” (Rocco, Gedro, & Kormanik, 2009), there were no results for lesbians and international assignments. For keywords multinational and lesbian, there were no results. For keywords lesbian and expatriate, there was one result that contained the words *lesbian* and *expatriate*, but the two were not used in concert.

In the absence of literature dealing with the topic of lesbians and expatriate assignments, lesbians and international assignments, or multinational corporations and lesbians, I examined the results that occurred from these searches and identified the articles that proximally dealt with the issue of lesbians and expatriate assignments. The results included the literature on expatriate assignments as management development, expatriate assignments and factors leading to failure/success, training issues and expatriate assignments, and women and expatriate assignments. There is a broadly understood context of business as a global endeavor, and there are questions related to the selection and the management of expatriates that are being addressed in management, leadership, and human resource management and development fields. There is a growing body of literature that supports the notion that international assignments are individually broadening undertakings that tend to reflect privilege and upward advancement. There even exists a critique of the traditional orthodoxy of management and leadership as masculine dominions, as evidenced by the research that explores women and international assignments.

**Expatriate Assignments as Management Development**

Altman and Shortland (2008) observe that the last two decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have seen a significant increase in international business activity because of globalization and the domination of multinational corporations. Of the 100 largest economies in the world, 30 are multinational corporations (Altman & Shortland, 2008). International assignments have become a significant aspect of career development. Dickman and Doherty (2008) posit that “international assignments are regularly positioned as beneficial to organizational success and individual career development, implying mutual benefits” (p. 145). Jokinen et al. (2008) indicate that these assignments are mind stretching, and they influence not only one’s identity but also one’s career expectations and intentions. Not only have international assignments become a dominion of Human Resource Development because of their developmental aspects, but they have also become the subject of inquiry regarding their success and failure rates. As such, there is a body of literature that seeks to study and provide insights about averting failure and facilitating success.

**Career Mobility**

In many multinational companies, international assignments are seen as stepping stones to higher level positions in management (Altman & Shortland, 2008; Insch et al., 2008).
Bu and McKeen (2002) have argued that international experience is becoming a requirement for senior positions in multinational corporations.

Although it has been acknowledged that the selection of employees for global assignments is a challenging process, and not all are suited for this type of development, global assignments help position a manager for upward mobility in the corporation and provide a leadership advantage for those “having gained exposure to different cultures” (Flynn, 2008, p. 422). International assignments afford one the development of a detailed understanding of the business as well as the acquisition of globally applicable skills (Jokinen et al., 2008). Kraimer, Shaffer, and Bolino (2009) noted that “from a human capital perspective, the more assignments an individual completes, the more opportunities the individual has to develop unique skills and abilities” (p. 29). The reason for this is that expatriate assignments provide the manager with a broad range of skills that the corporation recognizes with more advancement opportunities. In addition, the number of international assignments tends to be positively related to career advancement (Kraimer et al., 2009). Kohonen (2005) argued that expatriation is the most powerful way of developing globally competent leaders. Webb (1996) noted that expatriate managers have higher self-esteem as a result of greater freedom and autonomy and that expatriate assignments should become part of an overall career development strategy.

A taxonomy has emerged in the management literature of developmental assets that accrue to the expatriate businessperson. There are three types of these assets, otherwise referred to as “career capital” (Dickman & Doherty, 2008; Jokinen et al., 2008). The first, knowing how, refers to the skills, expertise, and tacit and explicit work-related knowledge (Jokinen et al., 2008). Knowing how includes both technical skills and capabilities as well as managerial capability, cultural awareness tenacity, and adaptability (Dickman & Doherty, 2008). Knowing whom refers to the social relations that one acquires and develops as a result of these assignments (Dickman & Doherty, 2008; Jokinen et al., 2008). Knowing why refers to the individual’s awareness and rationale for the assignment (Dickman & Doherty, 2008; Jokinen et al., 2008). Dickman and Doherty (2008) offer that “knowing why gives individuals a sense of purpose, energy, identification and direction in work, which are linked to motivational energy and the confidence to follow an envisaged career” (p. 146). Because international assignments present developmental opportunities for those who engage in them, they are generally a desirable career-building endeavor. International assignments are often reserved for high-potential employees and also serve as a signal that one is being groomed for positions of increasing prestige and responsibility (Dickman & Doherty, 2008).

**Expatriate Assignments, Factors Leading to Failure/Success, and Costs of Failure**

The emergence and current ubiquity of globalization requires corporations to strategically leverage their human capital in order to respond and compete in the global marketplace. The future of multinational corporations’ competitiveness in the global economy is contingent on their ability to change and adapt their
resources (Caligiuri & Colakoglu, 2007). Vogel, van Vuuren, and Millard (2008) claim that “one of the most prominent issues in international human resource management is the failure of expatriates” (p. 33). Even though expatriation has become a common practice among U.S.-based multinational corporations, there exists a high failure rate among expatriates because “neither they nor their families are prepared to deal with the level of uncertainty associated with the process” (Lee, 2007, p. 403).

Expatriate failure is partially defined as premature return from an assignment, and Lee suggests that the definition should be broadened to include performing under par in international assignments and repatriation difficulties. Another issue that has been recognized continually in the past few years has been the set of problems inherent in selecting, training, compensation and repatriating expatriates (Haile et al., 2007). Expatriate failure is costly. A study by the National Foreign Trade Council in 1994 found that the estimated cost of poor international staffing decisions cost between $200,000 and $1.2 million (Lee, 2007). Haile et al. (2007) note the aggregate costs of expatriate failure to be between $2 billion and $2.5 billion. In addition, there are financial costs as well as psychological costs for the expatriate (Lee, 2007). The opportunity costs of expatriate failure also include lost sales, damaged relationships with governments, customers, suppliers, and employees (Harcar & Harcar, 2003).

**Selection.** Yeaton and Hall (2008) suggest that a careful selection process and effective pre- and postdeparture training are critical to expatriate success. The employee should be someone with good interpersonal skills, such as relationship and communication skills, and the person should have a high tolerance for ambiguity (Yeaton & Hall, 2008). In addition, the employee should have patience, perseverance, technical skills, nonjudgmental behavior, and motivation. Lee argues that technical competence, though often seen as the most sufficient dimension for selection, is only the sixth most significant factor in expatriate success, yet companies find that to be the safest way to make selections.

**Training.** There are multiple considerations for the appropriate training, both pre- and postdeparture, and they include cultural sensitivity and awareness, language, business practices, international management skills, and family support training (Grundey, 2008; Haile et al., 2007; Yeaton & Hall, 2008). Grundey noted that effective training must include language usage, time planning, religion, decision making, humor, and behavior standard. Language usage should include both verbal and nonverbal communication. For example, silence is a way to express one’s opinion in some cultures, whereas in other cultures, silence might be misunderstood. Time planning refers to the importance that some cultures place on punctuality whereas others are spontaneous. Religion should be understood, because of the different values and beliefs held by those of varying faiths. Decision making refers to the extent to which a culture looks to one leader to make decisions, as opposed to a more collective process. Behavior standards refer to the varying norms of workplace behavior across cultures. Yeaton and Hall (2008) suggest that predeparture training should include three stages: an initial orientation to detail of the key aspects of the culture, the goals of the assignment, and the relocation requirements. The second stage consists of language training, cultural awareness, and making arrival arrangements. The third stage should be held on arrival in the host country, and
should focus on the challenges of professional, social, and domestic life in the new environment. Repatriation training should include prereturn counseling and reentry family counseling as well as a deliberate and strategic reintegration within the corporation (Grundey, 2008; Yeaton & Hall, 2008). Repatriates should have opportunities to use the knowledge and skills they have acquired during their assignment, which benefits both the employee and the organization (Caligiuri & Colakoglu, 2007). There is a substantive amount of focus on international assignments as corporate strategies and as components of management development for multinational corporations. Within this literature is a concomitant increase in the exploration of gender issues and expatriate assignments, which the next section will discuss.

**Women and Expatriate Assignments**

There is a developing discussion of women and international assignments and there are themes within these discussions. First, there is the theme of the glass ceiling, which has been updated as a conceptual construct and relabeled as a “glass border” that denotes the persistent underrepresentation of women in international assignments and the resulting lack of women in senior management positions. Second, there is the discussion of the slow but increasing number of women in the workforce and the concomitant number of women expatriates. Third, there is the suitability of women for international assignments and the pressures and the challenges that women face with respect to work and family responsibilities as well as the varying degrees of acceptance of women managers in countries across the world. Stereotypes and prejudice against women persist in the U.S., and there are factors that continue to keep women from reaching the top echelons of corporate America.

**The Glass Ceiling**

The glass ceiling is a “pervasive corporate phenomenon” (McDonald & Hite, 1998, p. 242). Former Secretary of Labor Robert B. Reich (1995) observed:

> The term “glass ceiling” first entered America’s public conversation less than a decade ago, when *The Wall Street Journal*’s “Corporate Woman” column identified a puzzling new phenomenon. There seemed to be an invisible—but impenetrable—barrier between women and the executive suite, preventing them from reaching the highest levels of the business world regardless of their accomplishments and merits. The phrase immediately captured the attention of the public as well as business leaders, journalists, and policy makers. The metaphor was quickly extended to refer to obstacles hindering the advancement of minority men, as well as women. (p. iii)

Although there is no mention of sexual minorities in Reich’s observation, nor is there mention of sexual minorities in the report, issues of sexual minority representation, and in particular, the career development of lesbians, are relevant for HRD and
there have been gradual efforts to include these issues in the literature. This is a subject to which the paper will return later. The glass border is a term coined by Mandelker (1994), and it refers to stereotypical assumptions about women as managers and about their suitability, viability, and preferences for expatriate assignments. Insch et al. (2008) note that

while women have made strides in breaking through the glass ceiling in the U.S. and many other developed countries, by adding the international requirement to managerial advancement, and then limiting women’s opportunity for expatriate experience, corporations are adding a layer of glass, in essence a double pane of glass, to the still-existing managerial glass ceiling. (p. 19)

Discrimination against sending women overseas persists. Elron and Kark (in Mendenhall & Oddou, 2000) note that there is a common perception that women are less motivated than men to become international managers. There is also a perception that women face cultural biases in foreign locations.

**The Slowly Increasing Number of Women Expatriates**

Women currently account for approximately 14% of the total number of expatriates sent by North American corporations (Harcar & Harcar, 2003; Selmer & Leung, 2003; Vance et al., 2006). Even though this figure is a gradual increase from the estimates of 3% in the 1980s, there is a persistent male bias toward women that discourages the selection of females for expatriate assignments (Vance et al., 2006). Kollinger (2005) noted that the literature on female expatriates deals with facets of underrepresentation of women and it tends to concentrate on three main fields. First, it focuses on gender-specific differences between expatriates concerning motivation and willingness to relocate. Second, it focuses on reasons for underrepresentation of female expatriates. Third, it examines the individual experiences of female expatriates and, in particular, the cultural adaption of women in the host country. The literature assessed for this study reflected themes of the glass ceiling and of the particular challenges as well as opportunities faced by women expatriates. Kollinger discovered that the reasons that female managers in Austria are not sent on foreign assignment include the prejudices of host-country nationals against women, lack of interest in female managers in going abroad and work–life balance conflict, and lack of women in the recruitment pool for international assignments.

**Women and International Assignments: Pressures and Challenges**

Multiple explanations have been set forth to explain the underrepresentation of women in international assignments. There are structural explanations, which point toward stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination toward women not only in host countries but by associates in their own home-location corporations (Altman & Shortland, 2008;
Harcar & Harcar, 2003; Kollinger, 2005; Selmer & Leung, 2003). There are explanations based on gender role differences, which highlight the challenges that women who have spouses and children face (Andreason, 2008; Brown, 2008; Konopaske, Robie, & Ivancevich, 2005). There are also explanations which suggest that it is the responsibility of women to champion their own progress, to market and promote themselves, and to exhibit aggressiveness (Insch et al., 2008).

Linehan, Scullion, and Walsh (2001) note that the increase of women in the workforce, which has not been accompanied by a concomitant increase of women in senior management positions, has become cause for research debate both in their home countries and in the international management literature. The acceptance of women as full participants in the workforce ranges from a trend toward improvement in the United States and Western Europe to almost no acceptance in some other countries (Ball, McCulloch, Geringer, Minor & McNett, 2008). In many countries, laws, customs, and attitudes continue to act as barriers to women in business, which present major problems for women to make or retain career progress, as sexism in widespread throughout the world (Ball et al., 2008). It is often difficult for women to do business in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries. For example, the law and customs in Saudi Arabia have prevented the comingling of men and women in the workplace, and women have been prohibited from driving vehicles (Ball et al., 2008).

Although corporations today are facing talent shortages at the senior management level, and in particular they face particular challenges finding suitable, talented managers for international assignments, there is a persistent and collective reluctance to place women in international assignments. Vance and Paik (2001, in Vance et al., 2006) claim that “women continue to be an underutilized source of human talent in international business” (p. 824). Insch et al. (2008) suggest that there are overt and covert barriers that prevent women managers from progressing into senior management positions, both domestic and international:

There barriers include the obligation to balance home life and career, isolation and loneliness, constantly being aware of being a woman in a man’s world, having to prove themselves to others, and having to work harder and be better than their male counterparts. . . . The glass ceiling in their home countries was a contributory factor to the low participation rate of women in international management and the lack of mentoring and networking relationships was among the most significant barriers facing women managers. (p. 21)

Vance et al. (2006) provide an explanation of why women are passed over for expatriate assignments in favor of men that is grounded in conflict theory. This theory suggests that those in the in-group, or majority, have an intrinsic discord of heterogeneity and that people tend to have more positive views of those in their own group. Members of privileged groups engage in self-serving actions that exclude and even exploit subordinate group members in order to protect the status quo, and in order to preserve their own interests (Vance et al., 2006). Furthermore, Vance et al. found that women are
commonly passed over for international assignments because of the heavy cultural restrictions on the role of women in international business, the predominance of males who prefer doing business with other males, and the vulnerability of women to the aggressive nature of the foreign business assignment.

There exists a heavily problematic nature, or tone, of the findings in current and recent literature on the experiences of women expatriates. The literature suggests that the importance of international assignments to career development creates yet another hurdle for women to overcome, as women still lag significantly behind men in selection for these critical career-building opportunities. There is a conversation emerging about women and international assignments that casts scholarly attention on these problems and presents the potential for HRD to help workplaces become more inclusive and equitable. Insch et al. (2008) encourage women to act purposely to produce identities that contribute to their professional success, such as networking and self-promotion. The emergence of a focus on women and international assignments, as discussed in this section, also brings into stark relief the gap in the literature on lesbians and international assignments.

Lesbians and International Assignments

Even though Harcar and Harcar (2003) argue that research on women expatriates remains limited, exploration within management and human resource management has begun. However, there is a complete lack of research of lesbian expatriates. Part of the difficulty of this subject is the fact that lesbians are generally indiscernible within the female population. Gedro (2009a) discussed lesbians and leadership, and observed an emergent exploration of women and leadership. Gedro (2009a) noted that although it may remain challenging to study women executives, it is indeed possible because of the emergence of research and writing that focused on women executives. This section will induce the unique challenges and considerations for lesbian expatriates. Most obvious and problematic is the invisibility of lesbians in corporate America as well as the lack of resources to help lesbians learn how to succeed. That lack of resources problematizes the work of HRD as well because there is little for HRD practitioners from which to draw when conducting career development and/or management development activities and interventions in organizations.

Lesbians, as part of the a sexual minority population that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees, face sexual orientation discrimination in addition to the discrimination inherent in being part of the gender minority. Gedro (2009b) identified some unique considerations for lesbian career development. These considerations include stereotyping about lesbians as truck drivers, athletes, mechanics, and other male-dominated occupations. In addition, Gedro found that lesbians are less likely to make career choices based on accommodating men. Finally, lesbians are often steered away from occupations that involve working with children, and they are often counseled into stereotypically lesbian careers. Therefore, although lesbians face gender discrimination, they also face sexual orientation discrimination.
Degges-White and Shoffner (2002) have posited that lesbians comprise roughly 3.6% of the population, or about 2,300,000. Fassinger (1991) maintains that this represents a significant yet invisible minority. Lesbians face discrimination in the forms of diminished earnings, at about 5% to 14% less than their heterosexual female counterparts (Badgett, 1995), and hate crimes (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000).

The absence of research about lesbian expatriate issues perpetuates their invisibility and marginalization in corporate ranks, because HRD professionals have little to no resources from which to draw, in order to learn about issues of gender and sexual minority status. Lesbians in corporate America have considerations that extend beyond their heterosexual counterparts’ considerations for international assignments. First, they are likely to consider the safety of the culture of the country as a special requirement. Second, if they are partnered, they have to negotiate their familial circumstances and determine whether it is safe and appropriate to bring their partner on their overseas assignment. Third, if they have been closeted in their organization, the decisions posed by these first two points might necessitate coming out of the closet. The reason for this is that it may be necessary for them to seek the assistance of their organizations in learning about the safety of the assigned country, and In addition, it may be necessary to negotiate benefits for their trailing partner.

The Lavender Ceiling

The lavender ceiling refers to the perceived tendency for organizations to not promote those in the sexual minority (i.e., those who are not heterosexual) to positions of increased authority, power, prestige, and formal responsibility (Hill, 2009). Discrimination against gays and lesbians shows up in both formal (direct) and informal (indirect) ways (Noknoi & Wutthirong, 2007). Direct discrimination includes termination, but it can also include exclusion from pay raises, promotions, and increased responsibility. Because international assignments can be stepping stones to positions of increasing responsibility, it is probable that direct discrimination against gays and lesbians for international assignments exists. However, because of the lack of research on the topic, that statement is necessarily conjectural. Indirect discrimination is covert, and shows up in less discernible ways. Lesbians, for example, are part of the gender minority of women, and as such, their pay levels are likely to be lower than those of their male counterparts (Noknoi & Wutthirong, 2007).

The Global Closet

Because negotiating one’s sexual identity is a necessary component of corporate and organizational life, lesbians experience the limiting effects of gender stereotypes and prejudice, as well as sexual orientation stereotypes and prejudice (McDermott, 2006). Two large surveys in the United States found that between a third and a half of lesbian participants keep their sexual identity hidden (McDermott, 2006). This closeting, or hiding, of one’s sexual orientation has a variety of effects on career aspects, occupation
selection, and progression. Hiding one’s lesbianism is often the result of a calculus that takes into account one’s safety and security (Gedro, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Coming out of the closet “is a complex process that occurs at multiple levels and is never fully complete. . . . Decisions to come out in organizations are driven in part by workplace safety and acceptance” (Hill, 2009, p. 40). Lesbians choose to closet, or pass as straight, in part because they fear losing professional or personal credibility or a relationship with someone important to them (Anderson & Holliday, 2004). Lesbians have little to no formal resources on which to draw to learn how to negotiate the persistent heterosexism of corporate America, and the matter of international assignment presents yet another layer of complication for lesbian career development.

The term *global closet* broadens the concept of the closet, and it represents the international scope of lesbian challenges, which again include invisibility, discrimination, stigmatization, and safety and security issues. Lesbians face employment discrimination in workplaces in the United States, and the lack of literature (presented earlier in the methodology discussion of this article) perpetuates the challenges lesbians face. The globalization of the corporate marketplace and the accompanying emergence of international assignments highlight the need for such resources when (and if) corporations send lesbians overseas. As a striking example of matters of safety and security when lesbians travel abroad, note that the author’s Dean was reluctant for the author to travel to the Academy of Human Resource Development Conference in Bahrain in December of 2009 because the author is a totally out and easily identifiable lesbian. Whether the fear and reluctance would manifest in actual experiences of discrimination, harassment, or even danger is speculative, but the perception that such could happen is the primary point. Research, writing, and knowledge dissemination on lesbians in corporate America, and for purposes of this article, lesbians on international assignments, remain thin and in an infancy stage of development. The global closet, therefore, represents the necessary negotiation of lesbian identity when traveling and working overseas.

Because of the lack of research focusing on lesbians and international assignments, lesbians must traverse through a myriad of considerations when negotiating their careers. Because international assignments have become critical to upward career mobility, the lack of research into lesbian expatriates and related issues presents an evolutionary and necessary subject for HRD research. There is a “black box” of information that with some research, could likely uncover helpful insights to help corporations.

If the failure rate of expatriation is indeed between 20% and 50% (Goby, Ahmed, Annavarjula, Ibrahim, & Osman-Gani, 2002), and the costs of expatriate failure is in the billions of dollars, it would be a fruitful and productive endeavor to examine some of the less accessible reasons for failure. What percentage, for example, of these failures could be due to a constellation of issues related to lesbianism? Again, this lack of information necessitates conjectural responses when it comes to the appropriateness, the safety, and the security of lesbians on international assignments. The *global closet*, therefore, is a term that signifies the array of decisions that lesbians on upward career tracks in corporations face when they are considered for, and consider, international
assignments. Once in another country, a lesbian faces the same constellation of choices as she does in the workplace in the United States. She can be closeted, or she can come out. This is an individual decision and it can have very high stakes.

There is a growing body of practitioner-oriented resources to help HRD professionals understand LGBT workplace issues in the United States. One example is Out and Equal Workplace Advocates, which provides workplace LGBT training (Baillie & Gedro, 2009). Another example is the Human Rights Campaign, which conducts and publishes research on LGBT-fair workplace policies and practices (Hill, 2009). However, there is little to no research and publishing to inform HRD practitioners on the global implications of sexual minority status. Therefore, research on women’s issues and international assignments serves to partially but certainly not completely inform lesbian issues, but it fails to provide necessary information about sexual minority issues.

Vance et al. (2006), for example, note that one of the main advantages in being a woman and doing business overseas is high visibility. However, lesbian women must negotiate their sexual orientation identity, which means making strategic choices about visibility. Therefore, the intersection of gender and sexuality complicate business life for lesbians, and their sexuality can potentially offset any advantages they might have as women.

**Safety and Security**

There are significant considerations for lesbians in the workplace with respect to safety and security. By safety and security, I mean not only in employment but also in physical form. The United States lacks federal workplace antidiscrimination at the federal level but there have been state-sponsored prohibitions against employment discrimination. Currently, there are 7 states with protections against sexual orientation, and 13 with protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Out and Equal Workplace Advocates, 2009). Lax and Phillips (2009) observe the variation of protection for LGBT people in the United States:

> The rights of gays and lesbians, as part of the so-called “culture wars,” lie at the heart of recent political conflict in the United States, perhaps even affecting the outcome of the 2004 presidential election. Battles over gay rights have been fought most intensely at the sub-national level—in legislatures, courtrooms, and direct democracy campaigns—yielding a complex policy mosaic. (p. 1)

Out and Equal Workplace Advocates (2009) notes that many cities and counties in the remaining 30 states have passed local nondiscrimination ordinances, especially population-dense urban areas. It is estimated that 50% of the total U.S. population live in communities where they are protected from workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation by state, county, or city law. An estimated 33% of the total U.S. population live in communities where they are protected from discrimination based on gender
identity by state, county, or city law. This “complex policy mosaic” (Lax & Phillips, 2009, p. 1) presents challenges for lesbians who work in domestic U.S. corporations, and there has been a gradual emergence of literature exploring and discussing lesbians in corporate America (Gedro, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Gedro et al., 2004).

The variety of protections for sexual minorities, combined with the gender minority status of lesbians, presents a significant yet unexplored set of challenges related to, among other considerations, safety and security. The discussion of U.S. protections for sexual minorities is germane to lesbians and expatriate assignments because companies located in states, cities, or counties that have prohibitions on discrimination against sexual minorities are likely to be more sensitive to sexual minority issues. They are likely, therefore, to be receptive and even perhaps in search of insights that help them learn how to treat lesbians equitably.

However, there are few resources assembled to date to provide HRD practitioners with information about the status of lesbians across the globe. This lack of information presents a significant gap in the literature and creates risks for lesbians who want to engage in international assignments. Swan and Mazur (2002) note that Chinese society is recognizing that homosexuality exists. In the European community, there have been enormous advances to protect sexual minorities, and Holland has become a “model for the world” (Swan & Mazur, 2002, p. 9). In Russia and Eastern Europe, LGBT people find themselves in a “situation similar or worse than U.S. gays and lesbians in 1969 at the time of the Stonewall riots” (Swan & Mazur, 2002, p. 9). There are parts of the world where it would not only be unsafe to come out at work, but where it would be unsafe to be a lesbian at all. For example, gay sex is illegal in many Islamic countries and in Cameroon, gay sex is punishable by up to 5 years in prison (Associated Press, 2009). Gay sex is illegal in Jamaica, and there are constant reports of gay men being executed in Iran (Associated Press, 2009). There is little to no research on the experiences of lesbians in other countries and reports of their treatment, but using this information about gay men as proximal illustrations suggests that there are parts of the world where lesbians would probably fare poorly as well.

Conclusions and Implications for HRD

If 85% of Fortune 500 firms do not think they have an adequate number of global leaders, it is clear that there is an opportunity for research and exploration into the issues raised in this literature review (Harcar & Harcar, 2003). Lesbians are a minority population with unique needs for career development resources, insights, and information. Some of the material on women and international assignments helps provide insights for lesbians because of gender minority status, but there is a significant gap in the literature on sexual minorities and international assignments. This leaves lesbians, and HRD practitioners, with many questions. Several of these questions are related to the tensions inherent in the “closet.” That is, if a lesbian is in the closet, she faces a conundrum if she is presented with an opportunity to serve in an overseas assignment in a part of the world that is unsafe for sexual minorities. In addition, if a lesbian is in the
cl and is in a primary relationship (i.e., has a life partner), she faces a set of decisions related to her relationship and the benefits for her “trailing spouse.” Issues of training heterosexual spouse are covered in the literature (Brown, 2008; Harcar & Harcar, 2003; Konopaske et al., 2005). However, lesbian relationships and their implications for overseas assignments remain invisible in the literature.

The lack of research on sexual minorities is likely caused by a lack of knowledge and interest, as well as little personal or professional experience with sexual minority status (Van Loo & Rocco, 2009). As a subject of inquiry, lesbians in corporate America and their unique challenges present a contemporary topic of inquiry for HRD that aligns with the fields’ commitment to respecting “fundamental rights, dignity, and worth of all people” (AHRD, 2000, in Hill, 2009). Lesbians, as a minority within a minority, face an array of challenges as the business world has become global and as international assignments have become instrumental in facilitating upward career mobility.

These challenges present implications for future research. Studies that explore lesbians’ experiences with the expatriate assignments could inform HRD practitioners about their particular considerations. These experiences could be stratified along a myriad of subtopics that are best captured along the following themes: selection and risk mitigation, work/life issues, population and quantitative studies, and lesbian career development.

**Selection and Risk Mitigation**

This article has already explored the risks and the costs involved in expatriate failure that have been assessed in the existing literature. Using, as proxy, the variance of legal protections across states in the United States, which results in part as a response to the lack of federal antidiscrimination protection for sexual minorities, sexual minorities face different levels of acceptance in different parts of the United States. In addition, they face different levels of acceptance from country to country around the world (Gedro, 2010). There is a matter of competency building, therefore, around knowledge of these variances. HRD can help organizations build that competency by providing research and materials to help organizations have insights and awareness around particular locations that may make more sense than others for lesbian expatriates to be assigned.

Research and resulting training and development initiatives can help sensitize HRD practitioners and their organizations to the nuances involved in expatriate selection so that the organization make selections that include awareness of issues that are heretofore “undiscussable,” such as lesbian identity. Such material would serve the organization well, by helping it make informed choices and then providing appropriate preparations for lesbian expatriates. It would serve lesbians well, because the burden would not have to fall on them to educate the organization around issues related to being lesbian. Conversely, such research may uncover the dynamics of the selection process that include lesbians who, because they are not out, decline expatriate opportunities because of their anticipation of negative career consequences if they do come out.
Work/Life Issues

Research that helps HRD practitioners gain sensitivity to lesbian work/life issues would result in mutually beneficial decisions around expatriate assignment, preparation, experience, and repatriation. This research could be informed by the work/life research and it could build on that existing research (discussed earlier in this article), but it could extend into the particular challenges that lesbian partnered relationships face. Lesbians who are partnered have to negotiate not only their own lesbian identity, but also the identity of their partner and the identity and recognition (or lack of recognition) of their relationship.

Population and Quantitative Studies

It would also be informative to conduct quantitative analyses on the proportion of lesbians within the high-potential, upwardly mobile, expatriate manager population. The questions that such a study might address are, Are lesbians over- or underrepresented within the female expatriate population? If they are overrepresented, what does that imply? Conversely, if they are underrepresented, what are the underlying causes? Examples of causes, I anticipate, are varying degrees of homophobia and heterosexism as well as lack of awareness. However, formal research into these dynamics could systematize and legitimize these suppositions, and then help the field move forward to develop various interventions that help disrupt the negative affects of homophobia, heterosexism, and lack of awareness.

Lesbian Career Development

Research into the dynamics of expatriate selection, training, experience, and repatriation could contribute to the career development literature. Gedro (2009) highlighted the challenges that are unique for lesbians and their career development. These challenges include occupational selection, entrance, development, and also their pervasive underemployment. International assignments are becoming central to upward career mobility because of the ubiquity and preponderance of multinational corporations. This means that HRD can contribute to the career development literature by delving into the particular challenges and dynamics of lesbians who aspire to executive management. These challenges include international assignments: Who gets chosen, how do they get prepared, what is their experience abroad, and how are they subsumed back into the home location of the corporation (assuming they return).

HRD has an opportunity to create value for corporations who struggle to find and develop executive talent, so there are instrumental reasons for addressing this gap. HRD also has the opportunity to help create more inclusive and equitable workplaces by helping decision makers to become aware of the issues related to this subset of their employees. HRD has the opportunity to help lesbians who want to progress in their careers, by providing them with research and information about career decision making and career negotiation.
Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References


**Bio**

**Julie Gedro**, MBA, PHR, EdD is associate professor of business, management and economics at Empire State College/State University of New York.