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occupational gender segregation**

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# **International rotational assignments: Women's challenge to occupational gender segregation**

## **Abstract**

### ***Design/methodology/approach***

This cross-sectional qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews and correspondence with female international rotational assignees, and interviews with HR professionals involved in selection and deployment for such assignments.

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of this exploratory research is to understand how women have accessed male-dominated oil and gas international rotational assignments and why they believe these roles to be professionally worthwhile.

### ***Findings***

HR personnel stereotype women as unsuitable for international rotational assignments. Women must be exceptionally determined and/or circumvent selection processes to access such roles.

Women value the professional and personal development gained from international rotational assignments which helps them widen their occupational skills capacity.

### ***Research limitations/implications***

To extend these findings, larger samples of female international rotational assignees and research in a wider range of industries are required. Longitudinal studies could further our understanding of women's career progression building upon their international rotational assignment experience.

### ***Practical implications***

To reduce stereotyping of women's perceived unsuitability, greater understanding of international rotational assignment roles/environments is required by managers involved in selection. Transparent selection processes are required to support diversity. Greater interest in the work performed by international rotational assignees will raise their profile and assist with wider labour market opportunities.

### ***Social implications***

Organisational representatives unintentionally reinforce occupational segregation by stereotyping women as less appropriate workers than men for international rotational assignments.

### ***Originality/value***

This research hears women's voices as they begin to make inroads into the masculine world of oil and gas international rotational assignments. Research propositions and recommendations for practice are suggested to assist in breaking down male monopoly in this context.

### **Research paper**

**Key words:** gender; international assignments; international rotational assignments; occupational segregation; oil and gas; women

## **Introduction**

International rotational assignments (hereafter referred to as IRAs) have traditionally been used in the exploration and extractive industries in remote and challenging environments (Air Inc., 2020). As organisations in other sectors seek to penetrate new markets in locations which lack international assignee infrastructure, some of which are considered as particularly hostile environments (Posthuma *et al.*, 2019) so their interest in IRAs is growing. For example, IRAs are becoming more prevalent across a range of industries including technology, consumer goods, financial services (Air Inc., 2017) and telecommunications (Suder *et al.*, 2017). Although practitioner surveys rely on limited client data, and this shortcoming must be acknowledged, it is notable that a higher proportion of organisations are developing international assignment policies to support different forms of frequent flyer mobility such as IRAs and international commuter assignments than for longer-term international assignments (Air Inc., 2020).

It is suggested that as organisations become more mindful of the cost pressures associated with longer-term international assignments but still seek global competency development for their future leaders, and as employees become less willing to disrupt their lives to relocate abroad longer-term, so the use of more frequent flyer international mobility presents significant advantages to employees and their employing firms (Oddou *et al.*, 2000). It is evident that multinationals are increasingly favouring the use of non-standard international assignments (such as short-term, commuter and rotational mobility) (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005) as the objectives and purpose of the assignment guide the actual type used (McKenna and Richardson, 2007).

Women's participation in such non-standard assignments is important for a number of reasons. First, for women themselves: global work experience is expected to lead to good career outcomes such as job and career satisfaction, salary advancement, promotion, and the

development of career capital competencies (Shaffer *et al.*, 2012), with the lack of global experience working against women's career advancement (Lansing and Boonman, 2011). Second, female assignees make a strong contribution to business success (Baruch *et al.*, 2016) and can do so very effectively not only when undertaking traditional long-term assignments even in male-dominated host countries (e.g. Harrison and Michailova, 2012) but also when participating in more flexible types of frequent flyer international mobility (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004). Hence, it is advantageous for organisations to capitalise on the numerous benefits of gender diversity (Özbilgin *et al.*, 2015).

There is evidence that firms in oil and gas – which employ some of the largest volumes of international assignees compared with other industries (Air Inc., 2017) – but some of the lowest proportions of women assignees, are keen to improve gender diversity both in their traditional international assignment populations and also in their fly-in/fly-out international remote working arrangements (Shortland, 2018a). This is also true of the mining industry which is reported as encouraging gender diversity as a means of achieving a “more cooperative culture” (Pirotta, 2009, p.39). Herein though lies an inter-twined problem – these extractive industries are highly masculine as are their international assignee populations (Richardson *et al.*, 2014), particularly those undertaking a frequent flyer style of global mobility (Shortland, 2016a). Although reported to have strong occupational safety cultures (Air Inc., 2020), it is likely that male assignees – who are reported to engage to a greater extent than women in increased sensation seeking (Stoermer *et al.*, 2017) – would be more willing to undertake IRAs in the extractive industries given their remote, challenging and potentially dangerous environments. Effort is thus needed to widen the attractiveness of this assignment type and the opportunities

available in oil and gas exploration for women if gender diversity is to be increased in this industry and assignment type.

### ***Research contribution***

We already know from research in the oil and gas industry that women's assignment participation decisions are based upon career potential, effects on their family life, and the financial rewards that flow from their posting (Shortland, 2016b). IRAs deliver functional expertise and transfer knowledge but are not viewed as especially career-enhancing by women assignees; this assignment type is also viewed by women as incompatible with motherhood (Shortland, 2018a). These issues suggest that women might not view IRAs as attractive. Nonetheless, IRAs offer good financial outcomes (Shortland, 2018b). They also provide an attractive work-life balance, home life stability and, being unaccompanied, facilitate women in dual career relationships to engage with international assignment opportunities (Shortland, 2018a). So it appears unlikely that the characteristics of IRAs are completely unattractive to women. Potentially employers' perceptions may influence women's access to IRAs and their institutional isomorphic actions cement male dominance (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) thereby influencing IRA gender segregation. Hence, if women – and the organisations they work for – are to challenge the status quo, it might be theorised that action will be needed to change organisational representatives' isomorphic behaviour in respect of appointing women as international rotational assignees. Women's own views of the attractiveness and worth of IRA roles will also require attention if perceived misgivings have a negative influence upon their willingness to even consider this assignment type.

This exploratory research thus aims to understand how current women assignees have accessed oil and gas industry IRAs and why they believe the pursuit of these roles to be

professionally worthwhile. It is set within the context of highly male-dominated oil and gas exploration and IRA environments. The inter-twined masculinity of this industry and its IRA populations has been selected as this provides a very strong male-dominated context in which to assess women's perceptions of the value of IRAs to their professional and career development. It is also anticipated that lessons may be learnt by less masculine sectors as they begin to deploy women on what has traditionally been a male-dominated assignment type. The research objectives are to draw upon the perspectives of Human Resources (HR) professionals with responsibility for the deployment and support of IRAs and to report the relatively unheard female international rotational assignee voice. The following research questions are addressed:

1. How do women navigate the selection process to gain entry into the masculine environment of international rotational assignments in the oil and gas exploration industry?
2. What professional and career progression opportunities do women perceive they can gain by undertaking international rotational assignments in oil and gas exploration?

This research extends our theoretical understanding of women's efforts to defy a specific highly gender-segregated labour market. It highlights potential research propositions and draws out implications for practice to increase gender diversity in IRAs. This knowledge is relevant not only to male-dominated remote industries such as oil and gas and mining but is also of importance to organisations in other industries if they seek to facilitate gender diversity in their international rotational assignee populations when entering remote, climatically harsh, potentially insecure, and otherwise challenging geographies.

## Literature Review

### *Defining terminology*

IRAs involve fly-in/fly-out (FIFO), unaccompanied international mobility with defined periods of host country working, interspersed with non-working rest periods in the home country (Collins and Isichei, 2018). However, this descriptor suggests overlap with other forms of ‘commuter’ style working. So, it is critical to distinguish IRAs from long distance commuting (LDC) using FIFO mobility involving rotation into and out of a worksite in an inter- or intra-regional context within a single country and other forms of international FIFO commuting/travel.

LDC is defined “as living and working in different locations due to work conditions where a daily return home after work is not possible” (Saxinger *et al.*, 2016, p.629). LDC is typically used in remote areas where labour cannot be sourced locally, for example in land-based mining (Sibbel, 2009) and in oil and gas extraction in remote and climatically harsh locations (such as in Arctic USA, Canada and Russia). It is also used in non-permanent bases of operation such as construction and engineering projects (for example, railways, dams and tunnels) (Saxinger *et al.*, 2016). LDC via FIFO mobility is also used to service the offshore oil industry (Sibbel, 2009). It is important to recognise that LDC/FIFO working applies in a range of other sectors as well – for example it is used to provide medical services in remote locations (Margolis, 2012).

LDC/FIFO mobility is characteristically rotational in nature involving employees undertaking fixed periods of work away from their families followed by rest periods when they return home. For example, FIFO employees servicing remote mining operations in Australia typically live in Australian cities, leaving their families behind when they commute the long distance into remote mining camps for their fixed rotation work periods (Storey, 2001). Key



characteristics of LDC in oil and gas include: “large, territorial, circular movements to and from the workplace that can cross several time and climate zones; continuous fluctuation between intense work and recreation periods (e.g. two or four weeks on duty and two weeks or one month off-shift back home); high workloads and interchanging day and night shifts (usually 12-h work days for 7 days a week); and subordination under a strict regime of camp organization and company surveillance during the period on duty” (Saxinger *et al.*, p.629).

IRAs share some of the characteristics of LDC/FIFO mobility. For example, they are a type of mobility which, due to the remote and challenging nature of the work location (for example, it may be politically insecure and/or climatically harsh), does not permit accompanying family. The essential difference though is that IRAs operate across country borders and, as such, are a form of international relocation. So for instance, in the oil and gas industry, offshore rig working is typically serviced via LDC using FIFO helicopter transport between onshore and offshore sites in the same country. IRAs in this industry, by contrast, involve international mobility between the assignees’ home country and a remote exploration camp location in another country (from which further FIFO mobility might also include visits to that country’s offshore rigs). Shift patterns for IRAs may, for example, involve onsite working patterns of 12-h days, 7 days a week for 28 days, followed by 28 days off-shift in the home country with no requirement to work during the off-shift period (Shortland, 2018a).

Further distinctions need to be made to distinguish IRAs which are, by their very nature, solo assignments with no choice of accompanying family mobility, and various other forms of international ‘frequent flyer’ or ‘flexpatriate work’ including international short-term assignments, international commuter assignments (ICAs) and international business trips (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004). International short-term assignments typically span one to 12 months

(McDonnell and Boyle, 2012) and assignees may be accompanied by family members (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004). ICAs are reported to be of defined duration, communicated to the assignee at the outset and, in a similar manner to other forms of international assignment, involve selection processes to ensure expertise is matched to defined responsibilities. However, unlike more traditional family-accompanied international assignments, ICAs are unaccompanied: “due to either personal or company-related circumstances, the employee commutes from home to the assignment location on a regular basis e.g. returns home every week or every month” (CBI/Deloitte & Touche, 1996, p. 14). ICAs are sometimes reported as being undertaken by choice being described as “an alternative geographical arrangement to either family migration or not migrating” or as a “compromise between commitments made in the life domains of work, residence, and family” (van der Klis and Mulder, 2008, p.2).

International business trips involve frequent flying but not relocation (Mayerhofer *et al.* (2004). This is an important distinction – they are not international assignments. International business travellers do not necessarily follow a regular schedule to a single destination, trips are usually short and of undefined duration and they do not involve specific selection processes – international business travel may be part of an otherwise mainly domestic-based, home country job role (Welch *et al.*, 2007). It is also important in this context to differentiate cross-border working as this also involves international commuting. Although the employee lives in one country and commutes across the border to another neighbouring country to work, returning to home/home country after work, a cross-border worker carries out a ‘local job’ (CBI/Deloitte & Touche, 1996); so again this is not an international assignment and does not involve relocation. Finally, it is important to note that employees undertaking various types of international frequent flyer mobility are supported by different organisational policies. For example, different financial

and other support (such as training) applies to IRAs and ICAs; different supporting policy also underpins international business travel (Air Inc., 2020). This further highlights the distinctive nature of each of these different types of international ‘flexpatriation’ (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004).

### ***Occupational segregation and female international assignment participation***

Occupational segregation reflects where women are crowded into particular sectors and job roles (horizontal segregation) and levels of lower seniority (vertical segregation) (Eurofound, 2017).

International assignments demonstrate occupational segregation in respect of women’s minority share of all types of international assignments. Notwithstanding this, there is evidence to show that women have achieved some success in their challenge to international assignment gender segregation: over the past three decades, their representation in assignments over six months’ duration has risen from 3% (Adler, 1984) to 32% across all industries (Santa Fe Relocation, 2019). Nonetheless, despite women’s success in securing an increasing share of longer-term international assignments, there are still specific assignment types which appear to be particularly gender-segregated. For example: in Shortland’s (2016a) oil and gas research only 7% of women assignees undertook IRAs; in Valk and Hannon’s (2016) study only one woman featured in the sample of 24 flexpatriates on rotational assignments; and there was only one woman again in Baker and Ciuk’s (2015) study of 20 international rotational assignees and business travellers.

Women face a number of challenges in pursuing and undertaking traditional international assignments. These have been well-documented over the past several decades and reported in historical overviews of women’s inroads into the masculine international assignment arena. For example, Altman and Shortland’s (2008) review summarises these as linked to organisations believing women lack the interest or motivation to work abroad, unwillingness to send women,

and negative perceptions of their likely success and host country reactions to their deployment. Shortland and Altman's (2011) review of female expatriation looks deeper into women's experiences through the lens of the international assignment cycle drawing upon literature that records women's difficulties as greater than men's in being selected, in receiving on-assignment support (such as access to mentors, networks, and role models), and in managing repatriation challenges. The authors also report that family power, dual careers and career precedence disadvantage women's international assignment career ambitions to a greater extent than men's. Work-life conflict and responsibilities for child-rearing may compound the challenges that women face in furthering their international careers (Fischlmayr and Kollinger, 2010). Women's own passiveness and weak self-confidence have also been proposed as influencing their under-representation in international assignments (Fischlmayr, 2002). These issues suggest that organisations and women themselves will need to take determined action if occupational segregation in the heavily masculine domain of IRAs in the oil and gas industry is to be reduced to any significant degree. To begin to address this though, it is necessary to consider the labour market context and how those involved in the selection and deployment of international rotational assignees are influenced by external pressures.

### ***Labour market structures and institutional isomorphism***

The primary labour market comprises internal, external and occupational facets. When employers regularly use current employees to fill particular positions within internal job structures they are drawing from an internal labour market (ILM) where skills are developed through experience and training. The ILM can also encompass firm ILMs (FILM) whereby mobility within the same occupation but between firms takes place. A further labour market comprises the occupational labour market (OLM) considered to encompass individuals

possessing skills and qualifications validated by educational qualifications and/or the opinion of their peers (Marsden, 1999). Organisationally-assigned international assignment positions are typically sourced internally (Suutari *et al.*, 2017) from a known OLM supported by ILM training and experience, rather than from the external labour market (ELM) where the potential cost of identifying suitable labour from an unknown talent pool is higher. Assignees gaining international knowledge and skills capabilities from their posting with their current employers are highly sought after by other firms operating in the international arena, reflecting the shortages of international competencies and experience in a rapidly globalising landscape (Collings *et al.*, 2007). This suggests some emphasis upon the OLM being supported by a FILM in respect of organisationally-assigned international mobility.

To help explain why there has been so little change in women gaining entry to roles such as IRAs, the concept of institutional isomorphism is relevant (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). These authors suggest three types of change that create isomorphic responses: ‘coercive’, resulting from political influence (including formal and informal pressures exerted by other organisations and through cultural expectations); ‘mimetic’, stemming from standard responses to uncertainty (under which, in poorly understood or ambiguous conditions, organisations model themselves on others through copying or borrowing of practices); and ‘normative’, linked to ‘professionalization’ (via professional education and networks).

Oil and gas exploration firms require agreements with host country governments to explore, drill, produce and export oil and gas (Markus, 2015). Political influence can lead to ‘coercive isomorphism’: culture, organisations and markets can all provide alternative perspectives on legitimacy of behaviour (Jørgensen *et al.*, 1986) and various control systems (such as laws and rules, incentives, penalties, customs, values and beliefs) can be used to

reinforce it (Pandya and Dholakia, 1992). Short-term benefits gained through non-compliance with industry practice can result in retaliatory action. Hence, organisations engage in ‘mimetic isomorphism’ and adopt standard approaches leading to greater uniformity and stability rather than diversity (Chow, 2004). Oil and gas firms also adopt ‘normative isomorphism’ through their development of early careers as part of graduate fast track development programmes (drawing from similar universities and courses) and by selecting for top management positions from those with an international track record in the industry (Shortland, 2009). This can result in ‘mimicking people’, meaning that those reaching the top are potentially barely distinguishable from each other due to ‘professionalization’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). As management is ‘professionalized’ similarly and personnel and information are exchanged across organisations within the sector, professionals whose ideas are developed in this way then continue to exercise control systems based on their beliefs through normative processes (Scott, 1995). The theoretical perspective of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) thus predicts a bleak outcome for change in respect of both horizontal and vertical segregation. Following this theoretical frame women would be expected to remain locked behind an invisible and impenetrable ‘glass border’ (Linehan and Walsh, 1999) to IRA mobility. This leads us to consider whether and how women can challenge the status quo.

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

Given the highly exploratory research aim and the limited literature on IRAs, a qualitative case study research design was considered most suitable. This was because, as Eisenhardt (1989, p.534) notes, case studies focus “on understanding the dynamics present within single settings”,

are especially appropriate in researching hitherto un-researched issues, and can be used to provide description and test theory. Case studies enable rich description of context to be built from multiple evidence sources using different but complementary data collection methods (Yin, 2009). For example, “archives, interviews, questionnaires, and observations” can be used (Eisenhardt, 1989, p.534) to address ‘how’ and ‘why’ research questions.

External validity refers to the extent of generalisation that can flow from a research study (Yin, 2009), with rich description of case context helping to establish generalisability (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The case here concerned women’s access to and perceived professional opportunities within IRAs in the oil and gas exploration sector. The research design employed independent source materials: the views of company representatives involved in IRA deployment and those of current female international rotational assignees in two oil and gas firms. These different explanations helped to support internal research validity (Yin, 2009). Research quality also concerns reliability. Ideally, the process should be transferable to future research (Silverman, 2005). Of course, total replicability is unrealistic in a case study setting and a sole focus on constructs and their measurability generates the risk of missing the rich background and context of a case (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991). Hence, to improve reliability and following Yin (2009), a case study protocol was used (a document captured the procedures undertaken including, for example, the interview schedules) and a database was set up (where the qualitative data were stored thematically).

### *Case context*

The UK Oil and Gas Industry Peer Group had a membership of 18 global oil and gas exploration and production organisations with UK representation. The project proposal was presented to the International Assignments (IA) Managers of these 18 firms at a Peer Group meeting. Six of these

firms expressed an initial interest in the research. Exploratory discussions were then held with HR and IA Managers in these companies with the nature of the project, requirements for participant access, and the time scale involved discussed. Although four said that were unable to commit to the depth of the programme and declined to take part, two IA Managers agreed to their companies participating in the research. Both of these company personnel expressed a deep personal interest in increasing gender diversity in their firms' international assignee populations.

Alpha Com and Beta Com are used as pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Each firm had both oil and gas extraction operations, used 28 day on-shift/28 day off-shift IRA cycles, and reported that women comprised between 1-2% of their IRA populations. Alpha Com used IRAs in two countries, considered to be challenging (insecure, remote and climatically harsh) and therefore unsuited to traditional family-accompanied, long-term international assignments – one in North Africa and one in Equatorial Africa. It had four women currently on an IRA, two in each of these locations. Beta Com used IRAs in four countries – three in North Africa (regarded as insecure) and one in Central Asia (considered particularly remote and climatically harsh). It also had four women undertaking IRAs; one in North Africa and three in Central Asia.

By way of context, Alpha Com had operations in 20 countries, with its headquarters in North America and regional centres in Western Europe and East Asia. It employed around 330 international assignees (about 3% of its employees). Of these, 23 women (7% of the assignee population) were deployed on long-term (up to five years), short-term (under a year), and extended transfer international assignments (over five years). One of these women had worked as an international rotational assignee before taking up her present long-term assignment. Beta Com had operations in 27 countries with its headquarters in Western Europe. It employed around 600 international assignees (about 10% of its employees). Of these, 62 women (10% of the assignee



population) were deployed on long-term and short-term international assignments. Two of these women had previous experience of IRAs before taking up their present long-term assignments.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Face-to-face interviews were carried out with each of the IA Managers (both female) in the two firms. In addition, three HR Managers in Beta Com who held responsibility for recruitment and training (both female) and resourcing (male) were also interviewed face-to-face. The East Asian Regional HR Manager in Alpha Com (female) was interviewed by telephone. All had involvement in the selection and deployment of IRAs. The interviews averaged around 60 minutes and were conducted privately on company premises, taped and transcribed with permission. Confidentiality was assured to all six interviewees.

The IA/HR interviewees were asked to describe the context of IRAs within their firms, including the factors determining their use, average assignment lengths, and factors influencing the take-up of such assignments by women. They were also asked to comment on locations, functions and job roles of international rotational assignees and the job levels/grades of current women international assignees who were on or who had previously undertaken IRAs. In addition, they were asked to speak about how IRAs facilitated professional and career development and how training and development was managed.

The IA Managers supplied background data and contact details for all 11 female international assignees who were either currently on IRAs or who had carried them out previous to their current international assignment role. They asked each woman if she was willing to participate in the study through private e-mail correspondence and a follow-up interview with the researcher. Seven female assignees agreed to participate in the research (five by correspondence and interview; two by correspondence only, due to time constraints). In order to present a full

profile of the firms' female international rotational assignees, given the very low numbers of women employed, HR data are also included for the four women currently on IRAs who declined to correspond and be interviewed. Hence, the profiles of all 11 female international rotational assignees are given in Table 1. Pseudonyms and regional host locations are used rather than specific worksites to provide context but maintain confidentiality. Eight of the women were in mid-management grades; two at the junior to mid-management level; and one was in a junior graduate management trainee role. Five women worked in on-site engineering, geosciences or safety positions; the remainder worked in office roles such as accounting, finance, HR and communications. Where age and marital status data were available, one woman was in her 20s, five in their 30s, two in their 40s, and one aged 50+; two women were single or divorced, and five were married or partnered. None currently had dependent children although one woman was pregnant at the time of the research.

- Insert Table 1 about here -

The five in-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out with the international rotational assignees were carried out separately from the six IA/HR managers. Three (one in Alpha Com and two in Beta Com) were conducted face-to-face when they were in the UK, where the researcher was based; the other two interviews (one in each firm) were carried out by telephone while the women were abroad. All five international rotational assignee interviews were conducted in a private room on company premises, following the same semi-structured interview schedule. They were taped and transcribed with permission. The interviews averaged 60 minutes. The international rotational assignee correspondence and interview questions are outlined in Appendix 1.

The IA/HR and international rotational assignee interview transcripts/e-mail correspondence were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Three a-priori codes were used: masculine environments; selection; and professional outcomes. These codes were determined by the key content aspects of the two research questions and had been phrased as key terms included within the range of questions posed to the interviewees. The transcripts and correspondence were read carefully and coding was carried out using Microsoft Word. Different coloured stripes were applied to the text to identify the a-priori codes with emerging themes under each a-priori code noted in the margin using the review comments tool. After this exercise was completed, the documents were coded again thematically using NVivo software. The rationale behind coding twice over as separate processes and using different tools was to attempt to reduce potential coding drift. The two coding exercises were carried out around a month apart to reduce the likelihood of memory bias in the second coding exercise. Subsequently, the two coding exercises were compared and any differences in coding resolved through revisiting the texts. A summary of the coding is presented in Table 2. Quotations to illustrate the identified themes were selected to reflect the respondent population and illustrate the most important issues that emerged from the research.

- Insert Table 2 about here -

## **Findings**

The findings are presented aligned with the two research questions.

### ***Navigating the masculine environment of international rotational assignment selection***

The masculine nature of IRAs and the lack of gender diversity in camp environments were highlighted by the HR representatives who focused heavily on the ‘tough’ nature of these

locations. Regardless of their gender, these interviewees' descriptors of IRA environments (insecure, tough, and restrictive for religious and cultural reasons) suggested that they thought these would be unsuitable for women:

“Those tend to be a camp environment, that’s probably quite a significant change to actually have women in those environments ... Simply because they are locations where you wouldn’t ... want to stay in for too long at a time. Yes, they are difficult locations ... so there is absolutely \*\*\*\*\* all to do where they are. So in (North Africa) the camp is in the middle of the desert. In (Equatorial Africa) it is literally in a compound with security fencing around it ... Yes, you (as a woman) would be glad to get out.” (IA Manager, Alpha Com)

“I think there would be a perception in terms of rotation, that a lot of women wouldn’t do that because it often is quite tough.” (Resourcing Manager, Beta Com)

“It’s tough, it’s very, very tough ... 28 days on and off ... psychologically they (must be) strong enough to cope with the isolation and separation of alternate months ... Marilyn (has) come into (North Africa) ... and there are just four rotators currently, all male, about 200 locals, male, and (women) feel very isolated – it’s a cultural and religious thing.” (IA Manager, Beta Com)

“She can go offshore, but she just can’t stay overnight in (North Africa) but ... depending on your job you have to be able to stay overnight offshore, and (Marilyn) herself said that this was a problem for her development.” (Graduate Scheme Manager, Beta Com)

These views appeared to translate into a somewhat prejudicial organisational approach to selecting women for rotational work:

“One of the first questions that you would have (to ask) is ‘are you genuinely prepared to do rotational?’ ... I would spend a long time probing that ... finding out whether they really understand what rotation means.” (Recruitment Manager, Beta Com)

These quotations indicate that HR took a stereotypical view that women could be unaware of the nature of the environments in which IRA work took place and/or that IRAs were simply inappropriate for women as they were not strong enough psychologically to cope with the masculine environment. HR thus indicated that women did not fit the typical worker profile for selection for an IRA. HR’s perceptions translated into isomorphic behaviour by verbalising their potential unsuitability for this assignment type as illustrated in the following assignee quotation:

“... my line manager ... articulated the assumption that of course I wouldn’t be interested in going.” (Zoe)

Nonetheless, despite the prejudice they faced, the women currently undertaking IRAs spoke of their determination to break down organisational stereotypes. These were often linked to the nature of the role, particularly women’s perceived unsuitability for work in the field in technical roles which were likely to be more highly male-dominated than office-based positions:

“It is a man’s business ... because ... you are talking about the technical part. So who is going to be in a field operating a rig, it’s not a woman, no. Some might do it now but ... it is a traditional male business ... Let’s be honest about it, it is a very conservative, male-oriented, white culture. But that doesn’t mean that a woman cannot succeed in it.” (Henrietta)

“There are always cases that you come across in your career ... where they’ve still been the old view of the guys that this is a male’s job, because especially being in engineering and technical ... you come across guys, men who can’t adapt to women, and with some

you might as well figure out that is the reason why they treat you how they treat you (but) you have your chance to change the world.” (Nana)

These quotations highlight that women were conscious that men had traditionally held IRA technical roles. Men’s views of their right to dominate IRA work were acknowledged but required challenge for occupational segregation to be reduced.

While some of the female international rotational assignees achieved their positions through the official selection channels whereby jobs were posted on the intranet and were open to application from across the company, others took active steps to circumvent the selection processes which they did not view as favourable to supporting their appointments. For example, they made use of their contacts and networks to secure IRA roles:

“When I was on a business trip to the asset (field operation) I asked the manager whether they needed another engineer. Everything happened behind the scenes and then I was asked by my manager if I would like to take up that position to which I said yes.”

(Marilyn)

The female assignees also spoke about how they had ‘fought’ to gain access to IRA roles and how, through their actions, they paved the way for other women to join them:

“When I started in (North Africa), I was the first woman and I had to battle to get me down there ... I think ... sending one woman in a camp where you have got maybe 800 men ... that wasn’t proper. But I was accepted, and now there are quite a few women who work down there. I was polite to everyone but I was hassled. So I would always report it immediately ... (but) you can’t talk down to men otherwise you are in conflict ... So it can be daunting.” (Carly)

### ***International rotational assignment professional and career progression outcomes***

The discussions with the HR professionals in both firms indicated a mixed message in respect of professional outcomes and career development from IRAs. While there was some acknowledgment that this assignment type could lead to some positive outcomes for both men and women, the HR view suggested that the main purpose of an IRA was to get functional tasks done:

“We like to think that they all (give) career development because ... that is how we like to sell the idea ... it can be a developmental role ... we have people that come off the rotational assignments and then go on to different types of assignments or come back into a head office role.” (IA Manager, Alpha Com)

“There’s always going to be some developmental aspects to it, but frankly, all those rotational secondments are doing a real job, they are really functional.” (IA Manager, Beta Com)

In contrast, the female assignees reported that IRAs gave international, professional, cultural and personal experiences that would not otherwise have been available to them. Even a short period on an IRA was considered helpful in this regard. The women placed emphasis on the technical and personal challenges that flowed from undertaking these remote assignments which they said led to significant professional and personal development. For example:

“My current location offers many technical challenges that I would not experience elsewhere. This will enhance my knowledge and competency profile.” (Marilyn)

“For me personally, it has been a fabulous opportunity ... just simply because the context and the environment is so difficult that you find yourself drawing upon I guess a strength

you wouldn't necessarily get the opportunity to draw upon if you didn't have those kinds of pressures." (Quelle)

The women assignees also reported that organisational perceptions of female employees in particular working in the challenging locations serviced by IRAs were positive. They suggested that by making such a valuable contribution to the company under hardship circumstances they, as women, would be well-regarded:

"I have heard people say ... if you have gone to (Central Asia) ... that is a pretty good notch. It is a good plus point." (Zoe)

Due to the remoteness of the IRA environments, those working there were considered to be self-sufficient and able to master a range of different roles as needs arose ("I like the variety" Penny). This supported the view that "you can work anywhere else afterwards because you interact with all departments in the company" (Carly). IRA working was thus viewed as aiding the development and enhancement of individuals' occupational skills profiles. Multi-skilling was also supported by the ability to undertake technical training during off-shift periods, unfettered by work requirements impinging on the time needed to complete relevant courses:

"In my experience it is more difficult to participate in training courses when on international assignments due to additional logistical challenges. This is an important benefit of my rotational assignment. I can participate during my rotational leave."  
(Marilyn)

Notwithstanding the widening of their occupational skills profile, one of the main issues that emerged from the discussions and correspondence with the women assignees concerned their ambivalent views of "chances of promotion" (Penny). They reported that working on IRAs for long periods led to neutral or negative career outcomes for both men and women:



“You can do it as a career move but then ... it tends to be harder I think to get promoted to high-level jobs... people who do this, tend to spend (only) a little time, maybe a couple of years ... I have got a friend from (North America), who is on a career path that is going well and he is going to (North Africa), I think rotation would be good for him for a couple of years, but he is really worried that the company, the same thing as me, is forgetting about him.” (Carly)

“It’s not actually so much career enhancing ... you just can’t stay on rotation ... and complain about career development. So you have to move on ... not every job ... on rotation does necessarily fit one into the career ladder.” (Nana)

“Has it been good for me? I don’t think it has. I don’t think professionally (in terms of promotion), it has done me any favors at all. There ... are certainly no women who have ever come out and gone on to better jobs. I think repatriation is a real problem ... especially from here.” (Quelle)

In relation to career advancement, it was notable that only one of the women who had undertaken an IRA gained a grade promotion as a result and that she had asked for her role to be evaluated:

“I felt stuck in a rut in terms of grade and recognition of my professional experience, and thought that the rotational role was an opportunity for me to seek promotion ... I had the role evaluated and it was upgraded, and I was promoted as a result. I had begun to feel left behind compared to other colleagues with comparable experience and performance track records, so this assignment enabled me to re-position myself.” (Zoe)

All of the other women moved up gradually within their banding, but remained in the same grade during their IRA and, for those who had taken another different assignment type after their IRA, in their successive assignment.

IRA workers are paired with back-to-backs. This means that another person carries out the role during the assignee's off-shift period. This did not appear to be a problem for those holding technical field positions. However, for those working in on-site office-based roles, particularly those involved directly with people and communications such as HR and Corporate Social Responsibility, the outcomes from back-to-back working were different. These women reported that assignees and replacement workers both have opportunities to bring potentially varying perspectives to the development and implementation of the single role:

“If it was just you in the assignment and there was no back-to-back, then you have greater ownership of the role. There is no ownership in the job at all and you can't afford to do that because otherwise you would kill yourself, because for everything I do my back-to-back might disagree, and undo it while I am away and then I would do it again and then they undo it. So ... it is very difficult to bring something of your own to the role and so ... you ... don't feel as if it is completely within your gift ... it is quite dysfunctional actually.” (Quelle)

The invisible and forgotten nature of being an international rotational assignee were highlighted as problematic particularly by those whose home countries, to which they returned on their off-shifts, were not company headquarters locations. These women said that they were not seen by top management; their work location was remote and seldom visited by the senior personnel who were involved in career planning, and they had no informal opportunities to go into head office on their off-shifts to maintain or raise their profiles:

“The company tends to forget about you when you do those types of assignments often. So if you’re not really outspoken ... you are not visible to the company, you tend to do your work, and no one else sees you. We have to make more effort to be seen than in town where people work five days a week.” (Carly)

“There is absolutely zero recognition ... because you are not sitting in front of them every day, you kind of get sent away. I’m in Australia. It’s not like I’m in the (HQ) going into the office every off-shift. So you are effectively forgotten about and then when you come back, you are seen as the same person that you were when you left for three years.” (Quelle)

In summary, IRAs helped the women assignees to build a wider occupational skills profile due to the variety of tasks and degree self-sufficiency required in these roles. Such multi-skilling enhanced their ability to work in a wider range of future jobs. The women also reported enhanced professional and personal outcomes from their IRA experiences which developed their inner strengths. They believed that women, in particular, were well-regarded by their firms for their contribution in challenging IRA environments. However, they felt that these valuable outcomes could be achieved on a relatively short IRA. Notwithstanding these positive outcomes, the women reported that IRAs did not lead to promotion within their own firms. This was explained by remote locations being invisible to top management responsible for career planning, compounded to some extent by lack of role ownership if the members of the back-to-back pair were not mutually supportive. Career progression issues were considered, in the main, to be similar for both men and women – the longer an individual spent undertaking IRAs, the more forgotten they became.

## Discussion

Rotational work in the oil and gas industry is portrayed as male. The Deepwater Horizon disaster movie is a case in point; one woman stars in an otherwise totally male oil rig worker cast list. In publicly available industry literature, photos show men working on rigs or in the field; women, if they are shown, are in office roles. The use of stereotypical images carries a message of prevalent sexism (Plakoyiannaki *et al.*, 2008) and as such, does little to dispel the picture of traditional oil and gas industry occupational segregation. IRAs are also highly masculine in this industry, even more so than other types of international assignments. In this study women comprise barely a handful of international rotational assignees in the case study firms. Set against this backdrop, this research explored women's efforts to enter the IRA male arena and to understand how women value the worth of these jobs. Aligned with research into working in hostile environments (Bader *et al.*, 2019) undertaking IRAs into challenging oil and gas exploration camps raised female international rotational assignees' self-esteem and self-efficacy. It found that female assignees rated IRA work highly for its technical challenge, personal and professional development, and in raising competency profiles while on-shift as well as the opportunities presented to pursue training and education opportunities while off-shift. Training and work experience opportunities thus appeared to assist in providing the necessary skills development that should have resulted in advancement in their firms' ILMs (Marsden, 1999). This suggests that IRA job opportunities should feature highly for women who wish to increase their occupational skills profiles.

Mimetic isomorphic pressures linked to standard responses to uncertainty influence employers' actions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) shaping and reinforcing occupational segregation within IRAs. With respect to facilitating women's access to IRAs, transparent

selection processes and supportive management are critical factors (Harris, 2002). Yet, in this study, women faced a number of hurdles in being appointed, including stereotypical assumptions from the IA/HR managers that they would not want to undertake such assignments because they were tough, isolated, difficult, boring, lonely, and women might not understand what IRA work meant in practice, linked to an implied lack of psychological strength needed to cope. These issues all suggest that employers do not believe that women would be interested in - or serious about - undertaking IRAs. In reality though, women reported the technical challenges of the work and the cultural diversity flowing from the mix of local personnel and the nationalities of the staff flying in (Vodden and Hall, 2016) provided professional and personal developmental opportunities which made such assignments worth pursuing. Given management's entrenched perceptions of IRA work, highlighting their HR professionalization and the pressures of normative isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), any woman wishing to do it would need to be very determined to prove that she had thought through the implications. She would also need to be very persuasive in her efforts to be taken seriously. Added to this, evidence from this study indicates facets of coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) at play represented by the cultural and religious pressures in local environments, such as those relating to the role of women in North Africa, in reinforcing the 'legitimacy' of the gendered nature of IRA occupational segregation. This leads to the following future research proposition:

RP1: Local cultural and management professionalization pressures compound the barriers women face in breaking down the maintenance of male monopoly in international rotational assignments.

It is notable that although the women in this study identified significant skills development advantages from undertaking IRAs which potentially increased their opportunities to work in a

wider OLM, their assessment of the value that this form of assignment brought to ILM career advancement was very limited. They identified issues such as shared role ownership, limited working time (only six months a year), invisibility to senior management, lack of access to head office or other career-enhancing locations, and poor repatriation job prospects, all of which were seen as detrimental to ILM career progression for both men and women. For example, unlike job sharing in a non-internationally mobile context where job share partners typically share a role during a 40-hour week and communication with their partner does not ‘turn off’ part-way through the week (Olmsted, 1979), in IRA working the lack of contact with their back-to-back from month to month (other than brief handovers at the airport on the shift change) led to a lack of continuity in the delivery of the job. This potentially affected role performance and consequently career outcomes. And, although the IA/HR managers reported that these functional jobs could result in career advancement, they did not wholeheartedly believe this to be true. Only one of the women had advanced up the internal grading structure as a result of her IRA (and she had to ask to be re-graded). Despite the obvious lack of promotion internally (suggesting that such assignments do little to improve the women’s opportunities to advance through the career ladders within their firms’ ILMs), the women reported that their assignments meant that they could ‘work anywhere else’ afterwards. This indicates that female assignees can use IRAs to increase their opportunities within the wider remit of the OLM. This accords with Marsden (1999) who reports on the demise of the ILM as firms place less emphasis on in-firm training and experience in giving promotional opportunities; the OLM, however, with its emphasis on qualifications and peer recognition provides a stronger basis for career advancement. Indeed, the women assignees noted that IRAs provided extremely favourable peer recognition of mastering

technical, logistical and cultural challenges. This leads to the following future research proposition:

RP2: International rotational assignments provide women with an opportunity to broaden their occupational labour market profile through recognition of assignment achievements and opportunities to extend their professional development.

Although institutional isomorphic actions appear to maintain masculine occupational segregation, women are making some headway into IRAs. However, a final point arising from this study concerns the roles undertaken by the female international rotational assignees. Six of the 11 women assignees whose profiles are included in Table 1 held office-based roles that could be considered as more ‘feminine’ occupations. Only five women (one in Alpha Com and four in Beta Com) worked in field roles such as engineering, geology/geophysics and on-site health and safety. This potentially suggests that women’s challenge to the male domination of IRAs in the oil and gas exploration industry is demonstrating horizontal segregation as women exhibit ‘channelling’ into accounts/finance, HR and communications positions.

### ***Implications for practice***

The literature on working in hostile environments suggests a number of actions that employers can take to reassure and support their international assignees in these locations. For example, employers can stress how they promote assignees’ well-being (Faeth and Kittler, 2020), their focus on increased workplace security (including secure housing) (Posthuma *et al.*, 2019) and their emphasis on comprehensive crisis planning (Gannon and Paraskevas, 2019), building trust in their employees that they will deliver such support as promised (Baker and Ciuk, 2015). In relation to career outcomes, employers might highlight the valuable, rare knowledge employees obtain when undertaking international assignments in hostile environments (Suder *et al.*, 2017)

and ensure that performance management reviews include effective goal setting, development options, and supportive people management approaches (Valk and Hannon, 2016). These actions can be applied to IRAs both in hostile locations and those which are challenging for other reasons. In addition, employers should provide realistic previews of the nature of the assignment location, including any risks involved in undertaking IRAs, and underline the organisation's duty of care (Bader *et al.*, 2019).

As shown in this study, to encourage women specifically to undertake IRAs, further action is needed by HR professionals to understand for themselves what these jobs and camp lifestyles are realistically like for women such that representative information on what IRAs entail can be presented to those potentially interested in applying for such roles. Involving current and previous female international rotational assignees in this process (for example by disseminating knowledge via debriefing on return to the home country) could help encourage other women to consider such assignments. This could also help to reduce HR and management stereotyping and emphasis on masculinity, toughness and challenge, and raise the profile of women on IRAs. HR should also place emphasis on issues such as personal and professional development and lifestyle factors, together with balanced explanations of the pros and cons of such assignments in relation to women's career outcomes. Developing networks or facilitating mentoring arrangements between women considering IRAs as a career choice and those involved with them already could be valuable in this regard. Greater management visibility/interest in the work performed by female international rotational assignees will raise their profile, providing wider labour market opportunities for these assignees and a known talent pool for their firms; management visits to the worksites or provision made for international rotational assignees to



visit head/regional offices could address this aspect. Underpinning all of these initiatives is the need for transparent selection processes to support gender diversity in IRAs.

### ***Limitations and further research***

This research was conducted within two oil and gas exploration and production firms. Their use of IRAs was limited to a relatively small number of exploration camp locations. To extend the findings and take this research forward, a larger number of oil and gas firms, other extractive industry companies and organisations in other sectors that use IRAs, operating across a wider range of host locations are needed to examine their applicability more widely. This research study's sample was small, due to just two oil and gas firms agreeing to participate and the very limited numbers of women undertaking IRAs that they employed. Access limitations meant that the research was cross-sectional. To extend this exploratory research, larger samples of female international rotational assignees are required. Longitudinal research could help us understand the extent to which women's IRA experiences result in career advancement beyond the ILM to encompass a wider OLM as they progress further within their careers. This study specifically examined women entering the male preserve of oil and gas exploration IRAs. Further research into women assignees' pre-disposition to working with predominantly men - as opposed to working in a more gender-balanced or female workforce - could also assist our understanding of gender segregation in IRAs. Men's reasons for undertaking IRAs and what they see as career advantages require research as well to determine any similarities and differences to those expressed by women. Men's views on women's incursion into male international rotational assignee territory would also make an illuminating research study.

## **Conclusion**

Theoretical discourse, informed by labour market structures and institutional isomorphism, suggests placing an emphasis on an attitudinal shift among HR managers to encourage women's take-up of IRAs. Organisational recognition of the personal and professional development that flows from undertaking this assignment type appears to be largely unrecognised, and thus a valuable source of talent is overlooked within firms' ILMs. Stereotypical views of the nature of IRA roles and the locations where they are carried out do little to widen interest in such assignment opportunities amongst women in the workforce. In essence, while women might view undertaking IRAs as worthwhile occupationally, organisational processes can serve to discourage or block female entry, reinforcing this male IRA bastion.

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**Table 1: Female Rotational Assignee Profiles**

| <b>Pseudonym and company</b> | <b>Information gathered</b>                              | <b>Home country</b> | <b>Company sending location</b> | <b>Rotational assignment location</b> | <b>Assignment length</b>                                       | <b>Current job role</b>                          | <b>Current Grade</b> | <b>Age range</b> | <b>Marital/family status</b> |
|------------------------------|--|---------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|----------------------|------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Alpha Com</b>             |  |                     |                                 |                                       |  |  |                      |                  |                              |
| Carly                        | Telephone interview + E-mail correspondence + HR data    | France              | Western Europe                  | North Africa                          | Current: 6 year term on rotation                               | Geologist  | Middle               | 30-34            | Married/expecting a baby     |
| Henrietta                    | Face-to-face interview + E-mail correspondence + HR data | USA                 | North America                   | North Africa                          | Previous: 2½ years on rotation; now on long-term assignment    | Accountant                                       | Middle               | 50+              | Widowed/two adult children   |
| Shalu                        | HR data only   | USA                 | North America                   | North Africa                          | Current: 2 year term on rotation                               | Accountant                                       | Middle               | 30-34            | No data                      |
| Joy                          | HR data only   | USA                 | North America                   | Equatorial Africa                     | Current: 4 year term on rotation                               | Information Management                           | Middle               | 50+              | No data                      |
| Avril                        | HR data only   | UK                  | Western Europe                  | Equatorial Africa                     | Current: 4 year term on rotation                               | Finance  | Middle               | 35-39            | No data                      |
| <b>Beta Com</b>              |  |                     |                                 |                                       |  |  |                      |                  |                              |
| Quelle                       | Face-to-face interview + E-mail correspondence + HR data | Australia           | Western Europe                  | Central Asia                          | Current: 3 year term on rotation                               | Communications + Corporate Social Responsibility | Middle               | 30-34            | Married/no children          |
| Zoe                          | Face-to-face interview + E-mail correspondence + HR data | UK                  | Western Europe                  | Central Asia                          | Current: 1 year on rotation                                    | Human Resources                                  | Middle               | 40-44            | Partnered/no children        |
| Nana                         | Telephone interview + E-mail correspondence + HR data    | Germany             | Western Europe                  | Central Asia                          | Previous: 4 year term on rotation; now on long-term assignment | Engineering                                      | Middle-lower         | 35-39            | Married/no children          |
| Penny                        | E-mail correspondence + HR data                          | UK                  | Western Europe                  | Central Asia                          | Previous: 2 year term on rotation; now on long-term assignment | Geophysics                                       | Middle               | 45-49            | Married/no children          |
| Marilyn                      | E-mail correspondence + HR data                          | UK                  | Western Europe                  | North Africa                          | Current: 1 year term on rotation                               | Engineering                                      | Junior               | 25-29            | Single/no children           |
| Geraldine                    | HR data only   | Trinidad & Tobago   | Caribbean                       | Central Asia                          | Current: on rotation - no data on length                       | Health and Safety                                | Middle-lower         | No data          | No data                      |

**Table 2: Thematic Coding**

| <b>A-priori codes</b> | <b>Emerging themes</b>  |
|-----------------------|---|
| Masculine environment | Camps<br>Culture<br>Friendships<br>Gender diversity<br>Isolation<br>Security<br>Shift work  |
| Selection             | Tough environment<br>Additional assignments<br>Conflict<br>Interviews<br>Intranet<br>Male priority<br>Networks<br>Prejudice<br>Stereotyping<br>Technical roles  |
| Professional outcomes | Assignment length<br>Back-to-backs<br>Career growth<br>Career planning<br>Cultural experience<br>Development<br>Functional work<br>Headquarters<br>International experience<br>Multi-skilling<br>Occupational skills<br>Personal experience<br>Professional skills<br>Promotion<br>Repatriation<br>Role ownership<br>Self-sufficiency<br>Technical challenge<br>Training<br>Visibility<br>Well-regarded |

## **Appendix 1**

### ***Female international rotational assignees' E-mail correspondence questions***

1. Background data: home country, sending location, assignment location, assignment length, grade, job role, marital and family status, age range? Previous assignments undertaken (type, length, location)? Which types of assignment would you consider undertaking in the future?
2. How did you hear about and get selected for the international rotational assignment (IRA) vacancy?
3. Please comment on the importance of training offered to you in respect of undertaking an IRA?
4. How important were the following career issues/professional outcomes in relation to your decision to undertake an IRA: gaining international experience, cultural understanding, professional experience and/or personal experience; achieving promotion abroad and/or on return; the potential to enhance your career by going? Which are the most important to you and why?
5. Please comment on the nature of the IRA environment (location, assignee population/profile, etc.)

### ***Female international rotational assignees' semi-structured interview schedule***

1. How would you describe the purpose of your international rotational assignment (IRA): Developmental? Functional/project-based? Strategic?
2. What do you see as the main advantages and disadvantages of undertaking an IRA?
3. How did the selection process work?

4. When you decided to take your IRA what priority did you give to your career? To what extent do you believe that going on an IRA is crucial to professional outcomes: Your development? Your career progression?
5. How important are training interventions/other development opportunities? Why?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add on the nature of the masculine environment?