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TRADITIONAL EXPATRIATE FAMILIES:
STATUS-REVERSAL MARRIAGES, SINGLE PARENTS,
SPLIT FAMILIES, AND LESBIAN PARTNERSHIPS**

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**Yvonne McNulty, Ph.D.
Shanghai University
Sydney Institute of Language and Commerce
20 Chengzhong Road
Jiading District, Shanghai, 201800
PR China**

Email: ymcnulty@expatresearch.com

Telephone: +65.9107.6645

Women as female breadwinners in non-traditional expatriate families: Status-reversal marriages, single parents, split families, and lesbian partnerships

Yvonne McNulty, Shanghai University

The context within which expatriation takes place has for years been dominated by the traditional view that international assignees are typically senior male staff in their late 40s or early 50s, sent by a corporate western headquarters to a subsidiary office in another country (Taylor, Napier, and Mayrhofer, 2002). These assignees generally have a generous remuneration package with substantial benefits and premiums – cost of living allowance, housing allowance, home leave, country club membership, tax equalization if required, annual bonus, hardship premium, and school fees, among others – and they are almost always accompanied by their (often non-working) wife, and children.

Over the past decade this view has changed, largely because conventional wisdom concerning the traditional international assignee has become not just unproductive, but counterproductive wherein using the ‘traditional’ type of expatriate has caused an unnecessary reduction in the available talent pool (McNulty and Inkson, 2013; Shortland, 2009). Today, the demographic data suggesting ‘who’ is an international assignee has been turned on its head (BGRS, 2012), with ‘gender’ in international assignments receiving considerable attention (Adler, 1987; Florkowski and Fogel, 1999). We now see more non-traditional expatriates emerging – executive women, married couples with no children, single and unaccompanied people, younger expatriates, and those from non-Western countries including Asian assignees – as companies attempt to expand their talent pool options while struggling to fulfill their global staffing needs. New and different types of assignments (e.g. commuter, rotational, short-term) (Meyskens, von Glinow, Werther, and Clarke, 2009), and compensation approaches (e.g. local-plus, localization) (Stanley, 2009), have also emerged as a way to replace the costly assignments of the past with more cost-effective solutions in a somewhat tight job market.

In this chapter, I focus on women in non-traditional expatriate families as representative of a new and emerging source of viable global talent. I concentrate on non-traditional families because this is an understudied population of which we know little about. As such, the motivation underlying the decision to expatriate for non-traditional families is not generally known in comparison to their more ‘traditional’ counterparts (e.g. Hippler, 2009; Konopaske, Robie, and Ivancevich, 2009), with many researchers being forced to make assumptions or to overstate their claims. I use the term ‘female expatriate’ as one that assumes breadwinner status, noting that non-working women (‘trailing spouses’) as female expatriates also play a crucial role in supporting a ‘two-person career’ (Papanek, 1973); for example, where a split family requires a husband to relocate abroad leaving a wife in the home-country to provide financial, pastoral, physical, psychological and emotional support as a temporary single parent to dependent family members that remain behind; or where the trailing spouse in a dual-career lesbian partnership assumes a lower-status dual-earner ‘job’, but does not have the higher-status breadwinner ‘career’ (see Duxbury, Lyons, and Higgins, 2007 for an excellent typology). It is important to note that while some recent research (e.g. Cole, 2012; Harvey and Wiese, 1998; Selmer and Leung, 2003c) has been focused on female breadwinners in ‘status-reversal families’ (those with a

male trailing spouse' (Duxbury *et al.*, 2007), anecdotal evidence and industry reports (e.g. ORC, 2008) show that there are *other* types of non-traditional families that are also supported by female breadwinner expatriates, including single parent, split families, and lesbian partnerships. In short, female expatriates can, and do, support more than the traditional heterosexual two-parent family, yet research in this area has been largely overlooked.

In this chapter, I draw on interviews with four female western expatriates in breadwinner roles that support a cross-section of non-traditional expatriate families, noting that cultural/social values in non-Western societies may have different implications for the number of non-traditional families and whether and how they undertake international work. My goal is to investigate similarities and differences among four types of non-traditional (western) families: status reversal marriages (with male trailing spouses), single parents, split families (where married partners do not live in the same country), and lesbian partnerships, noting that there are other types of non-traditional families, such as overseas adoption families, special needs children and those with multigenerational/elder care responsibilities that also warrant attention. Using a case study approach, I illustrate through vignettes: (a) why women in non-traditional families accept international assignments; (b) the barriers and challenges they face; and (c) the factors that contribute to their success. My aim is to: (i) address the gap in research that has largely ignored this segment of the talent pool; (ii) explore how the barriers to mobility for women supporting non-traditional families may be overcome at the policy level; (iii) understand the unique needs of women supporting non-traditional expatriate families and the factors that may lead to higher levels of assignment success; and (iv) propose a future research agenda to guide more scholarly work on this topic.

The nature of women's global careers

Company-assigned versus self-initiated expatriation

Recent research (e.g. Hutchings, Lirio, and Metcalfe, 2012; Metcalfe, 2008; Vance, McNulty, and Chauderlot, 2011) suggests that women have begun to pursue alternative forms of global work, over and above traditional company-sponsored, long-term international assignments, as a way to overcome the many barriers they face in attaining global skills through established routes. Tharenou (2008) found, in a longitudinal investigation of factors predicting how gender and family status influence employee willingness to expatriate, international job search behavior, and expatriation decisions, that one such barrier includes maintaining work-life balance, noting that:

[While] women are willing to expatriate, family factors lead to women being less able to transform their willingness into an international job search than men, subsequently flowing on to women expatriating less for work than men. Overall, the expatriation interests of women with partners and/or children were least realized (most inhibited) in international job search and subsequent expatriation behavior. The interests of childless single employees were most realized (p.183)

While there is little data to suggest what newer forms of international work entail, the case studies in this chapter provide some explanation. For example, three of

the four women whose stories are told here did not expatriate with the assistance of a multinational corporation (MNC) via a fixed contract/posting, electing instead to self-initiate their work abroad as a means of maintaining a degree of flexibility in career choice, work location, and work-family balance. This is representative of prior research showing that women represent nearly half of those who self-initiate expatriation for work (Inkson and Myers, 2003; Tharenou, 2003). Furthermore, while each woman represented here originates from a Western country, three of the four are based in Asia (two in Singapore, one in Shanghai), with a fourth currently residing in the US and about to expatriate to Australia. All are pursuing global careers – international work outside their home-country - with the intention of gaining skills and competencies for career advancement, a higher salary that enables them to sustain a desired lifestyle, providing their children (for those who have them) with a multi-cultural experience, and supporting their families as the female breadwinner. In line with other research (e.g. Harris, 2004; Hutchings *et al.*, 2012), all the women expressed continuing challenges in balancing their global career with family responsibilities, both within the nuclear family and extended family abroad in their respective home-countries.

Female expatriate talent pool

Just as women in international management are not new (Adler, 2002; Harris, 2004), female expatriates are likewise a growing phenomenon (e.g. Hutchings, French, and Hatcher, 2008). The percentage of women sent on international assignments has increased over the last two decades, from 3 percent in the early 1990s (GMAC, NFTC, and SHRM Global Forum, 2004) to 20 percent in 2009 (BGRS, 2009), comparing favourably with national relocation data showing that 37 per cent of US domestic transferees are women (Worldwide ERC, 2011), although women in developing countries remain much more under-represented relative to their developed country counterparts. These data are not surprising, given: (i) women's increasing rate of overall employment (irrespective of child responsibilities) and the valuable economic and financial contributions they make within families (Schoen, Rogers, and Amato, 2006; Sorrentino, 1990); (ii) that female expatriates represent an additional and important source of talent in global firms; and, (iii) that gender diversity has been shown as a corporate performance driver (Boatman, Wellins, and Neal, 2011; Süßmuth-Dyckerhoff, Wang, and Chen, 2012), particularly during expatriation (Adler, 1979; Guthrie, Ash, and Stevens, 2003). Many women may also be driven to accept transfers in order to hold onto their jobs (Worldwide ERC, 2011).

Yet, female expatriates appear to be an under-utilized resource in international staffing (McKeen and Bu, 2005; Selmer and Leung, 2003a). BGRS (2012) reports that the percentage of female expatriates has remained steady at between 17 and 20 per cent for the past five years, suggesting that there may be a glass ceiling for women with regard to international assignments (Insch, McIntyre, and Napier, 2008). In their commentary about female expatriates, Cole and McNulty (2011) noted that:

Despite shortages of international managers, there [is] no evidence of any serious attempt to increase the percentage of female managers selected for international assignments. Hence, female expatriates have been under-represented in disproportion to the size of the qualified female labor pool (p. 145)

While some research (e.g. Cole, 2012) suggests that the number of female expatriates could increase with appropriate organizational support and intervention, other scholars (e.g. Fischlmayr and Kollinger, 2010; Selmer and Leung, 2003b) contend that these candidates are being denied international assignment opportunities because of a combination of career development issues or personal and family issues, much like their domestic counterparts (Michailidis, Morphitou, and Theophylatou, 2012). For example, female expatriates often regard expatriation as a less successful career path than men because they tend to occupy lower positions despite having equal tenure and/or prior expatriate experience, and they are given less access to fast-track career programs, career counseling, and career planning (Selmer and Leung, 2002). Linehan (2002) found that creating options for the accompanying male trailing spouse and the difficulties associated with balancing career with child-raising were difficulties unique to female managers working internationally. While Hutchings, French and Hatcher (2008) found that female expatriates perceive less organizational support than males, Hutchings, Michailova and Harrison (2013) posit that specific countries are less appealing to females due to perceived differences in cultural distance from the home-country, political risk, and women not being accepted in host-country contexts. Other studies show that organizations' gender bias and stereotyping associated with international appointments is an ongoing challenge (Fischlmayr, 2002; Paik and Vance, 2002; Shortland, 2009).

While research shows that female expatriates represent a gender minority and there are many barriers that prevent them from achieving upward career mobility via international assignments, women in non-traditional expatriate families often experience additional stereotypes and prejudices and as such can find themselves in a "double minority" (see Gedro, 2010a, p. 387). For example, structural and systemic inequities across organizations can inhibit the possibility of global mobility for those women representing a combination of: (a) gender and marital status minorities (single-parent and split families); (b) gender and sexual orientation minorities (lesbian partnerships); (c) gender and race minorities (overseas adoption families); and (d) gender and disability minorities (families with special needs children).

Family systems theory

Prior research on expatriation (Caligiuri, Hyland, and Joshi, 1998; Takeuchi, Yun, and Tesluk, 2002) demonstrates that there are significant family system effects during expatriation. These include crossover effects between family members that can influence attitudes and behaviors, and in turn, intent to leave (Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley, and Luk, 2001). Indeed, studies focused on the trailing spouse have emerged as particularly important in light of evidence that suggests spouse adjustment is a critical factor in overall international assignment success (Andreason, 2008; Cole, 2011). Furthermore, industry surveys (e.g. Cartus, 2012) show that 'family and personal circumstances' and 'partner's career' remain the top reasons for refusing to accept an international assignment.

Family systems theory posits that while in an ideal situation relationships between family members exist in a state of balance or equilibrium (each reciprocally affecting the psychological state of the other, including possible physiological effects), maintaining such equilibrium during expatriation is often a challenge. This can be due to internal and external factors that exert pressure on a family's equilibrium as they attempt to adjust to their new environment (Brown, 2008). One would expect during expatriation that ongoing adjustments take place, as family

members strive to offset a change in one domain (a change in status from breadwinner to dependent) with a corresponding change in another domain (isolation from familiar networks).

For non-traditional expatriate families, maintaining family equilibrium is a combination of balancing individual demands placed on each family member while also building appropriate capabilities to enhance positive crossover effects. This can nonetheless be problematic, given the dynamic nature of family systems wherein each system will likely change in response to a variety of conditions, including dual-career status, prior expatriate experience, gender roles, and stage of family life-cycle. In line with crossover and work-family research (e.g. Brown, 2008), international assignments rarely impact just one aspect of life for expatriates, instead feeding into and influencing other areas of life such as feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, identity, and marriage and family relationships (Harvey, 1997). Thus, how non-traditional expatriate families cope with changes to their family system will impact on the relative success or failure of the overall assignment (see McNulty, 2012).

Non-traditional expatriate families

Defining 'family'

Published research on expatriate families for the past two decades has tended to draw on a restricted definition of family as a “monogamous patriarchal family headed by a man permanently married to his [one] wife and living with her and their children” (Rothausen, 1999, p. 818). This is despite that, in the 1970s and 80s, deviations from traditional household compositions were already emerging. As Sorrentino (1990) notes in the *Monthly Labor Review's* examination of demographic, household, and labour force trends in Canada, Japan, and major Western European nations over a 30-year period to 1990,

Families are becoming smaller, and household composition patterns over the past several decades have been away from the traditional nuclear family - husband, wife, and children living in one household - and toward more single-parent households, more persons living alone, and more couples living together out of wedlock. Indeed, the “consensual union” has become a more visible and accepted family type in several countries. The one-person household has become the fastest growing household type. The pace and timing of change differ from country to country, but the general direction is the same practically everywhere. (p. 41)

In keeping with these changes, the Vanier Institute (1992) provides a more inclusive perspective where ‘family’ is defined as,

Any combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibilities for variant combinations [including]: physical maintenance and care of group members; addition of new members through procreation or adoption; socialization of children; social control of members; production, consumption, distribution of goods and services; and affective nurturance — love.

From an international assignment perspective, ORC (2008) recently reported that, for the first time among its sample of worldwide survey participants, the most prevalent definition of 'spouse' used by the majority of MNCs (38%) to define 'family' included a married, long-term or live-in partner of the opposite or *same* sex. While most Japanese companies (80%) used the traditional definition of married husband or wife, European companies were the most liberal with 63 percent including the opposite or same-sex live-in partner in their definition. Similarly, KMPG (2011) found that over half of participants in their survey of 554 MNCs now include opposite-gender unmarried partners and nearly half include same-gender unmarried partners for the purposes of determining international assignment-related benefits.

In this chapter, I define an expatriate family as, '*married, defacto, live-in, or long-term partners of the opposite or same-sex, with or without children, with family members that reside in one or many locations; and legally separated or divorced (single) adults with children, with family members that reside in one or many locations*'. The definition I use accounts for a range of traditional and non-traditional family types including: (i) cohabitation outside of legal marriage; (ii) children born outside of wedlock; (iii) blended families with step-children from prior relationships; (iv) children at boarding school geographically separated from their parents; (v) lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) partnerships, (vi) adoptions that take place during an assignment; (vii) split families residing in two or more locations; and (viii) single parents with international custody arrangements. But it must also be pointed out that the composition of an expatriate family may pose challenges when an international assignment is offered, particularly for non-traditional families. Nunan and Vittorio (2009) note that,

Certain international destinations simply may not be a viable option for non-traditional families. Examples of situations that should be addressed in advance include foster or adopted children not sharing the same family name, as well as same-sex or unmarried partners. Employers and third-party partners must collaborate in advance to ensure that entry to the country as well as legal residence and employment are possible for these and all candidates. (p. 2)

Status-reversal marriages

A status-reversal marriage is defined as one where the primary income is generated by the wife (Drago, Black, and Wooden, 2005). The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) suggests that up to 35 per cent of American families are supported by female breadwinners, with approximately 10 per cent of international assignees representing female breadwinner families with accompanying male spouses (BGRS, 2012). The rise in status-reversal expatriate marriages can be explained by an increasing number of senior level jobs becoming attainable by women, due to their increased level of education, as well as their desire for greater work-family balance (i.e. shared family responsibilities with their spouse). It may also be explained by a blurring of the boundaries between career and family, where 'significant others' (i.e. husbands, partners) can play a strong role in the decision making process among couples during expatriation, where a wife, for example, wishes her career to take priority over that of her husband (Richardson, 2006). Tung (2004) suggested that female expatriates may be 'model global managers' because research has shown that women are equally successful to male expatriates in the performance of their international assignments

(Sinangil and Ones, 2003), and may have higher levels of adjustment (Haslberger, 2010; Selmer and Leung, 2003c). Consider the following case (note: pseudonyms have been used throughout).

Staying Relevant in Singapore

Deborah Saunders had never really considered that she might one day be the family breadwinner. Having financially supported her family for the past eight years in Singapore, the move there and her subsequent role as ‘career spouse’ arose much more out of necessity than desire. Facing bankruptcy in her native New Zealand arising from a failed family business five years earlier, accepting the job abroad with a small MNC in Asia seemed like a rational and logical next step for herself, her husband and their three young children. But when the job in Singapore fell through barely a year after arrival, it was then that being unemployed and limited to a 30-day ‘find-another-job-or-leave’ work permit rule really gave meaning to the seriousness of the breadwinner role she had assumed. With no safety net, no extended family support, no income, and three children to support, there were few options.

“It was,” Deborah recalls, “a perilous situation. I spent a week on the couch paralyzed with fear, beating myself up at having gotten us into this mess, and wondering what would become of us, all the while the days ticking down one by one until we would probably be forced to leave”.

Having determined when they left New Zealand a year earlier that returning to their home country was not an option, Deborah’s husband, Wayne, immediately went out and found a job in Singapore as a salesman. Although it was a low-paying base salary plus commission, the job nonetheless enabled the family to obtain a much-coveted ‘Employment Pass’, allowing them to remain in Singapore indefinitely and for the children to continue attendance at a local school. Deborah, too, at this point realized she needed to give up her dream of being the ‘career spouse’, and instead secured a low-paying but stable ‘job’ as an accountant for a small export company. Pulling in a combined monthly salary that paid the rent and utilities and bought groceries, but afforded the family few other luxuries including expensive international schools for their children, the Saunders landed back on their feet – just barely.

Today, Deborah is a well-respected and internationally recognized regulatory compliance and anti-corruption expert, a career woman who has secured roles with Deloitte and Thomson Reuters, among others, and currently heads up the program delivery division of an international compliance training organization. Still in Singapore, her remarkable career reinvention comes down to one thing: staying relevant.

“I figured out pretty quickly that being the breadwinner meant making long-term decisions and going with your gut, even when everyone else around me probably thought I was crazy,” says Deborah. “Our families back in New Zealand worried about us in the early days, because they felt extremely uncomfortable with me as the breadwinner. They had no faith in my ability to pull it off. I got labeled a ‘bad mother’ because I chose not to stay home and raise the kids like everyone else did in our small country town. But the financial necessity made me even more determined to

succeed”.

An accountant by trade, but with dreams of using her training to move into anti-corruption and forensic accounting, the accountant job following that first year became a necessary means to an end for Deborah, but it also proved to be a valuable turning point.

“I didn’t like the job,” she says, “and I loathed going there every day. It represented everything in New Zealand I wanted to get away from, so working there was a daily reminder I was going nowhere. But it paid the bills and we needed that. It also showed me that unless I was willing to put it all on the line and go after my dream, I’d probably be stuck in that sort of job for the rest of my life”.

By now in her early 40’s, and with children about to enter high school, Deborah worked by day in the export business and spent her evenings in night school, polishing up her skills on anti-corruption and fraud detection via distance education courses. Within a year, she secured a key role at Deloitte Forensics, heading up their newly formed Whistleblowing Division, including a six-month secondment to Indonesia to work on a high profile global anti-corruption investigation. After four years in the role, and having earned a reputation as a hard-working expert, she then moved to Thomson Reuters to take on a similar position. Recently, she was invited to join her current company in a prestigious role as Asia Program Director, researching regulatory developments in financial crime and anti-money laundering.

With three children about to enter university, a recently purchased multi-million dollar home, and Singapore citizenship taken up in 2009, Deborah is very clear about what it takes to succeed as a female expatriate breadwinner in a non-traditional family.

“It’s about courage, mainly,” she says, “and not just me, but for my husband and kids as well. People around us, especially other expats, they don’t know what to say to us, or about us, when we are in social situations. We are not ‘the norm’ and although *we* are fine with it, others often find it really uncomfortable. I do think too that it’s harder for Wayne than for me. I’m too focused on keeping us afloat financially to care what people think, but I know he finds it a struggle sometimes. But he, too, is amazed by the journey we have been through.”

Deborah and Wayne have certainly come a long way in just a few short years. They took a chance, went abroad with three young children where the risks were huge, and although they initially failed, they managed to get back up again and move on. “We said to each other ‘there’s no going back to New Zealand, we have to make it work here’, so we did,” says Deborah. “We’ve all worked extremely hard, even the kids, and we’ve done it as a team. When I was down, Wayne stepped up. When I was back on my feet, he took over his share of the house and the kids again. We have always played team with the kids and juggling our jobs and careers. The kids have rarely complained, even when their friends were going off to schools we could never afford.”

Deborah’s career success comes down to her almost singular focus on remaining relevant in a market that values innovation and creativity. Realizing early on that

Singapore demands specialists with deep knowledge, she developed expertise in a niche field, and remains innovative through education and self-training, certification, conference attendance, and reading. Having worked for some of the biggest global brands, she is now thinking ahead as to how best to support her children through the next seven years of university education, as well as her and Wayne's own retirement. "Although our family is stronger, and our marriage is stronger", says Deborah, "it only came about from many 'life' lessons along the way. I've learned that as a woman I tend to undervalue what I am worth. But when you're a breadwinner, it's about getting the best deal for yourself and your family".

"My advice to anyone thinking about being the female breadwinner is to negotiate hard and get a better deal, because you're worth it!"

Deborah's story is becoming increasingly common, not just because she has assumed the breadwinner status in the family but, because like many women, her career has not been supported by the types of traditional expatriation that some women rely on when building a global skillset. Like many female expatriates, Deborah's career success is both complicated - and facilitated - by her personal life: *complicated* by her husband's status-reversal role as the trailing spouse, but also *facilitated* by her family's 'teamwork' attitude.

Prior studies of male trailing spouses (e.g. Cole, 2012; Punnett, Crocker, and Stevens, 1992; Selmer and Leung, 2003d) have reported a number of challenges that men face in acclimatizing to their unusual status, ranging from suspicion by employers, to being ostracized by locals, and ignored by females in the same network. Compounding the problem for male trailing spouses is the absence of adequate organizational support. In a study of 264 trailing spouses in 54 host-locations, McNulty (2012) found that social support to alleviate marital stress and professional support to address the dual-career issue were perceived by trailing spouses as having the greatest impact on identity re-construction and, in turn, their adjustment. However, both types of support were lacking. Copeland and Norell (2002) found that an important aspect of trailing spouse adjustment is the creation of a social support network to increase psychological well-being, autonomy, and adjustment. Cole (2012) noted that,

Many of the informal and formal support mechanisms for partners have been designed for women only and may not prove useful for male partners. For example, sharing daily life experiences over morning coffee has long been traditional for stay-at-home mothers, but males are more apt to socialize while sharing active experiences such as golf or by attending sporting events. As a result, males may be more likely to need and use employer-provided partner support specifically designed for them. (p. 313)

Dual-career issues can also present problems in status-reversal marriages, particularly when taking time out of the workforce leads to a significant disruption in one's career path (Schneer and Reitman, 1993, 2006). Harvey (1997) noted that job losses and interruptions due to expatriation can result in lower self-esteem, a loss of power, and feelings of decreased self-work, manifesting in discontent and stress among family members. Cole (2011) found that career-oriented male partners had

lower cultural and interactional adjustment than their female counterparts when they suffered job losses.

In a related study, Cole (2012) notes that when men assume trailing spouse status, their sense of identity is often negatively affected by not successfully fulfilling the role of breadwinner for their family. Forret, Sullivan and Mainiero (2010) contend that a perceived loss of masculine and professional identity can lead to feelings of defeat among men, where changes in gender roles, as well as a lack of understanding from others relating to the unusual status of a female breadwinner family, may create barriers to undertaking international assignments. Indeed, The Permits Foundation (2009), in its survey of 3,300 trailing spouses, found that career and employment concerns for the accompanying spouse were important in the decision whether to accept an assignment for 83 per cent of males and 67 per cent of females, thus confirming that the dual-career issue can be a significant barrier to global mobility (Cartus, 2012; Chew and Zhu, 2002; Ernst and Young, 2010).

What, then, are the success factors for status-reversal expatriate marriages? For Deborah and Wayne, the decision to expatriate from New Zealand to Singapore was a joint decision, with sufficient buy-in on both sides that the relocation would benefit the *whole* family (Budworth, Enns, and Rowbotham, 2008). When they hit a rocky patch in the first year, both partners were committed to making it work, particularly during the 'workaholic' period when Deborah was getting her career and credentials established (Duxbury *et al.*, 2007). This type of healthy decision-making and 'teamwork' approach in non-traditional expatriate families is supported by recent research showing, for example, that females generally give more attention to their partners' willingness to relocate in the decision to accept an international assignment, than males do in reverse (Dupuis, Haines, and Saba, 2008; Geist and McManus, 2012). Similarly, McNulty and Boyko (2004) found that male trailing spouses generally feel less resentment towards their wives' employer about a relocation and display less ownership of their wives' career, than female trailing spouses do of their breadwinner husbands. For Deborah and Wayne, his lack of resentment towards her career was crucial to their success in the early years, given that Deborah was required to sacrifice family and personal time in order to climb the corporate ladder and be a 'team player'.

Single parents

While international assignments, whether company-assigned or self-initiated, represent an important opportunity for women in non-traditional families to pursue global careers, there is little to no research or exploration of the issues faced by single parent families undertaking these assignments. Nor is there much guidance offered by our scholarly research, nor consulting reports, as to how best to manage, support and attract this segment of the workforce to engage in international mobility, and the multiple considerations such families face when a single parent seeks upward career mobility via an international assignment. It matters because, as the following story shows, female single parent candidates represent a viable source of global talent that might otherwise be overlooked or dismissed for all the wrong reasons.

Successful Single Mum in Shanghai

New Zealander, Sarah Fletcher, is a 45 year-old senior executive and has been a single parent for six years. Currently living in China with her two children, the family recently relocated from Singapore where they spent four years on their first international assignment, before relocating to Shanghai. The company Sarah works for – a global dairy manufacturing firm – has gone to great lengths to ensure her success as an expatriate, in large part because of the specialized skillset she brings to the company and the demand for her niche skills in the Asia Pacific region.

A self-confessed ‘travel junkie’, Sarah initially said no to the Singapore assignment when it was first offered because, like most single parents, she could not see how she would be able to live without - or rebuild - her crucial support network of grandparents, friends, sitters, and role models for her children that many single parents rely on. So when the company urged her to reconsider the assignment, she made a smart move: recognizing she had a supportive boss, Sarah built a business case around her specific family needs and presented it to her boss, thus placing the decision back into the hands of her employer.

“I needed the company to support more frequent home leave trips to New Zealand,” explains Sarah, “because my children need to retain visitation rights with their respective fathers. Although I have full parental rights and don’t face any legal obstacles to relocating with them overseas, I nonetheless want them to retain what is an important relationship in their life.”

Thankfully, the company did not hesitate to include additional compensation in Sarah’s salary package to accommodate up to three paid home-leave visits per year for each child and/or each parent to fly to New Zealand or Singapore as required. In addition, Sarah was able to negotiate consideration for travelling with her children to New Zealand for any extended work-related business trips.

“I also spoke to an expat friend who lived in Singapore who explained how useful a live-in domestic helper could be,” says Sarah, “and the truth is, I didn’t have that option available to me even in New Zealand, so I saw that aspect of support in Singapore, and Asia in general, as being quite helpful for a single mum”.

In the early days though it was tough. “My children were 5 and 7 when we first moved to Singapore. Even today, with an ayi, I need to consider flying someone up from New Zealand if a business trip is longer than three days, like my mother or another family member. The ayi is good, but I need a deeper level of support when I’m away.”

As a result, her motivation to expatriate, she says, has little to do with financial gain. “A big portion of my salary is spent on traveling to and from New Zealand for the sake of the kids, beyond even what the company compensates me for, so I didn’t accept this assignment or the one in Singapore to make money. What drives me being here is more about building my career to be able to support my children, and having the opportunity to indulge in travel opportunities that we could not afford to do from New Zealand.” It helps that her company has a predominantly offshore team and

engages in global mobility on a large scale.

Financial concerns aside, there are additional challenges Sarah faces. “I’ve not met any other expat single parents in Shanghai and I only met one in Singapore. So I make a lot of compromises socially because I don’t have a husband or partner to help me build bridges to those relationships and social outlets. There can also be a lot of emotional stress that I am unable to share with a life partner. It all comes down to me. It can sometimes get overwhelming being on my own. It’s important to try to keep things in perspective, but that’s hard to do when you only have yourself to talk to!”

Although Sarah talks a lot about compromises, these are not just in her social life, but also for her children. “I second guess myself a lot and most of the battle is about the guilt I carry, wondering if I’ve made the right decision to take my children overseas away from their home base, and expose them to these different cultures. I compare myself, too often I think, to those expat families with stay-at-home mums and observe all the sporting and extra-curricular activities their children are involved in, and wonder if my own kids are missing out because as a working parent I just can’t be that available or accessible to make it happen for them to the same degree as their friends get”.

As challenging as it sometimes is, Sarah recognizes that there are also considerable positives to her situation. “I’ve learned that being a single parent is about accepting I can’t please everybody and I’m doing the best I can; I have to let myself off the hook sometimes and just go with what we’ve got. I’m not waiting for a man to come in and save us all. This is it for us. And I am fortunate, too, to have a clean break from the relationship with each child’s father, so I’m in control of my life decisions and that of my kids, which in some ways is much easier than having to consider a partner’s views all the time.”

It is clear that Sarah is a successful expatriate, evidenced by the company’s decision to offer her another assignment to Shanghai when the Singapore contract ended. “I didn’t hesitate to accept it,” she says, “I knew we could do it again. I knew what support network to build. I immediately joined an international women’s professional association, and I made sure we lived in an expat compound very close to the school among other families, even though the daily commute for me is quite long. I use skype to check in with the kids when I’m traveling, and I never use my single parent situation at work as an excuse for not getting something done.”

Sarah has also set manageable expectations with her new China boss about her work ethic and scheduling, agreeing to always travel for work when required, but never at the last minute because of her need to plan ahead for absences from home. She also chose a career path more in line with managing work-life balance. “I made it clear from the day I joined this company 11 years ago, when my first child was still a baby, that my family comes first. So I will work until 1 or 2am if needed in order to take a couple of hours off to attend one of my children’s mid-afternoon sporting events or assembly.”

“It’s a knife-edge though. When everything is going well, we totally rock it. But it doesn’t take much for it all to fall over.” Like when her daughter suffered a spinal injury requiring surgery and 6-weeks recuperation in New Zealand, necessitating that

the entire family temporarily relocate back home. Or when her son was found to have dyslexia requiring additional tutoring to support his learning needs.

As for other single parents considering an international assignment, Sarah has one piece of advice. “Be clear about what you really need, what really tugs at the heart strings when you think about moving, and then work out how to address that in your new country, and don’t try to fix everything. It won’t happen the way you expect, but it will happen.”

The characteristics of Sarah’s situation are likely to be common to many single parent families, albeit exacerbated by the stresses, uncertainty and restricted information typically associated with international mobility: finding new support networks, deciding whether to move away from a significant other parent, managing international custody arrangements, childcare support when traveling on business trips, loneliness, understanding from one’s employer, and for some, finding a new life partner. A further consideration in the decision to relocate is the notion that such decisions are not only dependent on the needs of the other (non-relocating) parent, but must also factor in a child’s well being in terms of changes that may occur in the quality and quantity of the relationship he/she has with their other parent (Elrod, 2010; Parkinson, Cashmore and Single, 2010)), and the support the family may no longer receive from extended family and friends (Geist and McManus, 2012). As Sarah explains, having access to appropriate role models for her son was an important consideration.

Accurate data on expatriate single parent families is difficult to obtain. As a guide, Worldwide ERC (2008) found that 9 per cent of transferees undertaking a US domestic relocation were single parents. One important issue in identifying single parent families is variations in definitions: what is the upper age limit for children that then qualifies a family for single-parent status in terms of assignment policy? Additionally, does the presence of the other parent in a cohabiting arrangement preclude single-parent status? Data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics stipulates that most organizations use the under-18 age limit for single-parent status (Sorrentino, 1990), however, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a general tendency for MNCs to extend the age limit to 21 for those expatriates with children attending university in the same location where the parent is currently residing. Single-parent status generally does not apply to expatriates with children attending university in another location or the home-country.

A further issue is the extent to which relocation policies can adequately address the practical needs of single parent families (e.g. daycare and school schedules, and unexpected sick days), particularly when a policy exception request is made in response to an economic or social issue that could be unique to a single parent situation. In Sarah’s case, it was crucial that the company provide additional compensation to facilitate her children’s access to their father in New Zealand. But as Cartus (2012) reports, not all companies are as generous, with many reporting a significant reduction in approving non-accompanying dependent visits (from 59 per cent in 2010 to 36 per cent in 2012, down 23 per cent overall). For other single parents, it may require granting permission to have a household goods shipment delivered over a weekend rather than a weekday (incurring substantial overtime charges imposed by the relocation vendor), so the employee is not required to take

time off work to unload the delivery and set up their house as would be expected of a traditional expatriate family with a spouse at home available to manage such things.

Split families

A split family is one where an international assignee's immediate family remains in the home country or old location while the assignee expatriates 'unaccompanied' to the (new) host-location (KPMG, 2011). Such arrangements may be temporary, for example, to allow a child to finish the school year in the home/old location, before the family then re-joins the assignee in the new location; or permanent, for example, where an assignee enters into a 'commuter marriage' situation indefinitely due to a spouses' career (Hendershott, 1995; Worldwide ERC, 2011). These types of assignments often provide for additional home leave to and from the home and host countries to allow for separated family members to visit each other, along with some additional compensation such as a separation allowance or a change in the length of the assignment to either a short-term or business trip (ORC, 2008). It is common practice, however, that unaccompanied expatriates receive only single-status benefits once on assignment, forgoing lifestyle, spouse and other types of support. Sullivan, Aldred and Taylor (2013) report that,

split families exist in a variety of forms including: (1) family stays in the home location and assignee relocates with more frequent trips home; (2) family and assignee relocate to the host country, and family lives in a tier 1 location while assignee commutes to a 2nd or 3rd tier location and returns on the weekend (an arrangement common in non-governmental organizations such as the United Nations when families are sent to hardship or dangerous locations); or (3) family and assignee relocate to a 'livable' host country and assignee commutes from there to a different country. While option (1) may be less expensive or cost neutral, and options (2) and (3) more expensive, these options are nonetheless used in a number of industries and locations where the expense is viewed as a non-optional business cost of positioning key talent and candidates of choice. (p. 19)

Cartus (2012) and BGRS (2012) report that the percentage of married/with partner expatriates that elect to undertake an unaccompanied assignment has remained steady at between 18 to 20 per cent for the past six years since 2007, with approximately 35 per cent of MNCs using 'unaccompanied' as an assignment type or policy (KPMG, 2011). While in the domestic relocation literature commuter/split families are common among researchers (e.g. Anderson and Spruill, 1993; Gerstel and Gross, 1987) and practitioners (Shellenbarger, 1999; Worldwide ERC, 2011), split families has become only a recent phenomenon in international relocations, with only consulting firms providing relevant data.

Sullivan *et al.* (2013) attribute the use of split family assignments to several factors including the spouse/partner's unwillingness to let go of the family's two-income status in a tough economic environment, along with the perceived hardship that often comes with assignments to emerging markets. It is also possible that companies' current international assignment programs are still not adequately meeting the needs of employees with spouses and families, causing them to decline international assignment opportunities or to opt for 'unaccompanied' status (*cf.*

Hyslop, 2012). Critical family challenges include spouse/partner resistance, family adjustment, children's education opportunities, difficult host location, cross-cultural adjustment, dual-career issues, and language barriers. Further, the growth of assignees from developing locations/countries may increase the rate of unaccompanied assignees for companies whose expatriate policies may not be designed to accurately reflect the needs, attitudes and requirements of this segment of the talent pool. Richardson (2006) suggests that maintaining close relationships with extended family (e.g. grandparents, cousins) can be important in the decision to expatriate, subsequently leading to some families engaging in split assignments as a way of retaining important extended family relationships rather than jeopardizing them (see also Baldrige, Eddleston, and Veiga, 2006).

Sullivan *et al.* (2013) contend that the decrease in expatriate families going on an international assignment, and the increase in alternative types of assignments such as 'split families' is: (a) caused by a lack of attention to solving the critical family challenges that are keeping these employees from considering an assignment, and, (b) causing a talent pool crisis for companies. As noted earlier, Cartus (2012) contends that talent pool shortages and family problems are exacerbated by MNCs strong focus on emerging markets,

a term that includes a broad range of geographies, from truly undeveloped sites, such as Papua New Guinea and Nigeria, to the big five "BRICS" countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and now South Africa) - hardly considered nations lacking in infrastructure on the whole. [But] even though the names may be familiar, many of these locations are new to companies and represent significant and urgent challenges for that reason alone. Thus, companies will be aggressive in attracting talent and allocating it in expanding geographical locations, including many underdeveloped locations. When the destination locations are underdeveloped, the issue of demographics becomes particularly important for one sector of the assignee population: single assignees are more likely to be selected when the location lacks infrastructure and poses security risks. Some of these may be "global nomads," individuals without the same kind of national ties that traditional assignees have and less likely to be concerned about family issues. Others may relocate their families to nearby locations that are more secure or have greater resources and commute from there. (p. 5)

While split family assignments are used by companies to reduce the barriers to mobility and address talent shortages, there are nonetheless likely to be significant personal costs to the family itself arising from the separation and absence of a spouse from their partner and dependent children, including the temporary single parent status the remaining parent assumes as is common in domestic commuter partnerships. To illustrate this point, consider Jessica's story.

The Company Would Prefer Divorced Expatriates

Jessica and Edward Siguel have been expatriates for nearly 12 years. With their now teenage sons, the family has lived in Dublin, Rio de Janeiro, Sydney, and Boston, relocating to each new city at the request of Edward's employer, a global manufacturing conglomerate. Until their latest move – to Brussels – Jessica had always assumed the 'trailing spouse' role, picking up jobs that suited their mobile lifestyle, and then giving them up again when another move appeared on the family's schedule. All that changed, however, during their last assignment.

A physiotherapist by training with a Masters degree, Jessica began, on their fourth move to Boston, what eventually became her 'second career', having been seconded by a global coaching organization to provide executive career services to MBA graduates at a prestigious local university. Within three years, Jessica was working fulltime and earning a six-figure salary. So when the move to Brussels was offered to her husband, she decided not to go, electing instead to remain in the US with their children and continue her career. Although her husband was not happy with the decision to enter into a split-family arrangement, it was, at the time, a decision made by Jessica under the guise of protecting their sons' private school education.

"I knew when I said no to Edward about the Brussels move that he was not happy, but thankfully it was made to ensure no disruption to the children's education," says Jessica. "Really though, it was more about me preserving my new career. I had followed him for so many years, and now I had a second chance to do something for myself. I was so sick of doing whatever the company wanted. I need to carve out my own identity. But I also felt very guilty about separating the children from their father."

For the next two years, the Siguel's flew from back and forth between the US and Europe at regular intervals to spend time together as a family, but, as Jessica explains, "in the end it was just too much. I relented and moved the boys and myself to Brussels to be with Edward".

Within 6 months of being reunited, however, Edward was offered another move, this time to Jakarta. "I flat refused to go," says Jessica. "I was furious. We had just moved ourselves to Europe to be together as a family and now we were expected to move again, and to a place where my career opportunities just would not be comparable to what I had eventually been able to re-establish for myself in Brussels".

By now self-employed as a full-time executive career coach with many international clients and a healthy salary, Jessica made the decision once and for all that she and the children would not relocate again. Despite many fruitless discussions with her husband, and the HR department at his company, it was agreed that Edward would once more embark on a split assignment, leaving his family behind in Belgium.

"I hated that he left, but I knew why he needed to. He's a company man, and work is his life. But unfortunately I did not share the passion for his company that he did. And I was sick of moving. Because I could now financially support myself with some additional assistance from Edward, I made what I still believe was the most sensible

decision – to stay put, to be the breadwinner for my kids, and to build my own life and career”.

Although Jessica is not against serial expatriation, it was, she says, impossible for her to have an active career as long as she kept agreeing to uproot the family every three years for the sake of her husband’s job. “I was losing myself in a life I didn’t want. I gave up many years as a trailing spouse, and I wanted something more as I approached my 40’s. Unfortunately, it came at the expense of splitting up our family.”

Still, Jessica is resolute that she is on the right track. It’s now been 18 months since Edward left for Jakarta, returning less and less to see his wife and children, largely because his company has stopped providing assignment benefits for their split family arrangement.

“They gave us 12 months after he left for Jakarta to re-unite there as a family in order to retain all our assignment benefits. But if we didn’t, the company made it clear that Edward would get to keep his assignment status while myself and children would need to go local, being supported predominantly by my salary.”

“We lost the housing allowance and school fees, home leave and everything else. I now pay those myself, with some support from Edward, and we have moved into a smaller apartment further away from the city,” says Jessica. “The stress as a single parent has been enormous, especially because I am working fulltime. There are days when I don’t go to bed until 3am trying to juggle everything.”

“But when I spoke to HR at his company about the situation, they were pretty blunt: if Edward and I were divorced, our assignment benefits would be re-instated to more than half what we were originally getting. But because we are not legally separated or divorced, the company will not cover the expenses, despite that Edward is still a bona fide international assignee that moves to wherever they ask him to go, and has a family to support.”

“I find it ridiculous,” says Jessica, “that we are only entitled to assignment benefits if we divorce. It’s a crazy situation. It strikes me that the company encourages divorce rather than trying to adequately support families through the enormous stresses that expatriation creates.”

Jessica’s situation is, unfortunately, not a rare one. In my conversations with mobility managers they, too, agree that many policies provide adequate provision for legal separation and divorce, with much less support for split families beyond only home-leave assistance. It is hard to know what the future holds for the Siguel’s and whether Jessica and Edward can get their family back together. But their challenges are those that many non-traditional expatriate families face: inadequate assignment benefits, a lack of dual-career assistance, and the pressure to undertake serial expatriation beyond what many families can cope with.

Lesbian partnerships

Gedro (2010b) asserts that,

lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people remain a marginalized, stigmatized, and unequally protected segment of the population in the United States and around the world. (p. 352)

It is thought that many LGBT people pursue less-rewarding careers because they are 'safer' and often 'more welcoming', suggesting there may be a corporate ceiling or 'glass border' that does not allow gays to advance and prosper either at home or abroad (Gedro, 2010a, p. 392). For example, while the United States has many states that recognize gay rights, just as many do not. Russia has also introduced a ban on many gay rights with laws recently enacted that will span the next 100 years. In contrast, Buenos Aires, New Zealand, Argentina and Uruguay have all recently passed laws that legalize same-sex marriage, with The Netherlands having the prestigious honor of being the first European country to adopt same-sex marriage laws being promptly followed by ten other European nations (Bohlen, 2012). Some companies have come out in favour of gay marriage (e.g. Starbucks, Goldman Sachs) whereas others have actively discriminated against it (e.g. Target) (Hicklin, 2012).

LGBT employee protections as well as the opportunities, issues and considerations with respect to lesbians and international assignments are important but under-researched areas. For lesbian expatriates, a major consideration is whether or not they are 'out', wherein their homosexuality is known by their employer. As Gedro (2010a, p. 396) notes, when an employee remains in the 'global closet' they are unlikely to volunteer for global career opportunities and just as likely to turn them down if the host-country is known to be unwelcoming to LGBT, without ever revealing to their employer the true nature of their sexuality. Thus, many lesbians are likely to suffer a form of self-discrimination resulting from self-imposed exclusion to international career opportunities. As such, lesbians may opt out of international assignments for much the same reasons as other women in non-traditional families: a fear of being stigmatized, unsupported, or discriminated against by colleagues in both the home and host country, or lacking in confidence to be successful in an international setting. More research is needed to understand the indirect and covert barriers that may exist to prevent lesbians from actively participating in the international labour market, and why many continue to hide their lesbianism out of concern for their safety and security. For the moment, let's consider Alison and Linda's situation and what the future may hold for their family.

Same-Sex Marriage and Expatriation

Alison Granger and Linda Rafter have been married for five years, having met 10 years ago when they were both working as expatriates in Japan. Alison is Australian, in her mid 40s, holds a doctorate in education, and works at her local university lecturing to MBA students. Linda is a trained physical therapist, American, and also in her 40's. Four years ago, they welcomed a daughter, Charlotte, to their family, a child born to Alison through artificial insemination and sperm donation and legally adopted by Linda who now works part-time in order to care for their daughter at home. Currently living in North Carolina close to Linda's extended family, in less

than a year they will be undertaking an international relocation to Melbourne, a planned move that both women say is for family rather than career reasons. “We made a joint decision to relocate out of the US because there are too many legal and structural barriers here for our family,” explains Linda, “so for the sake of our child we have made the decision to live in a country where we have more choices.”

Being in a same-sex marriage has its limitations no matter where lesbians live, but on the international scene the challenges can be even greater. “We take off our wedding rings when we go through immigration at the airport,” explains Alison, “because neither our same-sex status nor marriage are legally recognized in North Carolina for immigration purposes, so in the eyes of the law we are not a valid form of family in terms of domestic partner benefits, health insurance or anything else”. Such tension has certainly taken its toll. After five years of relentlessly seeking social, financial and legal support for their union, both women have had enough. “It’s not fair to our child,” explains Alison. “As adults we can understand, even if we don’t agree, why things are like this. But our daughter deserves more and we now need to advocate for our child.”

The reasons for their decision to relocate are understandable. On the work front, problems for Alison have become untenable because she lacks US citizenship or a green card and is not able to be sponsored by her ‘spouse’ to obtain either. “I only found fulltime work because my employer sponsored an E3 visa for me,” she says. “While I felt lucky to get the job and they do treat me exceptionally well, my visa nonetheless implies temporary status and there is no perpetual renewal, so the ‘rug’ at any second can be pulled out from under us if my visa were ever cancelled.”

There are other work-related problems as well. “Because of the visa situation I can never get tenure, my salary is capped, and I cannot earn any extra income teaching summer school or part-time work during semester breaks.” As the breadwinner, Alison recognizes that more employment permanency for her is needed, something both women hope to gain in Australia, a country they have gathered much information about, and whose same-sex legal entitlements are more generous than those available in the US.

Emotionally, the situation has also taken a toll. “We spend a significant amount of time just trying to stay together as a family and get around the ‘system’ to achieve it,” says an exasperated Linda, re-telling a particularly harrowing time when even visitation at the maternity ward during Charlotte’s birth was complicated by her non-relative status as a legitimate ‘family member’. “We can’t continue to live with so much uncertainty, always trying to finagle our way around some legal technicality. We need to start living our lives free from worry that the law might one day pull our family apart”.

In hindsight, neither woman regrets their decision to live in the US, nor to have children there, despite the many difficulties they have faced. “We were so career oriented before we had kids,” says Alison, “but like everyone else, that changed when Charlotte came along”.

Linda is more philosophical about what it takes to be a lesbian expatriate. Having watched Alison experience innumerable work permit problems that have brought

them considerable hardship, it has in many ways also clarified their role as parents. “I would never have considered leaving the US before,” she says, “but work is not everything. I’m perfectly ok to swap roles with Alison and be the ‘foreigner’ if it will bring us more financial and family stability. She and Charlotte are worth it.”

Alison and Linda put their success down to a number of things – being well versed, educated, aware and well informed legally about their rights and entitlements; and their strong communication skills with each other. “We don’t have defined gender roles,” explains Alison, “and we often swap who will be the breadwinner, depending on work permit laws or who can get the higher salary.” Being clear that work is not everything, being one part of who they are, has also helped in deciding which country will suit their lifestyle and family aspirations. “It’s bigger than who is the breadwinner; it’s about everyone being in it together.”

Alison and Linda’s advice for other lesbian expatriates is simple: “Live where you have as many choices as possible to empower your family to make decisions that matter: quality of life, safety, and going after your dreams.”

Alison and Linda, by all accounts, represent an unusual type of ‘family’, but like other non-traditional expatriate families, they face many similar issues: stigmatized by their status, limited in access to others like them, and practical restrictions relating to immigration and marital status. Although Alison was able to obtain fulltime employment in the US, it has nonetheless been a difficult experience, further complicated by an inability to have her marriage legally recognized in North Carolina, and along with it the entitlements necessary to raise their child in relative normality. Tellingly, Alison and Linda are prepared to face the same trials and tribulations again in another country, albeit one that their research indicates will provide fewer obstacles, but like most LGBT expatriates, they recognize that their unusual circumstances will never result in their being granted the full status afforded to ‘traditional’ expatriate families.

As Alison and Linda’s story shows, an important consideration for lesbians is the context within which expatriation occurs, namely the foreign setting, which may pose problems in terms of: (a) the safety of the culture for being firstly a woman, and then a lesbian; (b) whether they have a partner, and if familial circumstances will be recognized; and, (c) the requirement that they may need to come ‘out of the closet’ in order to undertake an assignment or an international relocation in terms of the legalities surrounding their same-sex marital status, as well as receive benefits and entitlements for their spouse and dependents (Gedro, 2010a).

Findings answers, avoiding assumptions

As in other studies (Hippler, 2009), there are similar motives for non-traditional expatriate families to undertake an international assignment, including career progression and financial stability as major drivers. Enriching the cultural and general life experiences of their children, and the family as a whole, is also important (Richardson, 2006), highlighting that “as a career decision, expatriation is especially potent because it changes the physical (and, therefore, social) context within which the family operates” (p. 480).

Some common themes that emerge for non-traditional expatriate families

include lack of access to, and easy interaction with, other families like them. This is important because existing support mechanisms provided by employers and/or expatriate associations and clubs tend not to cater for their specific needs, instead remaining largely focused on mainstream traditional families. Another theme is that female breadwinners tend to be sensitive to the discomforts faced by their partners and/or children relating to their special status, often taking deliberate action to buffer the stigma. In all instances of the case stories reported here, most female breadwinners structured their lives in ways that could insulate other family members from external perceptions of 'being different' (a case in point being single mum Sarah's decision to live in an expatriate compound close to her children's school among other 'traditional' expatriate families, and Alison and Linda's decision to relocate to Australia to provide their young daughter with a less discriminatory way of life).

An important consideration in the success of female breadwinner expatriate families is the dynamics of the relationships among family members. Duxbury *et al.* (2007) posit that, as female breadwinners are financially independent, the option exists for them to move into single-parent status if their family is too dysfunctional. Some families, obviously, do not have this luxury, for example where single-parent families are reliant on a female breadwinner to remain committed to a career given the family's dependence on her income, as we saw in the case of single mum Sarah Fletcher. Thus, the decision to include gender as a key construct worthy of scholarly attention reflects the fact that expatriate family life remains gendered to some degree. Indeed, female employment has been shown to increase marital stability (e.g. Schoen *et al.*, 2006), as demonstrated by Deborah and Wayne, wherein women's "economic activity does not undermine marriages but rather contributes to the continuing resilience of marriage as a social institution" (p. 526).

Other research (e.g. Tichenor, 1999) shows that more satisfaction is reported among female breadwinner families when the family structure is determined purposely (by choice) than as a result of negative circumstances (e.g. a husband being fired). It must be noted, however, that gender differences during expatriation are likely to be more salient in some cultures than others dependent upon the extent to which differences in gender role norms are tolerated in some societies (Sidania and Al Hakimb, 2012; Tung and Haq, 2012). Additionally, family and work dynamics are also likely to work differently across cultures (Aryee, 2005), suggesting that the combination of home- and host-country culture are important considerations when deploying non-traditional expatriate families.

Other success factors for non-traditional expatriate families with female breadwinners include women's awareness of the need for work-life balance, and their nurturing nature towards family as a whole, by giving due consideration and pastoral care as a priority to other family members when needed. This contrasts sharply with findings in other studies (e.g. McNulty, 2012) showing that female trailing spouses of male expatriates frequently reported 'feeling invisible', 'ignored', 'having my needs trivialized' and treated like 'a second class citizen' both by the sponsoring organization and their husbands. Lazarova and Pascoe (2013) note that children also tend to feel neglected because one or both parents are working long hours or they live in single or split family arrangements. Like Greenhaus and Parasuraman (1999), I posit that female expatriates are likely better at coping with work-life conflicts (see Cole and McNulty, 2011), where many breadwinner male expatriates may have a lower degree of tolerance to such issues.

Conclusions and future research

As highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, there are other types of non-traditional expatriate families that warrant attention in addition to those discussed here, in terms of why they accept international assignments, the challenges they face and the factors that contribute to their success. Future research would do well to focus on expatriate families with special needs children, as the issues surrounding relocation of a disabled child can be a significant challenge (Cartus, 2012; Mumma, 2001). Access to information about local or international schools that cater for special needs children (for example, 'Shine Academy' in Shanghai) would likely be a useful form of support (Tan, 2011). Elder care and multigenerational responsibilities constitute another type of non-traditional expatriate family (see Mumma, 2001). BGRS (2012) and KPMG (2011) report that only 15 per cent of companies have policy provisions to assist in care for elderly family members, but of those that do, bringing extended family members on assignment (64%) and supporting visits to the elderly family members in the home country (i.e. providing additional home leave) (55%) are the most popular solutions. Expatriate families that adopt children while abroad represent a third type of non-traditional family. ORC (2008) and KPMG (2011) report that overseas adoptions are increasingly supported by companies as part of the policy provisions provided to expatriates, where 'dependent children' for the purposes of assignment benefits includes,

those who rely on the assignee for the majority of their financial support, and are usually considered family for the purpose of calculating the assignee's international assignment-related allowances. This may include unmarried children (natural or adopted) typically under the age of 19 who would normally reside with the employee in the home country or other dependent relatives as approved by the organization's international assignment policy (KPMG, 2011, p. 88).

Blended families represent another type of non-traditional expatriate family, where step-parents and half-siblings from prior relationships live together and/or apart in line with joint custody arrangements and other legalities. Dependent children at boarding school often reflect blended family arrangements. Finally, although this article has focused on female expatriate breadwinners, more research on non-breadwinner family members in non-traditional families would be helpful to future research in this area (see Cole, 2012 for a recent example).

In this chapter, I set out to begin a journey to refute that the only option for female breadwinners in non-traditional expatriate families is to postpone an international assignment opportunity or to opt out of global mobility altogether. As demonstrated, gender role concerns are, in fact, slowly diminishing as we encounter a more modern society, particularly as gender role norms change in response to the non-traditional expatriate families that have become a more widespread part of the global talent pool. While the decision to accept an international assignment will always remain a personal responsibility on the part of the assignee, who will subsequently retain private responsibility for the ultimate success of an international assignment (as all our case stories show), companies also have a public responsibility to ensure their policies and practices are in keeping with the times, and that policy provisions can adequately support the changing demographic of this important segment of the international workforce.

By focusing in this chapter on female perspectives, I contribute to a more balanced picture of international assignee perceptions of the challenges non-traditional expatriate families face than existing research provides, where most research up to now has focused either on traditional family settings or used predominantly male expatriate samples (Brown, 2008; Takeuchi *et al.*, 2002; van der Zee, Ali, and Salome, 2005). Furthermore, research on non-traditional families is scarce, with no studies or literature focusing on women in this context. While alternative forms of assignment have received some attention (e.g. Collings, Scullion, and Morley, 2007; Meyskens *et al.*, 2009), the specific aspect of non-traditional expatriation is notably under-researched. This is surprising given the extensive research on factors that contribute to expatriate success (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, and Luk, 2005), including spouse and family adjustment and the role of family in the decision-making process to undertake an international assignment (Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi, and Bross, 1998; Richardson, 2006). Likewise, articles that focus on female breadwinner expatriates exclusively are rare (e.g. Fischlmayr and Kollinger, 2010) despite that literature on this topic can provide valuable insights into important work-life balance and other issues among female expatriates.

The implications from this exploratory undertaking of women in non-traditional expatriate families are numerous. Although there is a need to develop international assignment policies that are supportive of women expatriates in general, practitioners need to remember that non-traditional families face a double burden and in most cases need more organizational support than what is given to traditional expatriate families. While these additional policy components are not likely to be overly expensive, it does require some 'out of the box' thinking and clear communication with female expatriate breadwinners as to their specific needs. Flexible work arrangements, for example, could be given to single parent families. This chapter also highlights that 'significant others' (e.g. husbands, partners, children, extended family) are not only important in the decision to relocate, but are also important stakeholders (Richardson, 2006). Clearly, female expatriate breadwinners, irrespective of their family type, deserve to be supported with equal opportunities for global career advancement.

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