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Global careers

Work-life issues and the adjustment of women international managers

Hilary Harris

Centre for Research into the Management of Expatriation, Cranfield School of Management, Cranfield, UK

Keywords *Women executives, International organizations, Role conflict*

Abstract *This paper argues that both the impact of gender and work-family conflict itself are likely to increase in international working scenarios, which may involve the physical relocation of the entire family. In such cases, the boundaries between work and home become blurred due to the involvement of the whole family and there is often disruption of traditional family roles, causing increasing stress. Work demands are also likely to increase for the female expatriate due to the combined effect of role and culture novelty, thus enhancing the possibility of work-family conflict. The impact of gender role theory is apparent in three key areas: work, partner and family.*

Introduction

The importance of international assignments as a key method of developing the future senior management of international organizations has been noted by numerous authors (Mendenhall, 2001; Stroh and Caligiuri, 1998). Recent survey evidence (Organization Resources Counselors Inc (ORC), 2002) shows that this is a growing trend, with nearly 50 per cent of responding organizations indicating that they were planning to increase the number of international assignments in Asia Pacific, Europe/Middle East and Japan. Over 60 per cent of the assignments were single trips with planned repatriation. This confirms the importance of international experience as part of management development.

Despite this increase in demand for international assignees, the number of women in such positions remains stubbornly low. Figures from worldwide vary between 2 and 15 per cent (Adler, 1994; Florkowski and Fogel, 1995; Harris, 1999; Hede and O'Brien, 1996; Organization Resources Counselors Inc (ORC), 2002; Tung, 1997). Such statistics question the assumption that diversity is being acknowledged and incorporated in the development of a geocentric mindset. It is particularly worrying to see that the representation of women on international assignments is increasing at such a slow rate since Adler's seminal study in 1984. Many reasons have been put forward to explain the dearth of women on international assignments. These include lack of interest (Adler, 1984a); personality traits (Caligiuri and Cascio, 1998); foreigner's prejudice against women (Adler, 1984a); organizational reluctance to send women (Adler, 1984a); selection systems for international assignments (Harris, 1999) and dual-career and family constraints.

This paper focuses on the relatively under-researched topic of work-life balance issues resulting from partner and family considerations and the impact of these on women's adjustment on international assignments. The work-family literature argues that there is a negative or positive spillover from work to family and vice versa. However, studies investigating a gender impact on work-family conflict within



domestic settings (primarily US-based data) are equivocal (Eagle *et al.*, 1997; Frone *et al.*, 1997). The adjustment literature identifies a combination of antecedents to adjustment which will result in either successful or unsuccessful adjustment. A critical feature of the adjustment literature is its acknowledgement that adjustment is a dynamic process. However, the impact of family in the successful adjustment of expatriates is only being just acknowledged. In addition, the majority of adjustment studies have had a predominantly male sample and therefore the impact of gender has not been investigated.

This paper argues that the impact of gender is likely to be higher in the case of women relocating on an international assignment as a result of work, partner and family considerations but that can be mediated by both organizational and family support. Within the work sphere, female expatriates moving to more traditional cultures may encounter more problems integrating into their new work roles, given the impact of traditional values on men and women's societal roles; this in turn is likely to lead to work-family conflict. Family to work conflict is also more likely than in domestic situations as a result of both partner and family considerations. Accompanying an expatriate can be harder for a male partner due to loss of income and status and greater difficulty in gaining employment and acceptance within the foreign culture, as well as potential career problems in the future (Punnett, 1997). Women's greater involvement in the bringing up of children is also likely to be problematic in a situation where the woman needs to spend more time adjusting to a new role in a foreign country, whilst at the same time her children are having to cope with a new life away from family and friends. In contrast, a relatively recent addition to the adjustment literature highlights the mediating role of partner and family in determining a positive or negative work-life balance outcome. For instance, Caligiuri *et al.* (1998) demonstrated the significance of partner and family issues in the successful adjustment of the expatriate. Factors such as family support, communication and adaptability and also perceptions of the move are all seen to affect the adjustment of the expatriate. In one of the few studies with an exclusively female sample, Linehan (2002) found that positive support from a partner was a critical factor in adjustment for the women executives.

In view of the above, it is argued that there is a need for a detailed study of the impact of work/family balance issues on the adjustment of female international managers which will address both the theoretical and methodological limitations of existing research.

Work/life balance and gender implications

Gender role theory argues that societal norms of women's greater involvement with the family, even within apparently liberalised industrial democracies, mean that women will experience greater conflict in trying to balance work and family responsibilities. This theoretical perspective is informed by functionalist and psychoanalytic theories as well as by the work of sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists, all of whom claim that there are large, inherent and natural gender differences which lead to a view that women's place is at home and men's is in the workplace (Parsons and Bales, 1955). It should be noted that these theories relate mainly to middle class women, as poorer women have always had to work. This traditional perspective has been challenged by researchers in the US who argue that the facts underlying the assumptions of classical

theories of gender and multiple roles have changed so radically as to make them obsolete (Barnett and Hyde, 2001, p. 781).

Research into work-family conflict emphasises the complex nature of the inter-relationship between work and family and its positive and negative outcomes (Allen *et al.*, 2000; Beutell and Wittig-Berman, 1999; Edwards and Rothbard, 2000; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Gutek *et al.*, 1991). Early studies focused on the causes and consequences of conflict between work and family. This unidirectional perspective referred to conflicting role pressures between job and family that were incompatible so that participation in one role was made more difficult by virtue of participation in the other (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) identified three main types of work and family conflict. Time-based conflict occurs when time pressures associated with one role prevents an individual from fulfilling the expectations of the other role, i.e. when overtime cuts into family activities. Strain-based conflict occurs when strain or fatigue in one role affects performance in another. In line with spillover theory, this type of conflict occurs when workers carry their negative emotions and attitudes from their work life into their home life (Kelly and Vyodanoff, 1985; Piotrkowski, 1979). Behaviour-based conflict occurs when behavioural patterns in one role are incompatible with the behavioural requirements of the other role.

Most researchers now acknowledge work-family conflict is reciprocal in nature, i.e. that work can interfere with family (WFC) and family can interfere with work (FWC), resulting in a wide variety of psychological and physical outcomes for individuals (Adams *et al.*, 1996; Allen *et al.*, 2000; Edwards and Rothbard, 2000; Kelloway *et al.*, 1999; Lieter and Durup, 1996). The nature of the reciprocal relationship suggests that if one's work interferes with family, this may cause family issues as family obligations go unfulfilled and vice versa. An intervening variable is the extent of involvement of the individual within a domain (i.e. high involvement with work), which is expected to have a direct and positive relationship with satisfaction in that domain (Adams *et al.*, 1996; Frone *et al.*, 1994; Weiner *et al.*, 1987).

Interestingly, there has been little acknowledgement of the potential for positive spillover from work to family and vice versa. Fredriksen-Goldsen and Scharlach (2001) provide examples of positive spillover effects from multiple roles within the literature. For instance, the quality of men's and women's marital and parental roles has been found to buffer the psychological distress associated with work-related difficulties and poor experiences on the job (Barnett and Marshall, 1992; Barnett *et al.*, 1994). Equally, they quote two studies showing a positive spillover from work to family. The first showed that mothers' involvement in complex types of work was associated with providing an enriched home environment that promoted child development (Parcel and Meneghan, 1994). The second reported a positive association between support from supervisors regarding employees' nonwork demands and responsibilities and job satisfaction and health outcomes (Thomas and Ganster, 1995). The failure to acknowledge the existence of positive spillover effects may be a result of the implicit assumption of conflict contained in the label of most studies. There has also been relatively limited recent attention to this phenomenon.

Social support is omitted from this basic model, however, the role of support, in terms of work or family social support, has been considered by numerous researchers (Burke, 1988; Carlson and Perrewé, 1999; Etzioni, 1984; Greenhaus *et al.*, 1987). Social support in the work domain may come from a variety of sources, including peers

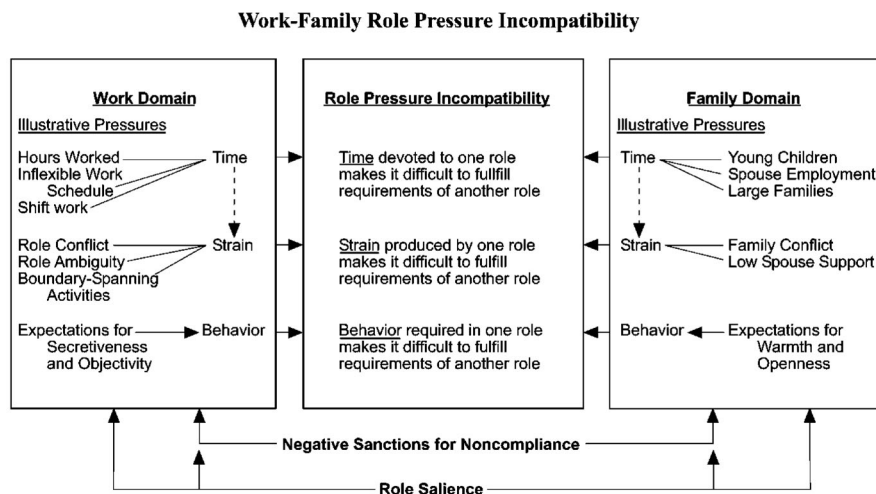
and supervisor support, as well as more formal social support mechanisms, such as organizational work-life balance programmes. However, research into organizational support suggests that, despite widespread proliferation, organizational policies designed to help employees integrate work and family roles do not necessarily reduce individual work-family conflict (Goff *et al.*, 1990) and are marginally effective at best (Solomon, 1994). Non-work social support, for example support from the family has been found to play an important role in reducing work-nonwork conflict (Caligiuri *et al.*, 1998).

Studies investigating the influence of gender on work-family interface within one-country settings are equivocal, with some reporting a link (Duxbury *et al.*, 1994; MacEwen and Barling, 1994) and others showing no evidence (Eagle *et al.*, 1997; Frone *et al.*, 1997). Gutek *et al.* (1991) argued that most models of work-family conflict operate from a rational view, in which conflict is related linearly to the total amount of time spent in paid and family work. They posited that according to the gender role perspective, gender role expectations mute the relationship between hours expended and perceived work-family conflict, and gender interacts with number of hours worked and work-family conflict. Their study findings provided partial support for this view, but also highlighted the complexity of the process, with changing expectations about appropriate roles from both men and women (Figure 1).

Adjustment on international assignments

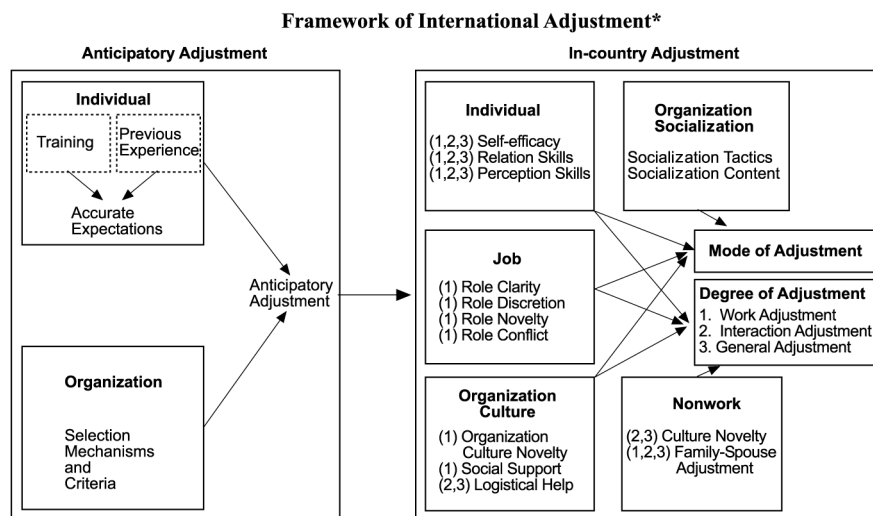
The adjustment process has been studied in both domestic and international contexts and is a multi-faceted phenomenon. In international scenarios, adjustment is seen to be a factor of both anticipatory adjustment and in-country adjustment (Black *et al.*, 1991) (Figure 2).

Hechanova *et al.* (2003) in their meta-review of employee's adjustment to overseas assignments state that adjustment can refer to either feelings of acceptance and satisfaction, acquisition of culturally acceptable skills and behaviours, lack of mental



Source: Greenhaus & Beutell (1985)

Figure 1.
Sources of conflict
between work and
family roles



Note: *Numbers in parentheses indicate the numbered facet(s) of adjustment to which the specific variable is expected to relate

Source: Black, Mendenhall & Oddou (1991)

Figure 2.
Framework of
international adjustment

health problems such as stress or depression and the psychological comfort an individual feels in a new situation (Berry *et al.*, 1988; Brislin, 1981; Bochner *et al.*, 1977; Gregersen and Black, 1990). Research on expatriate adjustment falls into the three main facets identified in the Black *et al.* (1991) model above, namely: general, interaction and work adjustment. General adjustment refers to the degree of comfort with general living conditions, such as climate, food, housing, cost of living etc. Interaction adjustment involves comfortably socialising and interacting with host nationals. Finally, work adjustment pertains to specific job responsibilities, performance standards and expectations and supervisory responsibilities (Black, 1988; Black and Stephens, 1989). The acknowledgement of the influence of pre and post departure factors on adjustment highlights the dynamic nature of the process. Torbiorn (1982) introduced the concept of the U-shaped curve of adjustment to describe the phases of an individual's psychological reactions to the assignment.

Models such as Black *et al.* (1991) Framework of International Adjustment largely ignore work-family issues. In the Black *et al.* model, only the individual adjustment of the spouse and family is taken into account. Yet the likelihood of work-family conflict and vice versa is almost certain to be increased as a result of the whole family having to relocate to a foreign country. Research into dual-career couples and international mobility demonstrates the critical nature of the interaction between partners in determining the successful outcome of international assignments. Harvey (1998) argues that issues such as loss of human capital, gender role perceptions and power status will influence dual-career couples' willingness to relocate, their adjustment and ultimately, their satisfaction in the course of an international assignment.

The impact of an international relocation on the whole family has been examined by Caligiuri *et al.* (1998) using family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974) and family

equilibrium. Family systems theory looks at the family as a system with three components.

- The structure of the family is that of an open sociocultural system in transformation.
- The family undergoes development, moving through a number of stages that require restructuring.
- The family adapts to changed circumstances so as to maintain continuity and enhance the psychological growth of each member. (p. 51).

Taking the concept of family systems further, Brett and Stroh (1995) argued that a family system suggested that there was an equilibrium between the family members and that each individual family member can affect the psychological state of other members. Caligiuri *et al.* (1998) argued that in the context of global assignments, pressures within the family, such as a child's mal-adjustment to his/her new school, or outside the family, such as unsatisfactory living conditions or difficulty in getting certain foods, can affect individual family members and thus the equilibrium of the family.

Under a family system approach, the double ABCX model (Hill, 1949; McCubbin and Patterson, 1982, 1983) examines family dynamics, as they relate to family adaptation to stressors such as global relocation. The model suggests that three factors interact to produce a family's adaptation or adjustment (Figure 3):

- the stressor (in this case, the international relocation);
- the family's resources or characteristics to cope with the stressor; and
- the family's perceptions of the stressor.

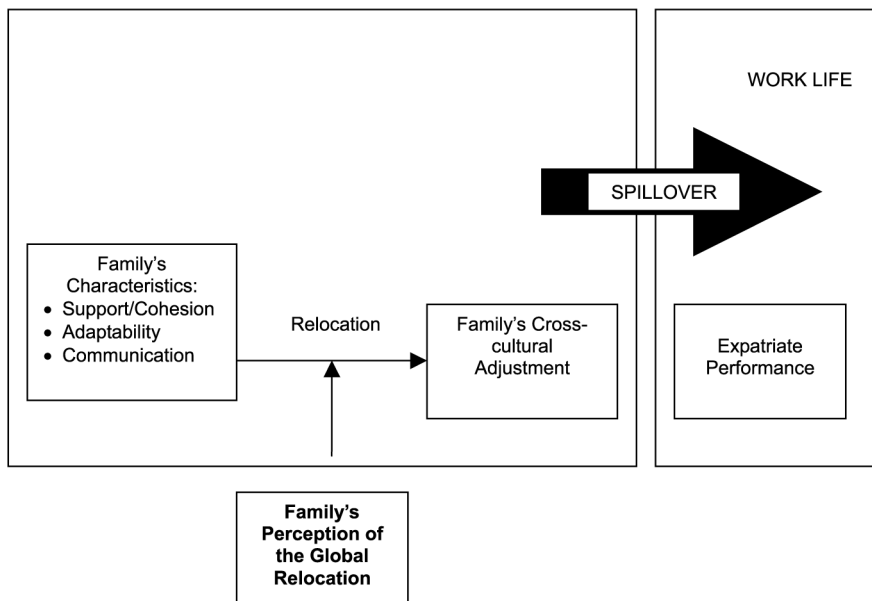


Figure 3.
Theoretical model of
family adjustment and
expatriate performance

Source: Caligiuri, Hyland & Joshi (1998)

The three family characteristics which mostly affect their ability to function are family support (or cohesion); family adaptability and family communication (Olson *et al.*, 1984). *Family support* refers to the cohesion or closeness that family members feel toward one another and the amount of emotional support that this engenders. Too little or too much emotional support can have negative consequences on family functioning. Family adaptability refers to the ability of the family to accommodate changes in its roles of functioning while maintaining family system continuity (Minuchin, 1974). The shift in roles for partners in the case of a female expatriate and trailing male partner will require a high degree of adaptability amongst all family members. Family communication refers to the ability to exchange opinions, respect differing opinions, establish decision-making rules, resolve conflicts and so on. A healthy level of family communication will result in both effective support as well as adaptability.

Research into both dual-career couples and family, therefore, highlights the fact that family issues are likely to have a stronger impact on work performance (in this case the adjustment of the female expatriate) in the context of an international assignment than would be the case for a woman undertaking managerial work in a domestic situation.

Limitations of existing studies

This brief review of the existing literatures in both work-family conflict and adjustment demonstrates that, as yet, the dynamics of work-life balance issues on adjustment of women on international assignments have not been addressed from an appropriate theoretical or empirical basis. Traditional approaches to the study of work-life balance issues, which incorporate both the work-family conflict and multiple roles literature do have a substantial theoretical basis but are not sufficient for this area of study for the following reasons.

First, virtually all studies on work-family conflict emanate from the US and consist of quantitative surveys of pre-set variables, many of which date from the 1970s and 1980s. This methodological approach is likely to give an inaccurate portrayal of the reality of women's experiences in the early years of the 21st century. Second, a majority of studies of work-family conflict, with some notable exceptions (Shaffer and Harrison, 1998; Shaffer and Harrison, 2001) are located within domestic settings, i.e. they are one-country studies and do not include mobility factors. Third, most of the studies undertaken have been structured to examine very homogenous and specific groups and work contexts, thus reducing the generalisability of the findings. Finally, most research into work-family conflict is static; it depicts a snapshot picture of the outcomes of various antecedents and types of conflicts on individuals' life and job satisfaction at one point of time.

From an international adjustment perspective, there is a need to examine the more complex dynamics of work-family balance once the family is in country. The literature on adjustment in international assignments emphasises the dynamic nature of the process (Black *et al.*, 1991; Torbiorn, 1982). It is to be expected that international workers and their families will experience different forms of work-family conflict at different stages in the assignment process. Caligiuri *et al.* (1998) have stressed the need to include family characteristics and family perceptions of the move as precursors to family adjustment, but only envisage a one-way spillover to work and expatriate performance.

In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the process, it is necessary to combine a number of theoretical perspectives, including gender role, multiple roles and adjustment. The next section of this paper develops a new model of gender, work, family and adjustment with a set of testable proposition.

Gender, work, family and adjustment on international assignments

This paper argues that both the impact of gender and work-family conflict itself are likely to increase in international working scenarios, which may involve the physical relocation of the entire family. In such cases, the boundaries between work and home become blurred due to the involvement of the whole family (Harvey, 1985) and there is often disruption to traditional family roles, causing increasing stress. Work demands are also likely to increase for the female expatriate due to the combined effect of role and culture novelty, thus enhancing the possibility of work-family conflict. The impact of gender role theory is apparent in three key areas: work, partner and family.

Work considerations

Gender role theory suggests that female expatriates will have more problems integrating into their new work roles in more traditional cultures, given the impact of traditional values on men and women's societal roles. Organizational respondents often quote this aspect, turning it into a more general assumption of foreigners' prejudice against women as a key reason for their reluctance to send women on international assignments (Adler, 1984a, b; Harris, 1999). There are a number of cultures in certain regions of the world which preclude women from being actively involved in business (e.g. some countries in the Middle East).

However, research by Adler (1987) amongst US women expatriates working in South-East Asian countries challenged the validity of this assumption by finding a very high rate of success amongst women international managers, largely due to the fact that women were seen as foreigners who happened to be women, not as women who happened to be foreigners - a subtle, but highly significant distinction. Female expatriate managers were therefore not subject to the same limitations imposed on local females. The women respondents did, however, acknowledge that they had to work harder initially to gain acceptance. Gaining acceptance from fellow (male) expatriates was seen to be even more of a difficulty by some women.

More recent research by Taylor and Napier (1996) reiterates Adler's (1987) findings in looking at the experiences of women professionals working on assignments in China, Japan and Turkey. They all reported issues with gaining credibility in the initial stages of working abroad. In this respect, Japan was perceived as more difficult than China. However, most of the women reported that they had found ways to overcome the resistance.

- P1a.* Women being sent to countries with more traditional socio-cultural norms will need to spend more time initially gaining acceptance in work-roles, thus enhancing the possibility of work-family conflict.

The response of firms to concerns about lack of acceptance of female expatriates by sending women to temporary or lower-status positions can be seen to have a negative

impact on work-family balance by increasing the amount of work role strain for women. Lack of confidence on the part of organizations can communicate itself to foreign colleagues and clients, thus making it even harder for women to be taken seriously (Adler, 1987).

P1b. Lack of organizational support may increase women's work adjustment difficulties, thus increasing the possibility of work-family conflict.

Organizational support with partner and children concerns is seen as a critical factor in adjustment (Black *et al.*, 1991). It has already been argued that women are more likely to experience difficulties in this respect as a result of gender role perceptions and the reality of male careers. The degree of organizational support for partner and children concerns is therefore a critical factor in the adjustment of women expatriates.

P1c. Women who receive satisfactory organizational support for partner and children concerns will experience less family-work conflict than women who do not receive satisfactory support.

Partner considerations

It has been argued that male partners face additional role transition obstacles in terms of adjusting to the role of trailing "spouse". Again according to gender role theory, socio-cultural norms, which see men as the primary breadwinners, mean that male accompanying partners are more likely to be concerned about continuing their careers in the host country. In a survey asking men to rank activities which they felt organizations should undertake to assist accompanying partners, (Punnett, 1997), four of the six top scoring activities dealt with issues concerning employment in the host country. However, many male partners are unable to obtain employment (Munton *et al.*, 1993; Punnett, 1997; Windham International and the National Foreign Trade Council, 1995). In these cases the male partner becomes dependent on the female expatriate and has to take on the non-traditional role of homemaker. These non-traditional roles of dependent and homemaker would be additional stressors for both the male and female partners (Caligiuri and Cascio, 1998; Harvey and Weise, 1998; Punnett, 1997). Additional socio-cultural barriers include the likelihood of the male spouse finding himself the lone man in a group of wives and the unavailability or inappropriateness of traditional volunteer activities which wives undertake in foreign locations, thus limiting the extent of productive activities for males (Punnett *et al.*, 1992). In these situations, the female partner may need to offer more support and empathy, thus increasing the demands placed on her from the family side.

P2a. The presence of a male trailing partner who is having problems adjusting will increase family-work conflict for the female expatriate.

The positive impact of a trailing male partner on the work performance of a female expatriate was, however, demonstrated by Linehan (2002) in her study of 50 senior female international managers. A majority of the married women in the study believed that progressing to the top of their managerial careers had been facilitated by the careers of their spouses being placed secondary to their own careers.

- P2b.* The presence of a male trailing partner who has successfully adjusted will provide support for the female expatriate and create a positive spillover effect to work performance.

Children considerations

The necessity to take the whole family on an international assignment places a major requirement on the female expatriate to focus on children's issues in both the pre-move phase and the initial entry phase. This will differ depending on the age range of the children.

For young children, i.e. pre-teens, at the pre-move stage, the critical focus of attention will be medical and education arrangements. The female expatriate will need to talk to the children about the move, but need not negotiate whether necessary to make the move or not. Women at this stage are likely to experience more family-work conflict due to increased time to be spent in arranging these issues for young children.

- P3a.* Time-based family to work conflict will be increased at the pre-move stage for female expatriates with young children

For female expatriates with teenage children, a large amount of time may be needed to ensure they are happy with the planned move. This is likely to involve both physical time and emotional energy.

- P3b.* Both time and strain-based family to work conflict will be increased at the pre-move stage for female expatriates with teenage children.

At the initial entry stage, mothers of both pre-teen and teenage children are likely required to spend considerable time helping them to adjust to new schools, language, friends, etc. There will also be health-related concerns in certain international postings. If the mother is going with a trailing partner, he can take much of the burden off the female expatriate. However, if the family has moved to a country with traditional socio-cultural norms about gender roles, the female may find she is faced with negative sanctions for leaving child-related issues to her male partner.

- P3c.* Female expatriates with trailing male partners will not experience as much time and strain-based family to work conflict in countries with more liberalised socio-cultural norms about gender roles.

- P3d.* Female expatriates with trailing male partners will experience more strain-based family to work conflict in countries with traditional socio-cultural norms about gender roles, as a result of negative sanctions against the assistance of the male partner.

Both Caligiuri and Cascio (1998) and Taylor and Napier (1996) mention the positive effect that a supportive family can have on women's adjustment and subsequent adjustment. This can be in the form of emotional support from within the family. It can also be in terms of easing the social transition in the case of countries where most socialisation occurs in a family context. In this respect, family support will assist women's performance.

- P3e.* Female expatriates who receive emotional support from within the family will experience a positive spillover from family to work.

- P3f. Female expatriates accompanied by their families will experience a positive spillover from family to work through being able to access social events through the family.

Work-family balance and adjustment for women international managers: towards a new research agenda

This paper has argued that work-family issues are likely to have a more significant impact on adjustment for women on international assignments as a result of differing gender role expectations in both the home and host country. At present, the dynamics of work-family conflict and adjustment have not been studied together and our knowledge of this phenomenon emanates from two separate bodies of literature. An understanding of how this might be experienced differently by women from different socio-cultural backgrounds and different generations is also lacking.

In summary, this paper calls for a longitudinal, qualitative study to surface the specific issues that international working raises for work-family balance and adjustment for individual women and their immediate families. The results of the qualitative investigation will provide a detailed summary of the issues relating to work-life balance for women from different cultural backgrounds. These findings will form the basis of an integrative model of work-life balance for internationally mobile women and its implications for global careers.

Finally, current research into women in international management focuses primarily on the case of Western women and their work-family and other socio-cultural issues. In order to advance our knowledge of the implications of international working on the work-life balance of individual women from different cultural backgrounds, a broad country, occupational and demographic sample would need to be used.

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