

Another 'Glass Ceiling'?: The Experiences of Women Professionals and Managers on International Assignments

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The last fifteen years have seen an exponential growth in research on women professionals and managers in organizations. However, much less attention has been paid to the small but growing number of women who are embracing international careers. This paper describes some of the main findings of a two-year longitudinal study of the experiences of 92 women expatriates in a variety of UK-based companies. The results show that while there are a growing number of women opting for international assignments (IAs), they are overwhelmingly concentrated in junior and middle management positions, have less options in terms of the countries to which they can be posted and are handicapped by cultural prejudices about 'proper' gender roles in some countries. The reasons for these problems are explored and some suggestions are made for improving international opportunities for women employees in the future.

Introduction: the internationalization of management

With the increasing globalization of trade, commerce and capital in the 1990s, international job mobility is becoming a more common experience for growing numbers of employees. For many companies, the successful management of expatriate assignments will be an important part of the success of their overseas commercial activities over the next decade and into the next millennium. For others, who are new to the international scene, the identification, training and development of international staff are fast becoming an important strategic HRM issue. And, in recent years, increasing numbers of young women have entered full-time professional career streams in management and, as a result, many more are now seeking opportunities for international careers. While a few researchers have looked specifically at women on IAs (Adler 1984a, 1984b, 1986–87 and 1994; Adler and Israeli 1987; Chusmir and Frontzack 1990; Harris and Harris 1988; Harris 1995; Kirk and Maddox 1988; Schein *et al.* 1996; Symons 1984; Thal and Cateora 1979; Westwood and Leung 1994), these are very much the exception. Very few books on women's careers or on the role of women in organizations make any references to this international

dimension (see, for example, Cooper and Davidson 1982; through to White, Cox and Cooper 1992 to Wilson 1995). In addition, the small numbers of women typically involved in these expatriate surveys have made it difficult to come to any general conclusions about the experiences of women on IAs or of British women specifically.

However, this research does show us that while there are indeed growing opportunities for women to pursue international careers, they still represent only a tiny proportion of the total world-wide expatriate population. Estimates of the number of women employees on IAs in the 1980s and 1990s vary between 3% and 12% in this literature. And, these figures appear to have changed little from those cited in the mid-1970s. However, this literature also shows quite clearly that women are as motivated as men to seek international career opportunities and are likely to be as successful as their male colleagues if they are selected for these. However, they are still less likely to be selected for IAs (often because of 'family' commitments), face greater problems with adaptation in traditionally patriarchal cultures and (with the noticeable exception of the USA) are unlikely to receive company support for their (male) 'trailing' partners.

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Study objectives and methodology

The data uncovered in these surveys offered a unique opportunity to look at a group of 92 expatriate British women professionals and managers from their preparation for the move, coping with new jobs and new work demands in alien environments and their general adaptation twelve months after the move. It also looks briefly at personnel policies affecting the management of women on IAs. Where appropriate, comparisons are made with the experiences of male expatriates to highlight similarities and differences between the two groups. The impact of attitudinal and cultural barriers on work performance is also examined. However, this paper is not intended to be a comparison of women managers on IAs with women managers in the UK or a detailed account of strategic international human resource management in UK companies. Because of the small numbers involved, we were not concerned with looking at any work/family overlap issues or at male 'trailing' partners.

The research¹ was conducted between March 1994 and March 1996 and involved 36 UK-based companies. These were selected from a mail shot of 200 leading UK-based organizations in autumn 1993. Selection was based on a number of criteria. These included: the range of their international operations (from multinationals down to companies who were relative newcomers to the international scene); company sector; the number of expatriates who could be contacted during the research and the willingness of the companies to collaborate during the project (as this required sustained administrative assistance over a two-year period). Initially, twenty interviews were conducted with personnel/HR managers in a representative selection of the companies in order to obtain information on the management of IAs from the company's perspective and to elicit the views and opinions of HR and personnel managers dealing with expatriates and IAs. These also provided an opportunity to pilot the questionnaires.

The study employed a multivariate theoretical model, a longitudinal research design and both quantitative and qualitative data gathering methods. The longitudinal design was employed primarily to look at changes and processes over time rather than relying on cross-sectional *ex post factum* analyses characteristic of almost every other study in this area (see Forster 1992 for a fuller description of the research model). The companies provided the names and contact addresses of employees who had been notified of an IA. Separate questionnaires were sent to

the employee and, where appropriate, their partners. These were posted 4–6 weeks prior to the move and then four and eight months after the move. The questionnaire surveys were conducted between July 1994 and December 1995. The questionnaires employed a variety of measures. Some of these have been used in previous studies of domestic relocations and others were designed specifically for this study. Most of these were replicated at each time point in order to analyse changes over time. These data were analysed using a standard SPSSx statistical package. The paper is divided into three main sections reflecting this research design and reports on the main findings at Time 1, 2 and 3.

The project was designed to look at how these women had coped with the first twelve months of an IA in terms of their affective well-being, motivation, job (dis)satisfaction and work performance. We also wanted to look at how they perceived the effectiveness of the training and cultural briefings they had received prior to their move, their adaptation to new cultures and how they coped with different cultural expectations about 'correct' gender roles. Last, we wanted to look at their personal self-efficacy and general mental health throughout this period. The principal measures we used at each time point to ascertain this information were:

- Warr's 1987 Vitamin Model (alpha = .78) was utilized to analyse affective well-being and performance. A new (piloted) 27-item job motivation and satisfaction scale (alpha = .81) was developed for this study that looked at autonomy and discretion (freedom to choose work methods, targeting of tasks and independence of action); opportunities to use professional and technical skills; clarity (the setting of clear work objectives by their boss and being able to plan effectively); perceived workload (and stress levels); social support (from colleagues and senior management) and communication.
- The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ). Previous research on domestic relocation has shown this to be amongst the top three most stressful experiences that people are likely to encounter in their lives (Munton and Forster 1992). The stress levels of our respondents were analysed throughout the survey using the GHQ-12 in order to see if these women had been experiencing disruptive levels of stress during their IAs. This is a very reliable instrument that has been used to detect levels of stress in

Table 1: Sample characteristics

	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3*
Staff:	335	310	300
Men	243	236	228
Women	92	74	72
Partners:	245	230	210
Women	221	207	191
Men	24	23	21
Total	580	540	510

Note: * Time 1 Qs sent out 4–6 weeks prior to the move, Time 2 Qs four months after the move and Time 3 Qs four months later. All figures rounded to nearest whole number.

hundreds of community and organizational samples. It contains a number of questions concerning how people have been feeling recently. This covers areas such as: sleeping difficulties, feelings of unhappiness and their ability to enjoy everyday experiences. It can also be used to categorize people into those who are generally healthy, those described as 'the worried well' and those who are suffering from severe stress and who may be experiencing psychological problems which require counselling.

- A measure of self-efficacy ($\alpha = .68$) in order to look at individual pro-activity in new situations among our respondents.
- Various other single item measures looking at: biographical, employment and career details; expectations about the move; selection criteria for IAs; relocation support; concerns about specific aspects of the move; ratings of training and cross-cultural briefings; knowledge of local cultures and languages and general outcomes to the move at Time 3.

Sample characteristics

A total of 1,824 questionnaires were returned over Times 1, 2 and 3. The return rate at Time 1 was 62%. A breakdown of these questionnaire returns over the three time points is presented in Table 1.

Attitudes towards work and the impending IA at Time 1

Biographical details

Some 89% of the respondents were single (contrasting with 27% of men in the sample). Of those in partnerships, only seven women

reported having children who were accompanying them on the IA. Their age distributions are presented in Table 2. These women worked in a variety of sectors but were more heavily concentrated in service industries when compared to male expatriates. For example, 25% were in banking and finance (men = 9%) and 24% were in retail and marketing (men = 6%). Only a handful worked in manufacturing and energy (see Table 3).

The biographical data, from the whole survey, show that British expatriates are successful professionals, more than twice as likely to be male than female, in middle and senior management positions and have enjoyed good upward mobility in career terms. Male expatriates are usually in their mid-thirties and married with children — although there are clear signs that the number of younger single male expatriates is growing. When compared with *all* other studies of expatriates over the last ten years, there are a surprisingly high number of women expatriates in this sample. This is a distinct change from the profiles of expatriate managers of a decade ago. This is still, we suspect, untypical of the general world population of expatriate managers. This higher than expected number is due to a number of factors. First, many of the companies in this study were relative newcomers to the international scene. Few of

Table 2: Age distribution

	Women %	Men %
< 25	17	11
25–35	50	41
36–45	32	36
46–50	1	10
56–65	0	2

Table 3: Company sector

Sector	%
Banking/finance	21
IT/electronics	16
Energy exploration/distribution	5
Engineering	2
Clothing/textiles	1
Retail/marketing	24
Chemicals	11
Motor manufacturing	5
Pharmaceuticals	2
Other	4

those UK international companies with long experience of expatriate management — ICI, BP, and so forth — were involved. Second, many of these companies did not have enough 'traditional' expatriates to fill overseas posts (because of downsizing and voluntary redundancies amongst older employees in the 1980s and early 1990s). Third, there has been a trend in recent years for some of these companies to actively push the careers and job prospects of bright young women recruits in a domestic context (in banking, finance and marketing, for example). As a result, many of their junior and middle management positions are now occupied by women seeking more senior positions through international experience.

However, there were noticeable differences in the relative seniority of male and female expatriates (Table 4). In addition, as a distinct sub-group, they are much younger than their male colleagues (on average — ten years) and are in more junior management positions. This shows that a 'glass ceiling' also exists in international careers at this moment in time. They work in a narrower range of professions and have experienced much less upward mobility in career terms. They are also much less likely to be married and it is very rare for them to have children. Their partners are almost invariably in full-time employment.

The data, derived from the measures described earlier, show that almost all women staff reported a high degree of satisfaction with their personal career development, previous opportunities for career advancement and their future prospects with their current employers prior to the IA. Six out of seven reported high levels of autonomy and discretion, good opportunities to make use of their professional and technical skills and adequate to good social support and communication (with colleagues and superiors) at work. In short, most staff reported a high level of satisfaction with their jobs, prior to their IA. On a less positive note, most of the women reported working in high pressure and high stress jobs and one quarter reported that their job often made them feel 'tense' or 'worried'. Some 45% felt that their current

Table 4: Occupational status

	Women %	Men %
Executive/Director	2	18
Senior Management	14	40
Middle Management	37	28
Junior Management	47	14

workload was 'too great' and 18% reported that they felt 'used up at the end of the working day'. Finally, very few reported worrying about their work while at home or reporting any conflicts between their work and personal lives prior to the move abroad. There was little apparent concern about moving away from family and friends and, in some cases, partners.

Selection criteria for IAs

Other research has shown that there is great variability in the selection criteria employed by UK companies when selecting staff for IAs. This research confirms that this variability extends to many UK-based companies. Table 5 shows the criteria which respondents reported being used by their company when selecting them for IAs.

There are some obvious differences in the criteria used for the men and women in this sample. Women were expected to have greater language skills but were less likely to undergo psychometric testing (perhaps, in the words of one (male) HR Manager, because 'we know that most of our younger women already have a lot of the skills we are looking for — particularly in terms of their communication and learning skills'). Previous

Table 5: Selection criteria for IAs

	Women %	Men %
Job interviews	100	98
Work performance appraisals	95	96
Domestic work track-record	90	94
Professional/educational qualifications	61	52
Language proficiency	29	9
Knowledge of local business culture	33	43
Familiarity with local cultures	22	34
Psychometric testing	15	30
Other psychological tests	12	19
Previous experience of an IA	9	35
Family circumstances	6	24
Willingness of spouse/partner to move	6	43
Spouse/partner's employment status	3	10

Note: Percentage of respondents reporting each item as having been used in their case.

experience of an IA was usually not considered important for women, nor were family circumstances.

Another significant fact that became clear from our interviews with HR managers was that very few of these companies had any clear, long-term *rationale* underpinning either the kinds of competencies they were looking for in their (potential) international managers (women or men) or precisely what other criteria they should employ in order to ensure that they were getting the best person for the job. This is not to say that they were not actively working on these issues. All had some ideas about the need for identifying 'good communicators', 'culturally sensitive staff', 'highly motivated staff', 'people who are able to think on their feet', and so forth. The interview data shows that they were all trying to develop, either in-house or through the use of consultants, more rigorous and uniform methods of selecting and developing expatriate managers. While there was very little evidence that companies were *actively* discriminating against women, some of our interviewees were candid enough to confirm that women were simply not considered for postings to what can be broadly described as 'traditional' patriarchal societies in, for example, the Middle East. Furthermore, none of these companies had any explicit formal policies for specifically targeting more women for IAs. The *official* line in all of the organizations was 'the best person for the job'.

Despite this, there are obvious attractions for companies in selecting younger single women (and men) for IAs, as the following quote from an interview with an HR manager in an energy exploration company illustrates.

Q. When you select people for IAs, what are your selection criteria?

A. [Laughs] Are you available, are you single, preferably, and can you go tomorrow!? And, I'm not being flippant about this. At the present time there is no standard way of selecting people for foreign assignments ... The bottom line is that if people are told to go, they go ... and line managers have the final say in this ... All the other stuff which we have talked about like psychological suitability, the family and so on has not gone into the equation — yet ... Some managers are better than others, and we do a good job but it's unofficial and erratic. We are hoping to introduce a minimum set of criteria into interviews for foreign assignments but without support from the top, this will

only be as good as the people doing the interviews ... We are a long way from sensitizing senior management that this is an issue which has to be faced — soon.

Later in the interview she commented:

As regards the position of women, we are an equal opportunities employer [laughs], no, we do take this very seriously but even though we do have more women coming in to the company, we are not specifically targeting them for overseas postings. In fact, I would say that our younger women are probably more reluctant to put themselves forward for these and I'm not absolutely sure why ... but, it may well be something we may have to address in the future as the number of potential male expatriates declines.

Across the 36 companies, there was also great variability in the level of support and training provided by the companies for these women (as there was for their male colleagues). Obviously, this provision is dependent on the nature of each IA and the knowledge and experience of the individual expatriate. In some IAs neither language training nor cross-cultural briefings may be necessary. Table 6 shows the types of training received by our respondents.

Attitudes towards the impending IA

These women were almost universally enthusiastic about the impending IA, with over 90% reporting being 'very' or 'extremely enthusiastic' about this. Some 90% saw it as something that would involve 'a significant change in their lives' and 98% saw it as 'a positive challenge'. In order to assess how well respondents felt they would cope with the IA, a ten-item measure was used to rate perceived self-efficacy (the ability to cope with new situations, dealing with uncertainties in life, adaptability to new challenges, and so

Table 6: Training and support provided by the companies for staff

	Women %	Men %
Cultural familiarization training	81	77
Induction programmes	73	60
Language training	61	49
Mentor in the new job	72	48
Job-related training	70	40

forth). Their average score was high at 4.7 (on a five-point scale). These scores were actually marginally higher than those of their male colleagues (4.5). They were also overwhelmingly enthusiastic about their forthcoming move. When compared with their single male colleagues, they had similarly low levels of concern about the social/family aspects of the move but slightly greater worries and concerns about the new job in terms of how they would perform and how they would get on with a new boss and colleagues. This is not a surprising result given the relative inexperience of this group in terms of IAs.

Attitudes towards the new job and motivation and performance after four months (Time 2)

The Time 2 questionnaire, received three months after starting the IA, repeated many of the measures used at Time 1 and also looked specifically at how our respondents were coping with their new jobs, their ratings of the training and cross-cultural briefings they had received and how they were coping with new cultures and languages. One of the most notable early findings from the Time 2 survey were differences in the location of the IAs which men and women embarked on (Table 7).

It is noticeable that most of these women were posted to areas that have either well established expatriate communities or to cultures where their gender would not be regarded as an issue in terms of actually getting their work done or in interacting with host country nationals. This confirms the findings of the studies cited earlier that potential women high-flyers are being precluded from

some IAs, because of cultural barriers in some countries (particularly in Africa, the Middle East and parts of East Asia). However, it appears that younger women have an edge over their male colleagues (of all ages) when it comes to postings to European countries. The interviews with HR managers indicate that this is because more of their women graduates have studied one or more European languages at university, had study placements at European universities or had experience of working in Europe (or, in a few cases, all three).

Relocation support provided by the companies for women on IAs

A significant predictor of successful outcomes to domestic relocations is the provision of comprehensive and flexible relocation packages (Munton and Forster 1992) and there is every reason to suppose that this will apply in an international context. Not surprisingly, all the companies provided these women with written information on the new area and relocation expenses guides. Most provide generous disturbance allowances, foreign-service allowances and cost of living premiums (in a variety of permutations). The respondents in this survey were overwhelmingly positive about these. For example, a single item measure at Time 2 asked employees to rate how helpful, overall, they were finding the advice, information and support being provided by their employer; 95% reported that this had been either 'quite' or 'very helpful'.

Evaluations of the pre-departure briefings and training

At Time 2, respondents were asked to give retrospective assessments of the preparation and briefings that they had received prior to the move. Their answers are summarized in Table 8. These data show generally positive opinions about the support and training received prior to and immediately after the start of an IA. But a worrying minority of around 20% gave consistently negative ratings to these. As well as these difficulties, the data show changes at work compared to Time 1. The 27-item work satisfaction measure employed at Time 1 was again used to assess changes over time and revealed few significant changes in the content of their jobs in terms of autonomy and discretion and opportunities to make full use of their professional and technical skills. However, one in five reported greater problems in terms of their relationships with their immediate superiors and work colleagues and one in

Table 7: Location of women expatriates' IAs

Region	Women %	Men %
Western Europe (EU and non-EU)	44	21
USA/Canada	25	16
East Asia (Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, China, Thailand, Burma and Indonesia)	21	37
Australasia	6	3
Middle East	2	11
Eastern Europe/Russia	2	6
India/Pakistan	0	4
North Africa	0	2

Table 8: Ratings of the training and support provided by the companies prior to the IA

	Rating (valid %)			
	(% responding)	Essential	Useful	Little/no use
Job previews:				
Verbal	(100)	51	29	20
Written	(73)	9	68	22
Job-related training	(70)	36	43	21
Language training	(29)	28	61	21
Cultural briefings	(77)	28	47	25
Induction programmes	(60)	31	56	13
Mentor in the new job	(48)	23	44	33

four reported greater communication problems at work and more difficulties with work overload. Across the board, there was a noticeable increase in reported stress levels amongst women employees; 58% of respondents now believed that their current workload was 'too great' (compared to 45% at Time 1). A slightly larger number (25%) felt 'used up at the end of the working day' (18% at Time 1). Over two-thirds now reported that their job had made them feel 'tense' or 'worried' in the last four months. Very few reported any clashes between their work and home lives. Being largely single, many of the traditional concerns of relocating families (disruption to family life, children's education, effects of the move on a partner's career and so forth) simply did not affect most of these women.

The data show few differences between single men and women in terms of general adaptation in areas such as Europe and North America. However, they did show that women expatriates working in China and Japan were much more likely to report difficulties with this. As in other East Asian cultures, women managers faced specific obstacles and prejudices, as this interviewee revealed:

My sex was never an issue until I came out here — I simply did my job and got rewarded by results ... And, I've got to say that the Training Centre really did not prepare me for the problems I have had since coming here because their basic line was that at the worst I would be treated as an honorary man or would not be treated like a Japanese woman ... But, basically, if you are not a bloke it is extremely difficult to be taken seriously by the Japanese because a lot of them, particularly the older ones, see women as largely ornamental. Sure, a lot of them work, but this is usually seen as a prelude to marriage and there are only a tiny handful at my level ... I

think that this is changing but not quickly enough to affect the rest of my time here ... Their attitudes are very bound up with their culture, er, women should be submissive and if you confront them [male colleagues] they simply do not know how to cope ... I would advise any women professional to think twice about coming over here to work. It has been an amazing experience and I have learnt a lot about different ways of doing business but it has also been a real bloody struggle and any other overseas posting would be a doddle after this one! (Marketing executive — motor manufacturer)

Another commented:

I know it sounds like a cliché, but you really do have to be twice as good as the blokes working here. When I first arrived here it was clear some of the British employees resented me being there — it seemed to break up this boys club thing they had and, of course [laughs], I was the only single woman in the office which in some ways was quite enjoyable ... but, the really infuriating thing was dealing with the local employees and businesses because they would always go to one of my male colleagues first or assume I was a secretary and ask for one of the men they knew when they got me on the phone even though I'm quite senior here. It probably took me a good six months before I was treated as some kind of an equal here. (Senior Software Programmer — computer company. She was the first woman posted to the company's Beijing Office)

Some of these results may appear to be slightly worrying both for the individual expatriates and their companies. However, with the noticeable exception of women on

IAs in some Far Eastern countries, they are largely consistent with other academic research on job changes in a domestic context (cf. Munton and Forster 1992). For example, most staff report higher stress levels and increased demands at work immediately following a job move. The reasons for this are well known: staff may have to learn new skills or acquire new knowledge in a very short space of time; they may have been brought in to 'sort out' specific problems which may require very long hours at the outset of an IA; they may want to be seen to be visibly performing well ('presenteeism') and, in most cultures, they will have to build up friendships and informal networks of influence. The key questions are (a) were these women well prepared for these eventualities prior to the move and, (b) what effects have these changes had on their personal lives and work performance some eight months after starting the IA? These questions are discussed in the next section.

Psychological well-being, motivation and performance and cultural adaptation eight months after the move (Time 3)

This section of the paper examines the data from the third time-point of the survey. We also look back to some earlier data to give an overall picture of how the process of expatriate assignments has unfolded over time. Respondents were first asked to assess how much of their work time had been taken up in dealing with aspects of their moves. The data presented in Tables 9 and 10 show that they had to spend some time dealing with relocation issues that could have been better spent focusing on the demands of their new job. At Time 3, respondents were also asked to assess what the general effects of the IA

Table 9: Work time taken up in dealing with aspects of the move

Amount	%	Amount	%
None at all	0	2-3 days	17
< 4 hours	0	3-4 days	18
4-8 hours	10	4-5 days	12
1-2 days	28	More than 5 days	15

Table 10: Days absent from work due to the move or anything connected with it

Amount	%	Amount	%
None at all	8	4 days	8
1 day	18	5 days	7
2 days	20	6 days	6
3 days	22	7+ days	10

had been on their working lives and career prospects (see Table 11).

These data show that most staff have adapted well to their IAs and regard them as career-enhancing experiences. Analysis of the repeat 27-item job satisfaction scale also shows that six out of seven were now reporting improvements or no change to the quality of their working lives and in their working relationships with their colleagues and immediate superiors. However, these data also show that a small minority of women continue to experience difficulties even after eight months. The data also show that most have adapted well to the demands of working in different business cultures around the world — although this does take longer in countries

Table 11: The general effects of current IA on respondents' working lives and career prospects

	Rating %		
	Better	No change	Worse
Prospects for career advancement	74	15	11
Work performance and productivity	52	43	5
Working relationships with colleagues	40	45	15
Help and support from immediate superior	32	45	13
Help and support from colleagues	45	43	12
Opportunities to make full use of skills and experience	72	20	8
General well-being	61	32	7

with 'novel' business cultures (particularly in East Asia). In contrast to the experiences of men (single or married), the location of the IA can have a significant effect on the reported outcomes of overseas postings. We have seen that women expatriates working in East Asian countries, other than Hong Kong and Singapore (both having large expatriate communities), reported greater difficulties in adapting to their job and to new cultures when compared with their peers working in Europe and North America.

The data confirm that pre-move training does help with general adaptation, but this is mediated by other factors such as length of time the company has been doing business in the particular location of the IA, cultural stereotypes about the 'correct' role of women and the support available in the new job situation. These problems were compounded when a company was moving its business activities into a country for the first time. And, there is some evidence that companies who are seeking to make fast inroads into new markets (and are relatively inexperienced at managing IAs) were throwing some of their women (and men) 'in at the deep end'.

Affective well-being and performance

Clearly, an IA has the potential to be a stressful experience. And, (di)stress has the potential to disrupt our natural coping strategies when confronted with a potential stressor — in this case a move abroad. The use of the GHQ-12 enabled us to look at any changes in the mental well-being of our respondents over a period of twelve months. The summary results from Time points 1, 2 and 3 are summarized in Table 12. This provides four sets of information. The proportion of this sample who scored above the accepted 'threshold' level; the average score for this group; the expected scores for a random population sample and the scores from the male employees in this survey at Time 3.

Table 12: *Psychological well-being during IAs*

	% Over threshold	Average score
Expected scores	17	8.8
This sample:		
Time 1	22	8.7
Time 2	34	11.2
Time 3	24	10.1
Male employees	27	10.3
— Time 3		

Interestingly, these respondents reported lower stress levels than staff moving within the UK (and with the men in this survey), although their scores are still above the average for a random population sample. These data show that they all experienced higher levels of stress during the early stages of the IA, reaching a peak at three to four months and then (in most cases) returning to normal levels after about eight months. There was little evidence that any of these women suffered from extreme distress.

On a final positive note, it is clear that expatriate failure rates amongst this group were extremely low. We found only two women who returned home prior to the officially agreed end of the IA. From figures obtained from the companies, we estimated that the mean failure rate for their women expatriates is currently 3%. This contrasts with a mean rate of 8% for the male staff in this survey and is considerably less than the failure rate of 16–40% cited in most (American) academic studies (see, for example; Baliga and Baker 1985; Barham and Devine 1991; BIC 1992; Black *et al.* 1991; Brewster 1991; Earley 1987; Forster 1992; Harris and Brewster 1995; Tung 1988a and 1988b).

The future: returning to work in the UK

Recent research on IAs has suggested that the biggest problem faced by many UK companies over the last few years has been the management of repatriation, caused by a cocktail of 'downsizing', mergers or other forms of 'rationalization'; redundancies and job redesign combined with expatriates having unrealistic or unrealizable expectations about their career prospects and a lack of forward planning in companies for these eventualities (Forster 1996 and 1994). While only a tiny number of these women have returned or are planning to return to the UK at the time of writing this paper, the challenges of finding a suitable position in the home operation is something they will have to concern themselves with in the near future (as many of their male colleagues have already had to do over the last few years). Indeed, one of the most telling pieces of information that emerged during our interviews with HR Managers in 1994 concerned the lack of information on repatriation in these companies. Little advice was provided to staff about the possible implications of moves abroad for their career progression after they return to the UK — particularly those of a long duration. And

because of the changes that all of these organizations have experienced over the last five years, they will all continue to have problems with the management of repatriation in the future (Forster 1994, pp. 196–8). One significant finding of this study is that all of these companies expect their overseas operations to grow, while their home operations will continue to shrink. While a few companies, notably in the oil sector, have embraced the notion of the career expatriate, most UK expatriates still return to their country of origin at the end of their IA. This does not bode well when these women return to work in the UK over the next few years.

Improving international career opportunities for women in the future

Many of the principles of the effective management of (male) expatriates also apply equally well to women and a detailed discussion of policy recommendations for improving opportunities for expatriates can be found elsewhere (see, for example, Adler and Israeli 1987; Brewster 1991; Forster 1996; Handler and Lane 1994; Tung 1988a). However, this research reinforces the suggestions, made over the last decade, by Adler in particular, that there are still specific steps that companies could take to improve international career opportunities for women.

1. Re-evaluating the training and cross-cultural briefing sessions provided for potential overseas staff. Many of the courses run at training centres focus largely on the experiences of *male* expatriates. This means ensuring that pre-move cultural briefings are up to date, relevant and catered specifically for the needs of women expatriates — with, for example, appropriate coping and behavioural strategies in highly patriarchal societies, appropriate protocol, customs and dress codes. There is little doubt that the right sort of pre-move cultural briefings *can* benefit women expatriates, but most of the women in this study had some criticisms of the briefings that they received either in-house, from consultants or at training centres. Their main criticisms were (a) the lack of up-to-date knowledge concerning local business environments, (b) the very short duration of most of these courses, and (c) the lack of advice on coping with problems of isolation during the IA.

These criticisms were common amongst women in new markets (particularly in East Asia). This also implies that training companies could involve more women with previous experience of IAs in their briefing sessions in the future.

2. Recognizing that, while there are growing opportunities for women in international careers, they are still concentrated largely in junior and (some) middle management positions. They are also concentrated in a narrower range of professions when compared to their male colleagues. They are rarely entrusted with major project work in new markets and they face greater restrictions in terms of the range of countries to which they are posted — although they do seem to have an advantage over their male colleagues in terms of European postings. Obviously, cultural barriers and 'traditional' views about gender roles are largely out of the control of companies. However, most companies are in a position to promote the interests of women by, for example, insisting on the 'best person for the job' principle — regardless of gender — and by promoting the interests of women in more informal ways. This is essential if companies are really committed to recruiting the best managerial talent in increasingly diverse work forces.
3. Involving, at an inter-organizational level, organizations like the *International Labour Organization* who are constantly seeking to improve the position of women in international labour markets. Improvements can and should be made to international opportunities for women employees in the future. Up to this moment in time, all of the companies in this study have been able to rely on either younger single women and men or employees in 'traditional' families to fill a relatively small number of expatriate positions. As the size of expatriate work forces increases (as most commentators argue), only a supreme optimist can believe that this situation will continue indefinitely and, in the future, greater cognizance will have to be taken of dual-career couples in terms of the management of IAs (Price-Waterhouse 1993). 'Trailing' male partners will become more of an issue in the next few years — for both individual employees and companies (Greenbury 1996). It is clear companies need to take greater cognizance of both these changing demographics and of 'alternative' personal

lifestyles. This may well necessitate greater networking between companies with foreign operations in order to improve the job opportunities of working partners.

Conclusion

The findings of this research project clearly have implications for companies operating in the international arena — some more so than others. On the one hand, most of the women that we surveyed and interviewed reported successful outcomes to their IAs and only two had returned home early from these by the Time 3 survey. There is also evidence to support the view that pre-move cultural briefings have a positive effect on their adaptation to an IA — although the benefits of these are clearly influenced by other factors that were discussed earlier. On the other hand, there is clear evidence that women are still in more junior management positions when compared to men (clear evidence of a solid 'glass ceiling' in an international context at the present time). They are much less likely to be entrusted with major projects in new markets. It is also clear that some of these women struggled in overseas postings (particularly in East Asia) and women who are seeking international careers still have major cultural obstacles to overcome in certain areas of the world if they are ever to achieve equality with their male colleagues in the future. However, all the evidence from graduate careers advisers in the UK indicates that growing numbers of well-educated and highly motivated younger women are looking for international job experience as a route to fast-track promotions and senior positions in organizations. If companies are really committed to turning the dual mantras of 'internationalization' and 'equal opportunities' into strategic and HRM realities, then many will need to take a critical look at their current expatriate management policies. As increasing numbers of bright younger women seek international career opportunities, those companies which do address these issues are more likely to attract the very best global female managerial and professional talent over the next few years. As Fisher has commented so accurately and succinctly: 'The best reason for believing that more women will be in charge before long is that in a ferociously competitive global economy, no company can afford to waste valuable brain-power simply because it is wearing a skirt' (Fisher 1992, p. 46).

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