

Female Expats – are they different?

Companies still send significantly more men on international assignments than women

While the percentage of female expatriates has increased over the past decades, women continue to be highly underrepresented on international assignments. They comprise over 40% of the employable global workforce, yet only roughly one in five or just over 20% of all expatriate roles are filled by women.

The gender imbalance has a negative impact on companies' performance and women's careers.

Gender equality is not an ethical but an economic issue for companies

With demographic change and ageing populations in western societies (baby boomers are retiring or are retired already), qualified personnel are difficult to find. Companies cannot confidently fill their leadership pipeline, let alone fill international assignments. It is therefore not an option to ignore the potential of highly qualified and highly educated women and foregoing their part of the talent pool.

Several studies show that companies with high gender balance achieve higher business performance. Companies gain competitive edge if women participate in the top levels of management. With women's added perspective, teams are more innovative and can therefore better address present and future market needs. Employees are more motivated and company culture is more open. Furthermore, gender diversity improves the company's image and attractiveness as an employer.

Women need international experience to further their careers

International experience is a must-have component for global leaders. The gender inequity in international assignments therefore has a negative long-term impact on women's careers.

What causes the gender inequity on international assignments?

Are women underrepresented on international assignments because they do not have the necessary qualifications to succeed? Are they not welcomed in some of the potential host countries? No, they are quite capable in international roles when given the chance. In fact, they possess qualities that are particularly useful in a multicultural environment, such as flexibility, sensitivity and understanding. Western women are generally welcomed and respected also in male dominated societies. Local employees do not apply the same yardstick to foreign female employees as to their local counterparts. They automatically assume that if a woman was sent on assignment, she must be particularly capable.

The main reason why few women take up international assignments is insufficient compatibility of family and job/work. Women are expected to give up career, men not. Women take time off for children, men will not or are not allowed to by social or business norms. Grinding corporate cultures are not built for a work/life balance. These are the same hurdles women face when attempting to break through the glass ceiling and advance in their careers overall. The higher up in the career ladder, the higher the gender imbalance. The glass ceiling between middle management and C-Suite remains largely intact and only few women climb to the top. As of June 2017, there are seven women CEO's among the FTSE 100 companies (7%), 32 women CEO's among the Fortune 500 (6.4%) and four (4%) in the 100 largest Swiss companies. The gender diversity pipeline (ratio of men and women at different levels of the hierarchy) is pyramid shaped, i.e. broad at staff level and narrow at the top.

Few companies have a formal selection process in place. Consequently, subconscious gender stereotypes come into play, especially against women with spouse/partner and/or families and women are often passed over unintentionally.

What needs to be done to widen expatriate gender diversity?

Insufficient compatibility of family and work can be addressed through flexible work models. In modern society women still have the main responsibility for household and children. Career paths and working conditions therefore need to be more compatible for child rearing. Such measures include:

- Part-time work
- Flexible working hours
- Job sharing
- Teleworking
- Parent leave
- Unpaid leave
- Company-own day-care center: parents are reassured if children are nearby
- Schools which are better aligned with business needs

To avoid subconscious gender bias, international assignments need to be an integrated part of company-wide development programs. Real commitment is necessary along with a change of the company's mindset. Awareness needs to be built among management regarding benefits of women in expatriate roles.

Other creative avenues include talent development with mentors specifically for women. Many successful women indicate that they had a mentor who took a personal interest in their advancement and provided developmental opportunities at the right time.

Awareness also needs to be built among high potential women around rewards associated with expatriate roles: sell international assignments to women and their families using positive feedback, such as children becoming global citizens and learning new language/s.

Many companies have established quantitative goals such as quotas and pay equality.

Women also need to do their part by managing their careers more actively and operating outside of their comfort zone, but in this pursuit, they need to strike a balance between acting like men and adopting their own particular behavior.

Have we made you curious about this issue? Are you perhaps struggling with certain aspects of your mobility program when it comes to transferring female expats? Have you had challenges in this area and possibly been asked about analyzing the reasons behind them?

We at OneExpatServices have ample experience in creating, supporting and securing the success of international mobility programs irrespective of gender.

Contact us via our website: www.OneExpatServices.com