

Expecting International Success: Female Managers Overseas

Nancy J. Adler

Personnel managers from sixty American and Canadian corporations were surveyed concerning their attitudes toward sending women abroad. Even though less than 3% of all expatriate managers are women, 72% of the personnel managers surveyed in 1983 predicted that the number of female expatriate managers sent abroad would increase. While the managers believe that there are qualified women available who are willing to move overseas, they list foreigners' prejudice, dual-career marriages, and the resistance of their own companies as major barriers to women's increased participation in international management. In all cases, companies see the barriers facing women in international management as significantly greater than those facing women pursuing domestic management careers.

THE LAST fifteen years have seen a remarkable increase in the number of North American women involved in all levels of domestic management. By 1979, 24.6% of all managers in the United States were women.¹ The percent of female managers is still smaller than that of men: 15% of the male labor force now hold managerial jobs whereas only 6% of females do.² As of 1978, 20% of MBAs were female.³ However, barely 1% of top managers are women.⁴ Although there are still only 300 to 400 women on corporate boards as compared with an estimated 15,000 men,⁵ a study conducted in the 1970s⁶ found that the percentage of boards having at least one female director had increased from 10.7% in 1973 to 36.4% by 1979. Although the participation of women in domestic management is

clearly smallest at the top executive levels, in all cases it is greater than that of women at any level of international management.⁷

MOST EXPATRIATE MANAGERS ARE MEN

Currently, very few expatriate managers sent overseas by North American firms are women.⁸ In a survey of 686 Canadian and American multinationals, 13,338 expatriate managers were identified.⁷ Of those, less than 3% were women.⁹ 20% of the surveyed firms had sent at least one woman in the last five years. There are twice as many American firms and five times as many Canadian firms that currently have a man overseas than firms that have sent a woman anytime in the last five years. Although 3% is not a very large showing, it represents a considerable increase over the past decade when women, in any position other than travel assignments, were almost nonexistent.¹⁰

Why Are So Few Expatriate Managers Women?

Although there has been very little research on the role of women in international management, a number of beliefs have emerged from the academic literature and from managers themselves attempting to explain the scarcity of female expatriate managers. The first belief is that the women themselves neither want to seek nor accept international assignments. The second belief is that, even if women are willing to work overseas, North American corporations are hesitant, if not absolutely resistant, to sending women abroad. The third belief is that women, even if selected, would not be effective due to foreigners' prejudice against them.

Are these beliefs myth or reality? This study was designed to test the second belief—companies' reluctance to send women overseas. It is part of a two year research project investigating each of the three beliefs about women in international management. Tested earlier, the first belief fell to

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the scrutiny of research: today's male and female graduating MBAs are equally interested in pursuing international careers.¹¹ The third belief concerning foreigners prejudice, is currently under investigation.

Are Companies Reluctant to Send Women Overseas?

A study of multinational corporations (MNCs) in five European countries¹² found that 60% of the managers surveyed believed that a woman could successfully head a MNC subsidiary. Nevertheless, these European based managers were apprehensive about the desirability and feasibility of assigning a woman due to resistance from superiors, subordinates, colleagues, and clients. Similarly, in a 1979 survey of 100 executives from Fortune 500 companies with overseas operations, the majority felt that women would confront overwhelming resistance when seeking international management positions in US firms.¹³ A third survey found that corporate executives whose organizations had failed to select women for international positions based their decisions on the belief that women would find the international "game" too difficult to master.¹⁴ As a deputy manager of human resources development for Mobil Oil Corporation noted, "The real problem exists in the minds of those who make decisions regarding who shall make business trips abroad and who shall be offered overseas assignments."¹⁵

Additionally, in some cases women have been associated implicitly with the spouse role. While most international personnel managers know wives who have gone overseas to accompany their employee husbands, many have not known women who have been sent abroad as managers. Since the history of overseas assignments reveals that dissatisfaction of the spouse (wife) is the primary reason for ineffectiveness and failure overseas,¹⁶ the inability of the spouse to adjust successfully overseas may, at times, be attributed to the person filling the spouse role (a woman) rather than to the role itself (that of being a spouse). Some companies assume that the difficulties faced by the wives of international executives

will also be faced by women sent to foreign countries as expatriate managers. Experience suggests that this is an inappropriate assumption. The role of the spouse is far more difficult than that of the employee, regardless of gender.

THE STUDY

In 1983, international personnel managers from sixty American and Canadian multinational companies were surveyed. On a questionnaire including both 7-point scaled items and open-ended questions, the managers were asked to describe their company's experience in selecting (or choosing not to select) women for expatriate positions.

The surveyed companies represent a wide range of industries: 11 chemical companies, 10 pharmaceutical and health-care companies, 9 banks and financial institutions, 6 telecommunications and information services, 6 consumer goods firms (including food and cosmetics), 4 manufacturing firms, 3 electronics firms, 3 mining and metals, 3 automobile and transportation companies, 2 diversified industries, and one each from retailing, broadcasting, and nuclear energy. The represented multinational corporations are large: the average number of employees was 74,235 with a range from 1,040 to 364,000. Represented American companies, as expected, were larger than Canadian companies, with 82,774 versus 50,327 employees, respectively. The personnel managers responding to the survey held fairly senior positions: 29 are vice-presidents or directors and 31 are managers of international personnel. Some are responsible primarily for international employees and others for personnel company-wide. Of the sixty surveyed managers, 13 are women and 47 men. Although all hold positions in North American companies, by citizenship, 15 are Canadian, 40 American, 3 British, and 2 Latin American.

As a group, the surveyed managers had extensive cross-cultural experience. All had travelled abroad; more than half (56.9%) had lived overseas; and more than one third (36.8%) had worked internationally as expatriate managers. They were

also highly experienced as international personnel professionals: 80% were involved directly in expatriate selection and all but seven (88.1%) had managed or worked directly with expatriate managers.

RESULTS

Companies Are Not Experienced in Sending Women Overseas

All surveyed companies had expatriate managers currently overseas. While the average number of male expatriates was 222.6 (ranging from 6 to 3900), the average number of female expatriates was 3 (ranging from 0 to 30). Whereas all companies had male expatriates overseas, 25% did not have any women currently overseas and 15% had never sent a woman.

As shown in Chart 1, slightly more than a third of the personnel managers had selected a woman for an expatriate assignment (34.5%) or had worked with a woman once she was posted overseas (37.9%). This compares with more than twice as many who had selected (80.0%) or worked with male expatriates (88.1%). 54.2% of the personnel managers had considered women for an expatriate position, whereas only 34.5% had selected one. Similarly, two-thirds of the personnel managers (67.9%) knew of a woman who had been sent overseas even though they had had no direct responsibility for her selection or performance. Whereas the surveyed managers were similar on all other dimensions, 100% of the female managers (but only 60% of the male managers) knew a woman who had been sent overseas.

Although the personnel managers had had little direct experience in selecting women for overseas assignments, 72% predicted that more women would be sent in the future.

Barriers Facing Female Expatriate Managers

As shown in Chart 2, the personnel managers perceived the major barriers facing women moving into expatriate positions to be: foreigners' prejudice (72.7%) and dual-career marriages (69.1%). In addition, more than half of the managers (53.8%) saw

CHART 1

Managers Experience in Working with Expatriates

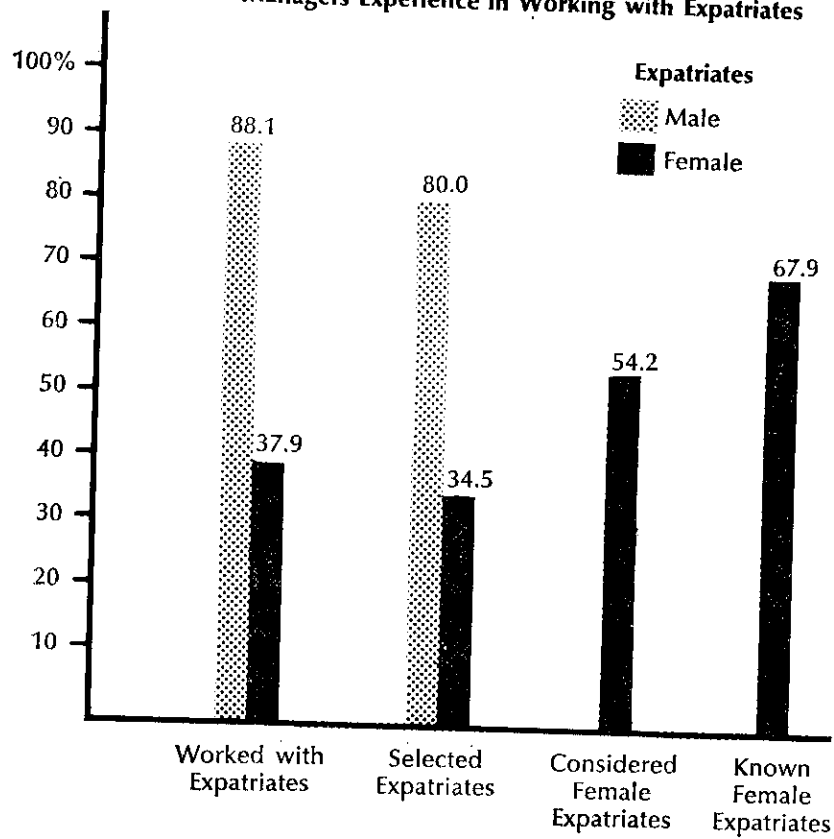


CHART 2

Managers Perceive Greater Barriers to Women in International than Domestic Management

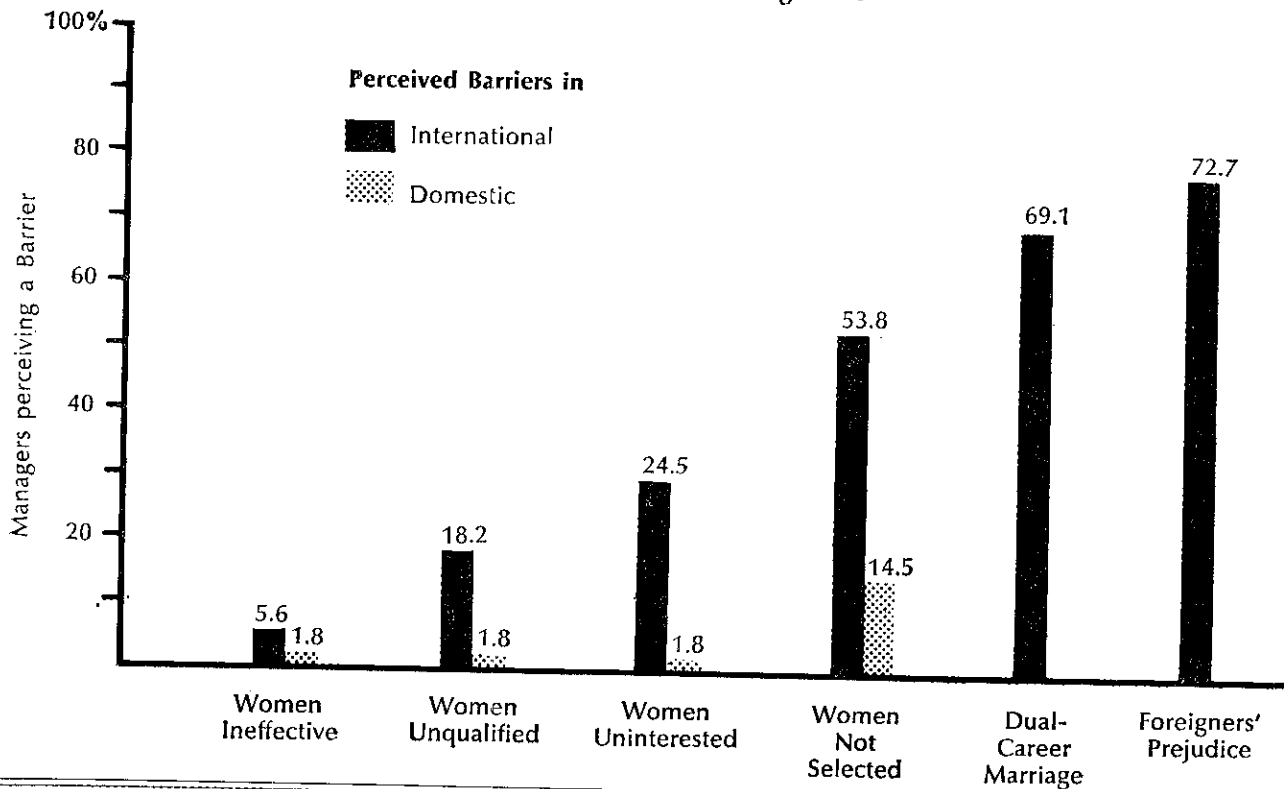


TABLE 1

**A Comparison of Managers' and Graduating MBAs' Perceptions
of Women in International Management**

Reasons why so few women are expatriate managers:	Perceptions of (percent agreeing):	
	Graduating MBAs n=1129 %	Personnel Managers n=60 %
Women are		
Unqualified	5.6	18.2
Ineffective	19.1	5.6
Uninterested	21.4	24.5
Not selected by corporations	78.0	53.8
Dual-Career Marriages	72.8	69.1
Foreigners' Prejudice	83.6	72.7

causing the woman to refuse to consider an expatriate position. In all cases, the prospect of transferring married female managers overseas was seen as more difficult than transferring single women or men married to nonworking or noncareer-oriented wives.

Selection bias

The role played directly by North American companies in considering, selecting, or choosing not to select women is not completely clear. In a survey of 686 North American multinational corporations, size characteristics of the firm (number of employees, number of foreign subsidiaries, assets, and sales) were used to explain the difference (variance) between sending many or a few expatriates overseas. The four size characteristics explained more than twice the difference (variance) in the percentage of male (49%) compared to female (22%) expatriates sent overseas.¹⁸ This difference indicates that decisions are being made regarding women's participation in international management based on different criteria than those affecting men. If this were not true, size characteristics of the firm would explain the same amount of variance in the percentage of female and male expatriates sent abroad.

In the present survey, more than half of the companies (53.8%) were seen as presenting major barriers to women working overseas, while almost a third (30.8%) were not. Fifteen percent of the managers were unsure of the extent of gender specific impacts on corporate selection decisions. The majority attributed their own company's reluctance to select women to: (a) traditional male chauvinism, (b) recognition of the higher risk involved in sending an unproven quantity (i.e., women who, unlike men, as yet have no overseas track record), and (c) the paucity of women with sufficient technical training and domestic management experience to qualify for high level line management positions overseas.

Women Interested

Less than a quarter of the personnel managers (24.5%) saw women as unwilling to accept expatriate assignments and relocate overseas. This minority assumed that female man-

their own company's reluctance to select women as a major barrier.

Few managers believed there was a scarcity of qualified women who would be willing to go or who would be effective if sent. When asked directly, three-quarters of the managers believed that qualified women were available (74.5%) and that they could be effective (77.8%) as international managers. Two-thirds of the managers (62.3%) believed that women were willing to work overseas.

In a similar study to that of the personnel managers, 1129 graduating MBA students from Canada, the United States, and Europe were surveyed to determine their interest in international careers and their explanations for the scarcity of women in international management. As shown in Table 1, the personnel managers saw slightly fewer problems caused by foreigners' prejudice and dual-career marriages, and considerably less reluctance on the part of companies to select women than did the graduating MBAs. However, the personnel managers saw women as considerably less qualified and slightly less interested in being international managers than did the graduating MBAs. In a comparison between men's and women's actual interest in pursuing international careers, no difference emerged: today's male and female MBAs are equally interested in pursuing international careers.¹⁷

Foreigners' prejudice

Three-quarters of the North American personnel managers (72.7%) saw foreign cultural patterns as posing

major barriers to female expatriate managers. A wide range of countries (including Japan, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Greece, Australia, France, etc.) were seen as limiting the role of women in business, considering women as second class citizens, restricting women's mobility, or excluding women altogether from the world of work. The form of this culturally based discrimination against working women was seen as varying from country to country, but the result—the severe limitation of female managers' potential effectiveness—was believed to be identical. Out of respect for the integrity of the foreign culture and the difficulty in changing fundamental beliefs and values, most companies believed foreigners' prejudice to be a serious, and often insurmountable, barrier confronting North American women's successful pursuit of international careers.

Dual-career marriages

Almost 70% of the managers (69.1%) viewed the balancing of two careers in an international move as a major obstacle. Whereas wives are generally seen as assets to successful male managers' careers, husbands are viewed as detriments to aspiring female managers' careers. Companies were concerned about what would happen if (a) the husband is unwilling to move or unable to find a suitable position in the foreign country, (b) the woman's salary eclipses that of her husband, (c) a two income family is reduced to one, albeit substantial, income, or (d) the husband's career is viewed as primary, thus

agers' hesitance was due to (a) close family ties, (b) child rearing responsibilities, (c) lack of female role models, (d) priority given to the husband's career, and (e) fear of isolation and loneliness (especially among single women).

International versus Domestic: Barriers Lower at Home

Companies see the barriers facing women in international management as significantly greater than those facing women pursuing domestic management careers. In every case, more managers believed that the obstacles were greater for women attempting to pursue international careers than for women choosing to follow domestic careers.¹⁹ As shown in Chart 2, more than thirteen times as many managers saw women as uninterested in international careers (24.5%) than as uninterested in domestic careers (1.8%); more than ten times as many managers saw women as unqualified for international careers (18.2%) than for domestic careers (1.8%); almost four times as many managers perceived companies as reluctant to select women for international careers (53.8%) than for domestic careers (14.5%); and three times as many saw women as incapable of being effective internationally as compared with domestically (5.6% vs. 1.8%). Whereas companies may be reluctant to promote women into domestic management positions, they are clearly more reluctant to promote them into international positions.

Disadvantages Outweigh Advantages

Companies saw "being female" as a distinct disadvantage in working internationally. Of the sixty managers surveyed, thirty-four (56.7%) listed no advantage to being female, whereas only one manager failed to list at least one disadvantage. On agreeing that being female was a disadvantage—and not an advantage—few companies saw the possibility of it being both.²⁰ Of those surveyed, female personnel managers saw significantly more advantages and fewer disadvantages than did their male colleagues.²¹ Overall, the more advantages managers perceived to being

female, the less they believed dual-career marriages to be a hindrance and the more they perceived the home company to be biased against selecting women for both domestic and international careers.²² For many companies considering sending women overseas, the question appears to be "How can we accept or diminish the negative impacts of being female?" not "How can we recognize and use gender to the female expatriate's and the company's advantage?"

Disadvantages

In addition to the disadvantages discussed previously, some companies felt hesitant to send women to certain areas of the world based primarily on the degree of isolation, danger, and physical hardship—such as remote locations, camp sites, off-shore drilling rigs, and military zones. Some, due to their interpretation of local customs, were willing to send women in staff but not line positions, or in internal but not client-contact positions. For example, some companies were willing to send a woman overseas as an internal information systems manager but not as either the regional sales manager or the managing director of an operation. Some had stronger fears about a woman failing than about a man failing because "the company neither wanted, nor could afford, to lose a good female manager". In considering sending single women, many feared the possibility of sexual harassment, isolation, and loneliness. One manager feared that single women would marry foreigners and not complete the expatriate assignment.

Advantages

Few companies (18%) saw being female as a net advantage. Of those that did, there was little consensus as to what the advantages were. Advantages, mentioned by three or more managers, included:

- *Greater motivation.* Some companies saw women as more determined to go overseas, more willing to work harder, and more committed to making an assignment work than many men.
- *Single.* Some companies saw female managers, who are more doubly hard to get along with local

frequently single, as more flexible and mobile than their married male counterparts.

- *Visibility.* Since there are very few female expatriates, some companies believed that the women would be noticed more readily and remembered more easily than their male counterparts.
- *Novelty.* Some companies noted the "shock value" of being female; contending that foreigners might assume "If she was selected, she must be great" and therefore accept her more readily. Also, some believed that since less is expected of women in many countries, their actual competence would be more highly regarded.
- *More time.* Due to the availability of servants for home and child care, some companies recognized that women working internationally would have more time than those working in North America.
- *Preparation.* Some companies believed that women's experience in North America prepared them for expatriate work by developing their tolerance for ambiguity, their understanding of others' values, and their ability to assume new roles and work assignments without strong peer support.
- *Corporate need.* Some companies saw the need to meet quotas for women in all areas of management, including international. Additionally, they noted women's willingness to go overseas at a time when men frequently turn down expatriate assignments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To increase the chances of success, the personnel managers made recommendations to the women themselves and to their companies. Beyond the job-specific, cross-cultural, and linguistic preparation given male expatriates leaving for overseas assignments, it was recommended that female expatriate managers (a) respect the foreign culture's views about women, (b) not take culturally-based discrimination personally nor be insulted by it, (c) go slowly and work

and international staff, (d) establish support networks with other professional expatriate women, and (e) act like "feminine professionals", thereby clearly assuming that being a woman and being professional are not mutually exclusive.

The personnel managers' recommendations to their companies were broader in scope and more detailed than their recommendations to the women. They included recommendations for managing the attitudes about women, the preparation given to women, the nature of the selection process, and the overseas support system.

- **Attitudes.** It was recommended that companies clearly express their policy toward sending women overseas, promote equal opportunity on international assignments, and focus on making expatriate assignments work rather than holding on to the attitude that they will not or may not work.

- **Preparation.** It was recommended that companies insure that qualified women are available for international assignments by (a) giving them the domestic experience necessary for international positions, and (b) sending them on foreign business trips. The availability of qualified women is the company's, not the women's, responsibility.

- **Selection.** It was recommended that companies (a) offer women expatriate positions, rather than assuming that they will turn them down, and (b) only select those women who have outstanding records of domestic success.

- **Overseas Support.** It was recommended that companies (a) do everything possible to assist husbands in finding appropriate overseas employment, (b) create a critical mass by sending more than one woman to each foreign location, (c) assign sponsors to

women both at home and overseas, and (d) let foreign staff know that the company expects them to help the woman succeed.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the increasing internationalization of business and the predictions of personnel managers in 60 of the largest North American organizations, the number of female expatriate managers will increase substantially over the next decade. To assure that the best candidates are sent, companies will need to reexamine their selection policies. Only when companies begin to see the advantages as well as the disadvantages of sending women overseas, will they be able to reduce the barriers currently facing women who are trying to include expatriate experience in their careers. Experience in sending women overseas is limited; the risk is therefore high. The advantages are becoming apparent; the risk is therefore worth taking.

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17. See 9.
18. See 11.
19. In t-tests comparison, international opportunities were significantly greater than domestic opportunities at the .005 level in every case.

Deterrents	For International Management	For Domestic Management
	\bar{x}	\bar{x}
Company's Reluctance to Select Women	4.44	2.65
Women Uninterested	3.17	1.62
Women Unqualified	2.45	1.51
Women Ineffective	2.45	1.56

\bar{x} —mean, on 7-point Likert scale.

20. Fifty-seven percent of the managers agreed that being female was a disadvantage ($\bar{x} = 4.9$ on a 7-point Likert scale) and an equal percent disagreed that it was an advantage ($\bar{x} = 3.2$); 25% saw being female as neither an advantage nor a disadvantage; and 18% saw it as strictly an advantage. The high negative correlation ($r = -.83$), indicates that managers see the impact of being female as *either* positive or negative, not as both. (Thus forming a unidimensional bipolar scale rather than two orthogonal unipolar scales).
21. On a 7-point scale (with 7 being strongly agree and 1 being strongly disagree), the results were as follows:

	Personnel Managers Perceptions		
	Male	Female	T-test
	\bar{x}	\bar{x}	Significance level
Advantages	2.91	4.17	.042
Disadvantages	4.83	3.85	.033

22. Perceived advantages and disadvantages of being female were correlated with the extent to which dual-career marriages and company bias against women was seen as a hindrance:

	Being Female Perceived as an:			
	Advantage		Disadvantage	
	Correlation	Significance	Correlation	Significance
	r	p	r	p
Dual-Career Marriage	-.2586	(.036)	.3062	(.013)
Home Company Disrespect for Women	.3607	(.005)	-.2432	(.041)

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