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International assignment reward policies: the importance of compensation and benefits to women's expatriate participation

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Introduction

Since the first studies on expatriate gender diversity were conducted, men have comprised the majority of expatriates (Altman and Shortland, 2008). Although around one-quarter of expatriate roles are held by women today (Brookfield, 2016), the male-dominated picture of expatriate gender diversity looks set to continue. Gender diversity in expatriation is regarded as an asset to business given women's success in their international assignments (Shortland, 2016) and, as such, various studies have explored why women's expatriation remains low in comparison to men's. Issues identified as having some bearing include: women's choices and family constraints; organisational decision-making (for example in selection, and in relation to their human and social capital); societal cultural explanations; and institutional effects, such as gendered labour market structures (Shortland, 2014). Yet, currently there is little published research on the effects of international reward and how this might affect the gendered nature of expatriation (Shortland and Perkins, 2016). This chapter therefore sets out to address this issue. It examines which elements of international assignment reward policy and practice have the strongest influence on women's acceptance of international assignments, and of different lengths and patterns of expatriation.

Reflecting its exploratory nature, this research employs a case study design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). It is set in the oil and gas exploration and production sector. This industry is

selected because it uses large and increasing numbers of expatriates (Air Inc., 2016, 2017), is known for its relatively attractive provision of expatriate compensation and benefits (IDS, 2002), and yet has low expatriate gender diversity (ORC Worldwide, 2007). This study sets out to identify the main reward policy items that women regard as critical preconditions to assignment acceptance and to outline recommendations to employers where policy and practice improvements might make a difference to increasing expatriate gender diversity across a range of assignment types. In this way it contributes both to our knowledge of expatriate reward and to our understanding of women's expatriate representation. The study sets out to address the following research question:

to what extent and how do the elements of international assignment reward policy support women's expatriation in different assignment lengths and patterns?

Method

The research was set within two medium-sized oil and gas exploration and production organisations, identified through convenience sampling (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). The case study firms had operations across 30 countries worldwide; they were not considered to be unique or extreme cases (Yin, 2009). In total they employed 93 female expatriates (between 8% and 11% of their total expatriate populations). The research approach involved: analysis of the international assignment reward policies applicable to different lengths and patterns of international mobility; interviews being conducted with 14 Human Resource (HR) professionals with responsibility for these policies to discuss their implementation in practice; a survey (conducted by e-mail) of all of the 93 women assignees who were policy recipients; and

interviews being conducted with 26 of the survey respondents, selected using stratified sampling (Collis and Hussey, 2009) to ensure appropriate representation by assignment length and pattern.

First, the international relocation policies were read and summarised descriptively, with any differences in approach by company identified. Using these data, an e-mail questionnaire was designed so that each female respondent could record which of the specific financial and non-financial elements identified she had received in relation to her current assignment type, and record and comment on the importance of each element in supporting her expatriate participation. Of the 93 women, 71 replied to the survey (response rate of 76%): 51 long-term assignees, 12 short-term and graduate placement assignees; five on rotational assignments, and three undertaking extended international transfers. The importance ratings data (from not important to very important) were analysed using SPSS but given the skewed nature of the assignment types undertaken by the respondents (with the majority being on long-term assignments) and the small size of the populations represented by each of the other policy types, these factors prevented tests of association and strength of relationship from being undertaken. Nonetheless, descriptive statistics were produced to highlight which reward policy elements were deemed to be very important (i.e. they were rated the most highly) to women's assignment participation, recorded by assignment length/pattern.

The interviews addressed how written policy was implemented in practice. These were semi-structured and conducted confidentially either face-to-face or by telephone: the HR interviews lasted between 30-90 minutes; those with the female assignees, between 60-90 minutes. The interviews were taped with participant agreement, transcribed, read systematically and coded via NVivo 8. Comments recorded in the survey were also coded. A thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify the financial and non-financial elements

within international assignment reward policy that were of particular relevance to women's assignment participation.

Findings

Analysis of the policy documentation and discussions with the HR personnel in each firm revealed that the two firms had very similar policy provision supporting their expatriate workforces and so the policy elements that were offered under their reward policies were combined, as shown in Table 1. The main policy items covered were grouped under the following headings: remuneration and allowances; housing and related issues; travel, transport and leave; medical and emergency assistance; visa and tax support; and financial payments relating to partner and family issues. The following sections examine these elements as made available under expatriate reward policy linked to assignment type (length/pattern), highlighting those of greatest importance to women's assignment participation decisions.

Table 1 about here

Long-term assignees

Long-term assignments were defined as being over a year in length; but on average these were typically around three years' duration in both firms. The majority of the assignees (51 women) were undertaking this assignment type. The most important elements of remuneration/allowances were identified from the survey as being pension continuity, the foreign service premium (FSP), the cost of living allowance (COLA) and the provision of a car with over 85% of the respondents rating these policy items as very important to their assignment participation. The provision of a disturbance allowance, paid in recognition of the need to replace various goods on relocation, was considered as very important by 80%. Approximately 70-75% of the long-term assignees

rated the assignment bonus, the mobility premium (paid in recognition of being mobile) and payments that supported rest and recreation (R&R) in hardship locations as very important.

The interview data confirmed that the *“financial rewards are a big driver”* for assignees. These data indicated that the key issue was the FSP which acted as a significant *“uplift”* to base salary. It was paid as a percentage of salary, determined by the hardship nature of the host location, and this frequently made a substantial difference to assignees’ wealth. The HR personnel reported that the FSP could raise salaries by some 50-60% in certain hardship locations. The assignees interviewed agreed: *“Uplift on salary in terms of hardship locations, yes, that’s probably the number one really”* and that *“it makes you feel a little bit better about being here”*. Even in less difficult locations, such as Australasia, where FSPs were around 10%, this still acted as an incentive for assignees to go, being seen as *“a prize”*. The COLA was especially important to those relocating to high cost locations. As such, concern was raised by those interviewed that the allowances were sufficient and reviewed regularly so that standards of living could be maintained. Cars – although standard in policy – were considered of greatest importance in *“car culture”* locations (North America, in particular).

The housing allowance (or provision of company housing as appropriate) was considered to be very important to assignment acceptance by all of the long-term assignees (*“having the housing ... and all that, paid for by the company ... that is nice, and I wouldn’t want to have to maintain my own housing”*). Around 90% said that the provision of temporary accommodation, home search assistance and payments for shipment of household goods were also very important to them. Utilities and telephone payments were considered to be very important by over half of the assignees (*“Getting your bills paid is enormously useful...”*).

Allowances related to home leave travel costs, transport to and from the host location, flights to reunite families and vacation were valued very highly by around 90% of the long-term assignees. For example, as one interviewee explained: “...*the elements that are straight off that the company arranges for you ... like for example ... you get your flights out and you don't have to worry about and you get your home leave back and you get your travel days, it makes the whole decision a lot easier*”.

Over 90% of long-term assignees reported that medical insurance and family emergency assistance were very important to their assignment acceptance (“*we have a very good benefits package, but the medical insurance, the personal accident insurance, just for the supporting framework...*”). Around 80% of the women said that tax preparation and work permit/visa assistance were very important to them (“*The tax briefing ... was important because I have got a house that I rent out and you need to understand the tax implications of going abroad...*”).

Turning to family assistance, support for children's education applied only to long-term assignees. Nine women had received education allowances for their children's schooling in the host location and three were eligible for education assistance for their children on repatriation (due to the ages of their children). All regarded these items as being very important to them in being able to take up their assignments (“*allowances are set to pay for decent schools*”). Seven of these women had received support to pay for a school search consultant and five said that this was very important. Nineteen women had received work visa support for their spouses with 17 reporting this as being very important to their assignment participation (“... *anything ... to assist spouses in getting work visas or accommodating them to work ... is beneficial in accommodating women expatriates*”).

Long-term assignees were eligible for limited spouse/partner financial allowances in recognition of spouses giving up work on relocation. Twelve women had received this support and half regarded it as very important when accepting their assignments. (*“The partner gets ... the partner support programme. So they try and encourage and provide financial support if partners want to do any studying or take courses that will enable them to work whilst overseas ... So that has been very good.”*)

Short-term assignees and graduate scheme trainees

Short-term assignees undertook assignments that were typically between six and 12 months' duration. Graduate trainees undertook a series of four, six month placements, one of which was guaranteed to be an expatriate assignment. Twelve women were on short-term/graduate placements. The majority reported the FSP as the most important financial element supporting their assignment participation. Around two-thirds said that the mobility premium, bonus, pension continuity and car were very important while around half rated the COLA as very important. Only one woman was based in a location which attracted R&R but she rated this as very important to her decision to accept her assignment. The graduates received a graduate placement allowance – and all viewed this as very important to assignment acceptance.

The provision of company housing (or a housing allowance if this was appropriate) was rated as very important by around 80% of the short-term/graduate assignees (*“just because it takes so much of the hassle out of it”*). Around 60% rated home search assistance and temporary accommodation as very important. Payments for utilities and telephone expenses were only rated as very important by around half of the assignees.

Given the relatively short timescale that assignees were away from home, only two-thirds noted that vacation allowances were very important to them; nonetheless, over 80% said that

home leave travel costs, flights to reunite families and transport to and from the host location were very important to their assignment acceptance. Family emergency assistance did not apply in the host location as assignments were typically unaccompanied but medical insurance was covered. However, the assignees explained that should an emergency take place with family members at home then their company did address this (*“the transporting you back, if something happens to a family member is very important”*). Around two-thirds reported that medical insurance was very important to their assignment decision. Over 70% said that work permit/visa assistance was very important to their assignment participation (*“the main area that is difficult to handle is things to do with visas and changing over your visa”*) but, reflecting the short length of time that they were away, only 45% said that tax preparation was very important.

Rotational assignees

Five women were undertaking rotational assignments. These involved working 28 days on assignment, followed by 28 days off-shift at home. Certain allowances were not applicable (R&R, mobility, disturbance) but all received a rotation allowance and this was rated as very important by four of the five women. All rated the FSP as very important to their assignment participation; three placed high importance on pension continuity, the car and the bonus. COLA was only applicable to one assignee, who rated it as important to her assignment take-up. Assignees said that rotation locations were usually remote and challenging, sometimes dangerous. They acknowledged that the money was good (*“the bonus I would say is excellent”*) but said that if rotation, with additional allowances paid as compensation for challenging location factors, was to be replaced with long-term in-country postings, very high salaries would be needed to encourage assignment participation.

Rotational assignees lived in company housing with paid utilities; no temporary accommodation, home search assistance or shipment of household goods applied to these transfers. Assignees' telephone expenses were paid and meals provided. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents rated these issues as very important to their assignment acceptance.

With respect to travel, transport and leave, company policy only addressed transport costs to and from the home location; four women said that this was very important to their assignment participation. Family emergency assistance did not apply in the host location as the assignments were unaccompanied but if an emergency arose at home, assignees' transport home was covered (*"The hardest thing when you work on rotation is not to be at home in case of an emergency. there is... a very good emergency response plan in place and it is very important to me to know that I can go home very quickly if need be..."*). Medical insurance was covered in policy and four women reported this as being very important. Three women reported that tax preparation and two said that work permit/visa assistance were very important to their assignment participation (*"they get you your work permit. So that was fairly easy"*).

Extended international transfers

One of the firms had a policy that specifically addressed extended international transfers (over five years' duration). This was a modified form of the policy that applied to long-term assignees, and it included some local terms. Thus, certain allowances were not applicable (COLA, FSP, R&R, and disturbance). Only three women were undertaking such assignments. Assignees noted that allowances were considerably limited. Thus, all rated those that they did receive - mobility premiums and bonuses - as very important to their assignment participation; two placed high importance on pension continuity and one on the provision of a car.

Assignees on extended transfers did not receive support with housing, utilities or telephone expenses under policy as they were expected to manage their own costs similar to locally hired employees. However, assistance with home search, the provision of temporary accommodation and the shipment of household goods were all company-funded and all assignees regarded these to be very important to their assignment acceptance.

Company policy only addressed transport costs to and from the home location; all assignees said this was very important. Medical insurance and family emergency assistance were not provided under policy as local terms applied. Tax preparation and work permit/visa assistance were supported under policy; the women all regarded these items as very important to them being able to undertake their assignments. Two women had received work visa support for their spouses and both said this was very important to them in their assignment decision.

Discussion

While it is widely accepted that money is not the main driver for international assignment acceptance (Pate and Scullion, 2010; McNulty, 2014), if the reward package is not considered sufficient or equitable, it can act as a reason for assignment refusal (Suutari, Tornikoski and Mäkelä, 2012; Warneke and Schneider, 2011; Welch, 1994). Hence, even though career development and family circumstances are recognised as the most crucial factors influencing expatriation decision-making (Dickmann, Doherty, Mills and Brewster, 2008; Hippler, 2009), we cannot discount the relevance of reward policy as a factor in the decision to undertake a global career (Suutari, Tornikoski and Mäkelä, 2012).

Disentangling the various influences that affect women's assignment acceptance is notoriously difficult as potential posts are weighed up in terms of the balance between career, family and

financial outcomes (Shortland, 2016). To attempt to address this, this research study examined the reward elements that women assignees reported as being the most important in their decision to go, having evaluated career and family assignment outcomes as favourable. This section discusses these findings in the context of relevant theoretical frames presented in the Chapter entitled “Segmenting international assignments: theorising expatriate reward” – compensating differentials (Rosen, 1986) in terms of the sufficiency of the package; and equity theory (Adams, 1963) in relation to its fairness.

As Rosen (1986) proposes, compensating wage differentials relate to extra payment(s) necessary to encourage workers to undertake jobs that are viewed as less desirable relative to others that the person could do. While expatriate assignments typically offer desirable career benefits, the provision of additional rewards addresses factors such as the disruption to family and friendship relationships as a direct result of being globally mobile, working in challenging locations and living in unfamiliar cultures, to name but a few. Expatriate reward policy design does not differentiate by gender, with policy elements applying both to men and women. The various additions to salary given in the form of expatriate allowances and benefits in the two case studies acted as a significant compensating differential for undertaking an international assignment, making the financial aspect of expatriation very attractive to anyone offered such a posting.

Turning to women’s expatriation, it is helpful to examine compensating differentials specifically from a gender perspective. In relation to women’s work, Anker (2001) theorises that women ‘prefer’ good working conditions and fringe benefits (supporting their family responsibilities) over high monetary rewards. It would therefore be expected that women assignees would focus their attention on elements in the reward package, particularly fringe

benefits, which address family issues. In contrast to this prediction, however, it was clear from this research study that financial reward elements stood out as being of the greatest importance to women in their assignment acceptance decision. In the main, the women assignees placed the highest importance on pension continuity, the FSP, COLA, bonuses, mobility premiums, housing allowances, cars, and, for mothers, payments to support children's education. Nonetheless, Anker's (2001) gendered interpretation of compensating differentials did have some relevance as the female assignees in this study did value certain fringe benefits linked to their family concerns, especially work visa assistance to address partner employment, and support with moving home (including home search and household goods shipments). Home leave travel supporting family reunion and to help them address family emergencies was also particularly relevant to their assignment participation.

With respect to equity, this research identified differences in reward policy content applying to different lengths and patterns of assignments. While policy segmentation is becoming increasingly popular as a means of differentiating between assignment types and in facilitating cost control (Air Inc., 2016, 2017), this leads to different levels of financial and practical support being made available depending on the assignment type undertaken. This research identified that women primarily undertook long-term assignments. These were best supported financially and in practice by organisations through international assignment reward policy. Short-term and rotational assignments did attract a wide range of allowances and benefits demonstrating significant compensating differentials, but the generosity of provision was more limited, typically linked to the single status nature of these assignments. Extended transfer assignments also demonstrated that compensating differentials had been applied, but the range of allowances and benefits was much lower, with local terms in operation for some elements.

While equity was preserved within a policy type (such that all moving under the umbrella of a particular assignment type were treated equitably under policy), differential treatment was in evidence between the terms and conditions of policies designed to address different mobility requirements. This has implications linked to equity theory (Adams, 1963). Assignees can compare the elements of their reward packages with those offered to individuals undertaking different types of assignments. If the roles performed are similar in the assignment location but the assignees undertaking these are on different assignment types with different reward packages applied, inequity can be perceived. When this takes place, Adams (1963) suggests such perceived inequity leads to tension flowing from potential dissatisfaction and, as a result, this affects individuals' effort. With respect to expatriation, it can affect decisions to engage in particular activities (such as assignment acceptance) as well as dissatisfaction once involved in the posting. Potentially, this might also have ramifications for expatriate adjustment (Zhu, Wanberg, Harrison and Diehn, 2016). For example, in this research women placed considerable emphasis on fringe benefits connected to home-making. While long-term and extended transfer assignees received support to find a home and furnish it with their own belongings, this fringe benefit was limited for short-term assignees who were mostly offered company housing, and was not afforded to those on rotation who lived in furnished camp accommodation.

Accompanied short-term assignments were permissible in both firms but the supporting reward package reflected, in the main, the assumption that these assignments would typically be undertaken solo. As such, only limited assistance was given with family issues for this type of assignment. Yet this research study shows that the women assignees were concerned about family unity and the policy elements that maintained this when making their assignment participation decision. This suggests that women would be less willing to endure fairly lengthy

periods of family separation necessitated by single status short-term assignments and, for mothers in particular, the month away from home on rotational working patterns. As assignments become shorter and more flexible in terms of the deployment patterns used (Brookfield, 2016), equity theory (Adams, 1963) and gendered predictions in relation to compensating differentials (Anker, 2001) would indicate that the lower levels of family support provided for short-term and rotational assignments could reduce women's willingness to engage in these types of assignments, reinforcing the gendered nature of expatriation.

Implications for organisational practice

These research findings are of value because they can assist organisations to increase expatriate gender diversity through the inclusion of policy elements that are of particular relevance to women, helping to support their decision to accept an assignment. In particular, the importance of practical support should not be ignored. There was clear evidence in this study that women looked to their employers to assist with family-related fringe benefits especially in relation to spousal employment, finding and setting up home, and assisting them in maintaining family unity and in responding to family emergencies. Without these aspects being included in the international reward policy, women's willingness to accept assignments could be compromised. Of course, it is important to be mindful of any 'decoupling' of what may be articulated in policy from what is offered/received in practice; policy intent and implementation can differ substantially – with potentially negative implications for perceived equity.

With respect to policy segmentation, while employers will be mindful of cost constraints and the need to tailor reward policy to ensure that it is fit-for-purpose, care must be taken not to make particular assignment types unattractive by removing highly appreciated elements of

family support. Thus, regarding women's assignment participation, action to address spousal and family concerns across the range of assignment lengths and patterns is necessary.

Limitations and call for further research

This cross-sectional case study research addressed female expatriation in two medium sized firms in the oil and gas exploration and production sector. It would be helpful to further our understanding of the influence of reward policy on female expatriation across a wider spectrum of industries. In addition, we need to learn how trends are developing in relation to the effects of policy segmentation on gender diversity as assignment lengths shorten and deployment patterns became more flexible. Longitudinal research would therefore be especially useful. As international reward policy and practice is designed to address both male and female mobility, research that examines any differences in the importance that men and women place on particular policy elements would be valuable. Such information would not only help to identify how gender diversity can be facilitated but also how all assignees can best be supported across a range of assignments. The potential relationship between reward practices and expatriate adjustment would also prove to be a valuable line of enquiry.

Concluding remarks

Expatriate reward policy demonstrates the application of significant compensating differentials, making international assignments financially attractive. Female assignees do look to the expatriate reward package to provide financial enhancement via premiums and allowances that raise their base salaries substantially when making their expatriate assignment acceptance decisions. However besides financial incentives, they also focus on home-making and family support/unity and the policy elements that address these factors. Segmentation of expatriate

reward policy results in long-term assignments being especially well-rewarded both financially and via the provision of fringe benefits that address the key issues that women wish to see in place when making their assignment acceptance decisions. Potential disincentives to women undertaking alternative assignments need to be recognised and remedial action taken. Hence, appropriate benefits should be included within international reward policy across the spectrum of alternative assignment types if organisations are to increase expatriate gender diversity.

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Table 1: Reward policy elements by assignment type received by female assignees

Reward policy elements included in international assignments reward policy and received by female assignees (□)	Long-term Assignments	Short-term Assignments	Rotational Assignments	Extended International Transfers*
Remuneration and allowances				
Pension continuity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bonus	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cost of living (COLA)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Foreign service premium (FSP)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Mobility premium	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
Rest and recreation allowance (R&R)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Disturbance allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Rotation allowance			<input type="checkbox"/>	
Graduate placement allowance (graduates only)		<input type="checkbox"/>		
Car/allowance/local transport	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Housing and related issues				
Housing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Temporary accommodation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
Home search	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
Utilities payment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Telephone payment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Shipment of household goods	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
Meals payment			<input type="checkbox"/>	
Travel, transport and leave				
Transport to and from host location	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Home leave travel costs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Vacation allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Flights to reunite family	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Medical and emergency assistance				
Medical insurance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Family emergency assistance in host location	<input type="checkbox"/>			
Visa and tax support				
Work permit/visa assistance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tax preparation/assistance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Partner and family issues				
Children's education allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>			
School search in host location	<input type="checkbox"/>			
Education assistance for children on repatriation	<input type="checkbox"/>			
Spouse/partner allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>			
Work permit/visa assistance for spouse/partner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>

*One company only had a specific policy for transfers exceeding five years' duration.