Gender Issues and Family Concerns for Women with International Careers: Female Expatriates in Western Multinational Corporations in Taiwan

Abstract / The author examines how female expatriates face gender stereotyping and discrimination in their home and host countries and how they reconcile their conflicts between home and work. Although gender stereotyping and discrimination are not significant phenomena in the selection process in home companies, this result needs a cautious interpretation because the informants do not have complete information and falsely presume that overseas assignments are under the protection of antidiscrimination laws. In the host countries, some evidence indicates that gender stereotyping and discrimination are intra-ethnic rather than nonexistent. Moreover, life courses influence women's efforts to build overseas careers; expatriate women who are married and raising children have to utilize other types of social support in order to balance family and job responsibilities.

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Although significant improvements have taken place in the workplace status of women, gender discrimination still exists — especially in foreign postings, which are usually considered positive in terms of career advancement, salary increases, and managerial appointments. Foreign postings are frequently considered requisites for eventually gaining positions in corporate senior management, but are rarely given to women. Even though percentages of female expatriates working in overseas offices are increasing, they are much lower than the percentages of women entering domestic labor markets. This suggests that women pursuing international careers are more likely to encounter gender discrimination and family responsibility issues than their domestic counterparts.

Reasons cited for not giving overseas assignments to female employees of multinational corporations include (a) they are not motivated to pursue such positions; (b) they are unqualified in terms of rank, specialization, or education; (c) concerns about the physical safety of female managers, who would be required to travel between and within underdeveloped countries; (d) concerns about women's general ability to cope with isolation and loneliness in a foreign country; (e) spousal career issues; and (f) severe gender prejudices, especially in developing countries.

However, the literature on this topic suggests and provides evidence that top male managers at multinational corporations use these ideas as excuses for blocking overseas assignments for women. On the other hand, some researchers have observed that female expatriates working in the Asian offices of multinational firms benefit from a frequently noted double
standard in those countries—that is, unlike their local counterparts, they are more likely to be treated as foreign rather than female. The high visibility of female expatriate managers can therefore be advantageous to a firm, since women make strong first impressions due to their gender, and many local clients view them as curiosities deserving of special treatment. Their strong interpersonal skills are also beneficial when interacting with local clients. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that many female expatriates find it easier to balance their professional and family lives overseas, since global assignments often include the benefit of household help.

In-depth interviews with 21 female expatriates from 17 Western multinational corporations in Taiwan were conducted between 1999 and 2000. The collected data confirmed that all of the interviewees were qualified for international careers and motivated for such positions. However, evidence was found that (a) their interpersonal skills were not fully acknowledged; (b) not all female expatriates enjoy the advantages of foreigner status; and (c) family concerns for female expatriates are much more complex and broader than previously thought, therefore household help provided by the companies only partly ameliorates the pressures they feel.

The author uses the above points to analyze how female expatriates face gender stereotyping and discrimination in their home and host countries and how they reconcile conflicts between home and work. The three most important findings are:

1. Unfounded bias against females in overseas assignments in multinational corporations is not as severe as it once was. But this interpretation should be viewed with caution because the scope of this study did not include female employees who believe that they were passed over for overseas assignments but nevertheless continued to work in their home offices. Moreover, many company-selected female expatriates in Taiwan admit to not knowing whether they were second choices—that is, whether they had been offered their postings only after their male colleagues had turned down their companies’ offers. Evidence was also found indicating that expatriate women presume that their companies do not have gender-biased policies in foreign assignments due to antidiscrimination laws in their home countries, where in fact those laws do not cover foreign postings.

2. The Caucasian females interviewed for this study reported feelings of acceptance by local employees and customers because of their foreigner status, but female expatriates of Chinese origin encountered some difficulties because they were judged according to local norms for female behavior. Furthermore, the Caucasian interviewees also occasionally experienced clear acts of gender prejudice at the hands of male colleagues from the same ethnic back-
ground. This suggests that the complex array of ethnic differences in sex discrimination requires further study.

3. A female expatriate is more likely than her male counterpart to find that her career is influenced by her family life course — in other words, to be delayed, terminated, or interrupted by marital and maternal responsibilities. In the face of these challenges, a woman may choose to remain single instead of placing herself in a position that requires an exceptional level of support in order to meet the dual demands of career and family. Sources of that support include a caring husband; independent and understanding children; competent nannies, live-in maids or relatives to help with child raising; understanding colleagues; family-friendly company policies (e.g., helping spouses find jobs and providing flexible work hours); and supportive host government policies (e.g., permitting the hiring of foreign maids). In comparison, men have traditionally relied on supportive wives to take care of all domestic responsibilities while working overseas. Even today, in most families women are still the primary caretakers, regardless of their career responsibilities or workloads.