



Yes, they can do it! Exploring female expatriates' effectiveness

Maria Bastida*

University of Santiago de Compostela, Faculty of Labor Relations, USC Campus Vida, 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain



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ABSTRACT

Research has highlighted the under-representation of women in international assignments. While individual and organisational causes for this minor presence have been deeply explored, there is a lack of empirical studies on the effectiveness of female expatriates. Moreover, these studies have focused on a particular facet of effectiveness, and findings are usually based on the perceptions of women of their own work. Additionally, only a few of them include male expatriates, which undermine the possibility of making comparisons.

This paper explores gender contingencies on expatriate effectiveness using different groups of measures: adjustment, premature return, performance, commitment and job satisfaction. The author carried out four logit models and, overall, she did not find significant differences on effectiveness between female expatriates and men ones. Moreover, not-significant differences favour women. Theoretical and practical implications are contemplated.

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1. Introduction

There is general consensus that the development of a global orientation is imperative for today's organisations in order to be competitive (Tung, 2016). Given that top managers' international experience in multinational companies seems to be a relevant factor for the success of the company's internationalisation strategy (Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen, 2001; Hutzschenreuter & Horstkotte, 2013), leaders with effective intercultural skills are essential for companies competing in a borderless world. As a result, the possession of a global mind-set seems to be a prerequisite for advancement to higher management positions in globalising firms (Altman & Baruch, 2013; Bird & Mendenhall, 2016). Previous researchers have argued that because overseas work experience has been proven to be the fastest way to acquire global capabilities (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009; Insch, McIntyre, & Napier, 2008), it is often used as a surrogate measure of global mind-set (Tung, 2004). Thus, international mobility can be a competitive differentiator for organisations in a global context (Altman & Shortland, 2008; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009; Insch et al., 2008).

Research has highlighted the underrepresentation of women in expatriation (Shortland, 2014; Altman & Shortland, 2008; Insch et al., 2008; Tung, 2004), and recent surveys have shown that

women account for only 25% of IAs (Brookfield Inc., 2016). Taken overall, this suggests that there are still obstacles to the presence of women in the international workforce.

This shortcoming poses two concerns. Firstly, because IAs have become a key requirement for career advancement (Engle, Dowling, & Festing, 2008), women's lack of international experience may be an obstacle to their career progress. In this regard, 37% of the respondents to Brookfield's (2016) survey reported that the low acceptance rates of IAs among female candidates are having adverse impacts on the creation of balanced senior management teams in their companies. Secondly, from a point of view of maximising talent, companies cannot afford to limit their talented human resources pools by excluding women (Paik & Vance, 2002).

Research to date has explored in depth the causes of the absence of women managers in IAs (see Altman & Shortland, 2008; Salamin & Hanappi, 2014; Shortland, 2014, for recent reviews). Since Adler's (1984c) influential paper regarding international female under-representation, most research has focused on three widespread myths: the supposed lower willingness of women to accept IAs (e.g. Adler, 1984a, 1984b, 2002); the existence of host-country prejudices against female expatriates and the rejection of women in the foreign culture (e.g. Adler, 2002; Caligiuri, Joshi, & Lazarova, 1999; Hutchings, Michailova, & Harrison, 2013); and the cultural distance between host and home countries, which includes different roles being distributed to women and leads organisations to send men rather than women abroad (Hutchings et al., 2013; Mathur-Helm, 2002; Tung, 2008). Paradoxically, the possibility that a woman may be as effective as a man in an international

* Correspondence to: Faculty of Labor Relations, University of Santiago de Compostela, Campus Vida, 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain.
E-mail address: maria.bastida@usc.es

location has been underexplored, even though from an organisational approach women's supposed ineffectiveness should be the only valid criterion for excluding them from IA selection processes.

Our study aims to address this gap in research. More specifically, our main objective is to explore whether women are less successful on IAs than men are, and, as a consequence, are not sent abroad. In order to achieve this objective, first, relevant literature and the empirical evidence concerning the effectiveness of women in IAs is discussed. Then, the theoretical explanations that have been offered for the evidence found are reviewed. Conclusions from this review lead us to suggest that there are no differences between male and female expatriate effectiveness. We empirically test this claim on a sample that includes both men and women. Finally, we report the main theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

2. Literature review

The low representation of women in IAs has been addressed from a variety of perspectives. These different approaches can be grouped into three main categories:

- (a) *Individual*: women's lack of interest in expatriation (Adler, 1984a, 1984b, 2002; Stroh, Varma, & Valy-Durbin, 2000); different emphasis on personal vs. professional life (Fischlmayr & Kollinger, 2010; Linehan & Walsh, 2000; Selmer & Luring, 2011; Shen & Jiang, 2015; Tharenou, 2008).
- (b) *Organisational*: biases in the selection process (Harris, 2002; Paik & Vance, 2002; Varma, Toh, & Budhwar, 2006); higher selection requirements for women than for men (Linehan & Walsh, 2001); concerns about the physical safety of women because of the inherent risks to travelling to underdeveloped countries (Napier & Taylor, 2002); lack of mentors' counselling (Linehan & Walsh, 1999; Selmer & Leung, 2003b); lack of effective models of female leadership (Linehan, 2002).
- (c) *Cultural*: host-country prejudices or rejection to women (Hutchings et al., 2013; Stroh et al., 2000; Tung, 2004); different roles attributed to women in the host country (Hutchings et al., 2013; Mathur-Helm, 2002; Tung, 2008).

Research has been directed mainly at examining individual and organisational causes.

With regard to the former, several studies have pointed out that women are interested in IAs, and would be likely to accept them (Adler, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c; Linehan & Scullion, 2004; Stroh et al., 2000; Tharenou, 2010). In addition, recent studies on self-initiated expatriates – individuals who voluntarily resort to the international sphere to seek employment – have found that the percentage of women exceeds that of men in this type of international experience, and that the percentage of women in self-initiated expatriation is larger than in company-assigned expatriation (Andresen, Biemann, & Pattie, 2015; Cerdin & Pargneux, 2010; Vance & McNulty, 2014). Scholars interpret these data as evidence of the interest and engagement of women in international careers. In sum, despite some contrasting evidence (van der Velde, Bossink, & Jansen, 2005), there is some consensus on the willingness of women to undertake IAs.

With regard to organisational causes, female expatriates report that they are less likely to be sent abroad by their organisations (Stroh et al., 2000). Moreover, some studies have found that women are required to be more highly qualified than men, including having a higher level of education, greater technical competence and more managerial expertise (Linehan & Walsh, 2000). It has also been suggested that that if there are several equally qualified male and female candidates for an IA, a man is usually preferred (Forster, 1999). Although these results should be treated with

caution because they have been inferred from women's perceptions, the conclusion from this research must be that organisations have a rather reluctant attitude to sending women on IAs. According to different authors, this attitude can be related to assumptions concerning the masculine nature of international locations, so there is sufficient evidence to confirm that there may be some implicit discrimination against women (Hutchings, Lirio, & Metcalfe, 2012; Insch et al., 2008; Paik & Vance, 2002; Tharenou, 2010).

As has been previously noted, studies that explore whether cultural distance might be a problem for the effectiveness of expatriate women in comparison with men are scarce. This may be related to the lack of an accurate definition of expatriate effectiveness (Cerdin & Pargneux, 2009). Bearing this limitation in mind, scholars have mainly focused on three indicators for measuring effectiveness put forward by Caligiuri and Tung (1999): premature termination; performance; and adjustment.

With regard to premature termination, which is considered an assignment failure rate, researchers have noted that the rate of premature return of men is similar to that of women (Caligiuri & Tung, 1999; Forster, 1999; Tharenou, 2010).

With respect to performance, Adler found that 97% of a sample of US female expatriates thought they were successful in their overseas assignment. Although this percentage seems unrealistic (Caligiuri et al., 1999), other researchers have found that female expatriates' performance is satisfactory regardless of the country they come from and the one they are assigned to (e.g. Adler, 1984b; Caligiuri & Tung, 1999; Linehan and Scullion, 2004).

Finally, another group of studies focuses on cross-cultural adjustment (hereafter, CCA). While it is true that this concept is not a performance indicator per se, it has been assumed that if expatriates are unable to adjust to the host location, they are likely to perform poorly. Some authors (e.g. Caligiuri & Tung, 1999; Culpan & Wright, 2002) have suggested that women may face difficulties in adjusting to cultures where there is both low female participation in the workforce and a lower percentage of women managers. However, comparative studies of adjustment have concluded that, overall, women adjust at least as well as men (Cole & McNulty, 2011; Haslberger, 2010; Salamin & Davoine, 2015; Selmer & Leung, 2003a).

Additionally, both Selmer and Leung's (2003a) study and its replications found that female expatriates have significantly higher interaction and work adjustment levels than their male counterparts. This is an important finding, because it has been suggested that interaction adjustment – namely, the perceived comfort related to the interpersonal relations and the interaction with other people from the host country – may be the fundamental dimension for CCA, since both general and work adjustment are based on interpersonal relationships (Black & Stephens, 1989). In connection to this, some researchers have suggested that female expatriates may be better positioned than men to handle an expatriate assignment (Shortland & Altman, 2011), due basically to their better social, interpersonal and communication skills and to their capabilities such as team- and relationship-building (Vance & McNulty, 2014). It has also been noted that female expatriates benefit from visibility and a "halo effect", because host-country nationals assume that those women would not have been sent abroad if they were not competent (Napier & Taylor, 2002).

Overall, it seems that the success of women on global assignments has been generally confirmed. Nevertheless, most studies have utilised a single criterion of expatriate success, which offers only a partial view of performance. Also, the vast majority of studies have involved only women participants, which prevents comparisons with male expatriates (e.g. Linehan & Scullion, 2004). Moreover, it seems that female expatriates' success has been defined by the outcomes of the IA (adjustment, permanence or performance) but without taking into consideration personal

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