

Guidelines For Women Expatriates



No question about it—the rules are different for female employees assigned to overseas posts. These strategies will help them prosper in their new environment.



By Cornelius Grove and Willa Hallowell

Client companies with whom we work have asked us on several occasions: "Is it OK to send this woman to Asia on assignment?" or "We have some expat positions opening in a Moslem country; dare we even consider women for these assignments?" The two of us decided to do some investigations of our own to enable us to answer inquiries such as these with more confidence.

To give you the flavor of what we learned, here are two quotes from our interviewees, American professional women who had extensive (often multiple) experiences on assignment for U.S. companies in Asia and the Middle East.

I feel more respected as a manager in China than I do in the United States. The Chinese value two qual-

ities in their leaders: competence and ren: [warm-heartedness, benevolence, and readiness to care for others]. If a leader is ren, he or she will receive subordinates' loyalty in turn. Adopting ren behavior is more common by American female assignees than by American males.

In the United States, we women have fought against being "caretakers." But overseas, I've seen this aspect of a woman's socialization work in her favor time and time again. It helps us understand what's going on around us. Expatriate women can use this as an asset! Think of it as "leveraging diversity."

In short, what we learned pulled us significantly toward the conclusion that, everything else being equal, many female expats have advantages that make them more likely to succeed

abroad than male expats. We also gained insight into how women—and men!—can become even more likely to succeed.

So why have American companies tended to avoid sending their competent women abroad? We believe it's largely a case of false assumptions. Because decision-makers have little or no day-to-day experience of how local (male) employees in other countries relate to female expatriates in their

Americans formerly treated their female co-workers is a poor basis for predicting what will happen abroad today. In short, it's time to subject our assumptions to a dose of reality.

Here's what our investigations suggest: When a competent professional American female goes abroad, her local colleagues notice that she is female but, in most cases, do *not* mentally classify her with their local female co-workers. They either classify her strictly as a

build a unique classification for herself in the minds of her local co-workers. And that classification has a better than even chance of being a positive, respected one. Why? Because, *as a female*, she probably is characterized by behavioral traits that are valued in many cultures, traits such as sensitivity to nonverbal cues, a determination to seek consensus, and a tendency to treat human relationships as more important in the long run than either productivity or power. (Using the terms of Deborah Tannen—a respected author on this subject—her commitment to “rapport” over “report” will serve her very well abroad.) And if she is highly competent as well, her chances of success are maximized.

The lives of female assignees are not problem-free, of course. They are still recognizably female; in some cultures, this has undesirable consequences. Our interviewees, for example, spoke of: 1) not being allowed to own or drive a car; 2) not having access to a women's toilet on the executive suite floor; and 3) not being consulted when local males came looking for decisions or directives.

American women have been encouraged to take a stand against gender-based distinctions in both the home and workplace. The fact that female assignees are not in the United States rarely dims their disapproval when such distinctions are encountered abroad. Our interviewees convinced us, however, that a threat to the success of female assignees is the strong reaction some have to gender distinctions abroad. Why? Because in those cultures (as in ours), people's attachment to the “rules” by which they live runs deep. When a foreigner who is temporarily living and working in the culture disapproves, the tendency is not to acquiesce, but to close ranks! As one of our interviewees said: “You can't expect to walk into a centuries-old culture with its own traditions and beliefs, and change it. You've got to be flexible and able to adapt, even when things go against your values. Keep your eye on the prize. Ask, why am I here, anyway? *Not to make trouble!*”

The extent to which “unfair” or “outmoded” or “inappropriate” norms and values—as judged by Americans—occur abroad differs from country to country. The two of us do not have an encyclopedic knowledge of every nation on Earth, but what we do know suggests that our close neighbor Mexico presents significant

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midst, they build their suppositions on two familiar sources: 1) what they've read or heard about how local women are treated in the workplaces of other cultures, and 2) how American women are treated by male colleagues in our U.S. workplaces.

What have decision-makers read or heard? It's not pleasant by our U.S. standards: women with ability and credentials languishing in support and service roles, getting no respect. Much of this is accurate—but about whom? About *local* women in workplaces abroad. (This is a key distinction.)

What about American women in U.S. workplaces? Historically, the reaction to women here was primarily based on their being female, and only secondarily on their competencies. Now, as a nation, we are changing this, but many of us have firsthand memories of the bad old days. So we worry that sending our women abroad will subject them to a replay of those times gone by.

Through our interviews, the two of us learned that how local males abroad treat their local female co-workers is *not* a good basis on which to predict how they'll treat expat females. We also learned that how

high-status professional (deserving respect), or they are unsure how to classify her because she is outside their range of experience. The first tendency is nicely illustrated by Madeleine Albright's experience in Saudi Arabia, as reported in the *International Herald Tribune* of September 15, 1997:

The big difference for Mrs. Albright was that she came here [to Saudi Arabia] in her official capacity. As is their long-standing practice, the Saudis dealt with the position, not the person filling it—just as they did with Henry Kissinger when he was Secretary of State, even though Jews are normally not welcome here.

The second tendency, which we will discuss at more length below, is captured by one of our interviewees, who said: “I had round eyes and blond hair... which placed me in the category of “weird animal.” Despite the fact that I also spoke Japanese, their overriding category for me was *Gaijin* [foreigner].”

When the reaction to the newly arrived female is perplexity, opportunity knocks! For she is free to consciously

Female Assignees In Mexico

When female expatriates from the United States cross the border to work in Mexico, they are forced to confront Mexican cultural perspectives about the role of women that contrast sharply with those to which they are accustomed.

According to Dr. Ilya Adler, Mexican law and traditional attitudes toward women still make it rare to find women in top-level positions in Mexican firms. Into this situation enters the highly competent, results-oriented professional American woman, thinking of herself as the equal of men. She finds her Mexican colleagues polite and friendly. But as one female assignee told Dr. Adler, before long the politeness wore thin as she realized that many of her male subordinates were going to her male peer, not to her, for authorizations or answers about their work. She was being ignored...politely.

North-of-the-border female expats also encounter behavior they consider sexist. Men pull out chairs for women and openly try to flirt with them. Even more unsettling is the behavior of some female Mexican co-workers. They appear flirtatious towards male colleagues, and seem over-dressed and too heavily made-up for the office. Rarely do they embrace the American emphasis on gender-blind treatment. They are struggling for economic opportunities, and do not see the necessity of discarding their femininity in the process. A related factor is that the Mexican women are keenly aware of the difference in status and salary between U.S. females and themselves.



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The impact of these gender-related cultural patterns on the American female assignee can threaten her ability to perform at her customary level. At such a juncture, *appropriate* support and guidance is critical. One female expat was advised to "just let people know that you are unhappy about how you're being treated." She did just that, and later concluded, "I guess it worked in the short-term, but it left me and everyone else with a bad taste that was hard to get rid of." Neither private head-on con-

frontations nor public demands for gender equity are the optimal way to proceed with Mexican colleagues, male or female.

Many of the participants in Dr. Adler's study came to realize that getting close to people and caring for their personal lives is *the* cultural ingredient that engenders Mexicans' loyalty and respect. One American said, "Once I became more personal with colleagues and subordinates, I got the respect necessary to do my job well. More importantly, I started to enjoy myself at work."

Based on our experience, we would like to offer these guidelines for American female expats in, or on their way to, Mexico:

- Learn about gender differences *prior* to departure, especially through talking with women who have worked in Mexico. Adjust your expectations.
- Think clearly about your dilemma. On the one hand are ideal conditions for your success, as you've learned to conceive of them in the United States. On the other hand is a morass of cultural differences, including ways of dealing with gender that you consider unfair. Explore both points of view, weaving a fabric that enables you to be successful *and* sensitive to the local culture.
- Be patient. Mexicans are proud of their long and distinctive history. Learning about what they value takes time. Without investing that time, you will find it difficult to build the relationships with Mexicans that, in turn, will make it more possible for you to weave your supportive fabric.

challenges for American female assignees (see sidebar above).

Whatever the country, whatever the culture, the advantages that women in business tend to have abroad, such as those outlined above, can gradually be undermined by their public protestations or self-consuming private rage at gender-based distinctions that would not be tolerated in the United States of the 1990s.

Today, globalizing companies are sending ever-greater numbers of expatriates overseas. They would do well to follow these key rules:

- Question assumptions about how female assignees might fare in certain other cultures. A culture might seem

very different from ours, or a nation may be on the other side of the world from ours, but these are not safe indicators of a woman expat's success there. Learn from books, from training events, and from people who have lived and worked there. Then make decisions.

- Include competent women in your short lists for expatriate assignments everywhere in the world; some indeed may possess a competitive edge.
- When assessing both men and women, balance relationship-orientation with technical competence as your principal expatriate selection criteria.
- When assessing both men and

women, be on the alert for candidates who might become deeply upset by gender-based distinctions abroad. Their concerns, acceptable in the United States, can create risks for your company abroad. □

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