

REPORT ON THE WORKSHOP
‘GLOBALLY MOBILE PROFESSIONAL FAMILIES:
DISTANCE, TIME, AGE AND GENDER’
hosted by the International Gender Centre, November 21st 2003

INTRODUCTION

The International Gender Studies Centre (IGS), until recently the Cross Cultural Centre for research on Women, has had an interest in globally mobile expatriates for more than thirty years. Among other books we single out two: Shirley Ardener and Hilary Callan’s ‘The Incorporated Wife’ (1984), a collection of articles on the wives of men who were regularly re-located by their employers, and Helen Callaway’s ‘European Women in Colonial Nigeria’ (1987). Last year, Deborah Bryceson, one of our members edited with Ulla Vuorela ‘The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks’.

We felt that there would be value in bringing together a wide range of people interested in globally mobile families. Those who are practically involved relatively seldom meet with those who have an academic interest in the subject. Those researchers who are social scientists often do not speak the same language as those from a business management background. Consultants who train expatriates often have a different concept of ‘culture’ from anthropologists. Those interested in middle class expatriates seldom talk with those interested in economic migrants and refugees – yet many of the issues affecting families, are very similar.

Globally mobile professionals come in very different forms. They include business people, UN officials, NGO workers, diplomats and long-timers married to local people. And business people themselves range from the employees of large international corporations who sign up for a mobile career to the singleton expatriate hired by a national firm.

There has been increasing interest in globalisation: in the characteristics of emerging and evolving global societies – the extent to which they exist and the levels at which they operate. There has been particular interest in the emergence of what might be called the global capitalist class. Tumbling air-fares, the internet and e-mail affect not only how organisations operate across national frontiers but also the nature of family formation. They affect, too, the concept of ‘home’, or indeed ‘homes’ and the nature of social networks. The concept of the nuclear family as the only expatriate model has long since gone. All the major employers of expatriates employ women as well as men and the problems facing dual career families are very real. Families are split across different locations, form and re-form in a far wider range of patterns than formerly. It was the purpose of the workshop to explore some of the issues facing today’s mobile families from a gender perspective.

This report is made up of the abstracts provided by each of the people who presented a paper followed by reflections on the day. The workshop was convened by Anne Coles, assisted by Josephine Reynell, Janette Davies, Deborah Bryceson and Tina Wallace. For further information please contact Anne Coles at anne.coles@qeh.ox.ac.uk.

PROGRAMME

Session 1 Global and cross-cultural issues

Kit Lawry *Globally mobile families and cultural sensitivity*

Lynne Kay *Expatriate women's differing perspectives on Malawi*

Marianne van Bakel *A piece of cake? Dutch diplomatic families in the UK*

Session 2 Transnational family institutional support systems

Judy Moody Stuart *The changing expectations of a global employee's dependents and their recognition in a large corporation. The genesis of Outpost and SEC.*

Susie Inwood *Corporate perspective on how to prepare and support families on assignment*

Emilie Salvesen *Family support systems in the British Diplomatic Service*

Session 3 Dynamics of transnational families

Emefa Takyi *Ghanaian diplomatic families in London*

Patreeya Kitcharoen *Thai women migrants in England: impacts on family well-being and gender relations*

Anne Coles *The passage of time: changing expatriate patterns and challenges*

Session 4 Transnational families and 'home'

Judith Thomas *Expatriate women living in compounds in the Middle East*

Anne Marie Fechter *Home(s) away from Home: Expatriates and the Internet*

ABSTRACTS OF THE PRESENTATIONS

Kit Lawry

“Being at ease and effective: how important is cultural sensitivity for globally mobile families?”

‘There are no foreign lands; only the traveller is foreign.’ R L Stevenson

Introduction: The normal stages of adjusting to changes to where we live include: settling in, getting accustomed to the new cultural environment, being at ease and effective, then preparing to return home or move on. This paper applies particularly to the second and third stages: getting accustomed to the new cultural environment, and being at ease and effective. The paper consists of five parts and looks at the following issues:

1. Getting accustomed to the new cultural environment:

What is “culture”? A brief summary of different theories and definitions of culture, eg Hofstede, Said, Calas, Kluckhohn

2. Being at ease and effective, both professionally and in private life:

Statement of the problem: “the myth of the expert” (Hoecklin 1995) suggests that if only the visitor / expatriate / adviser has enough technical expertise, cultural expertise

is not necessary. This contrasts strongly with my experience of foreign “experts” invited by local or international donor organisations to a country to solve a particular set of problems encountering serious difficulties in passing on their knowledge. This is not because of a lack of technical expertise but because of their lack of knowledge of local culture, and local ways of proceeding and communicating. A conference in Malawi on cross-cultural issues in the management of development projects confirmed my incipient feelings that, beyond tools and approaches to work, the attitudes and inter-personal skills of people who work in countries and cultures not their own were important. This does not apply to development work alone, although my research focussed on international NGOs. Expatriates living or working in a country and culture not their own need what I called “cultural sensitivity” to be at ease and effective. Other authors refer to cross-cultural awareness or cultural competence.

3. What is “cultural sensitivity”?:

Brief summary of theories of difference, and the power values implicit in categorizing Working definitions of “cultural sensitivity”: the ability to appreciate and understand cultural perspectives and assumptions different from one’s own; the ability to reflexively recognise one’s own taken-for-granted or accepted paradigms, and how they affect one’s thinking and behaviour; cultural sensitivity involves an awareness of self and one’s own paradigms which leads to an understanding of both self and others.

4. Is cultural sensitivity important for globally mobile families?:

Brief reference to the globalisation / glocalisation debate and the convergence / divergence debate.

5. Can cultural sensitivity be learned, as a skill?:

Models of stages of gaining cultural sensitivity: Bennett, Bhawuk and Triandis

6. Conclusion:

I think cultural sensitivity is very important for globally mobile families, and can to a certain extent be learned or acquired. But do globally mobile family members *want* to learn? Are they in any way selected for their openness to cultural learning?

Lynne Kay

‘Expatriate Women’s different perspectives on Malawi’

*‘Where you arrive does not matter as much
as who you are when you arrive there (Seneca)’*

How often have you heard an expatriate (yourself?) saying how fantastic a particular country (or continent) is, or how they hate “this place”. But to what extent is it factors to do with ourselves rather than the place that determine our experience? In this paper, I explore this question, using insights from my own experience as well as the perspectives of expatriate women I interviewed for my book (forthcoming), “And Then I Came Here”. What did the women perceive as barriers to adapting to a new country, to what extent did they eventually settle, and what helped the process of adjustment?

“And Then I Came Here” is an oral history of 30 expatriate women. The women were all living in Lilongwe, Malawi, at the end of the 1990s, and were a diverse group, typical of many expatriate circles. They came from 18 countries and five continents, ranged in age from 28 to 62, and included women following a partner, women with the leading job, and single women abroad in their own right. All were in Malawi on contract with one or other international development agency.

My intention in gathering these women’s perspectives was twofold. Firstly, I had been living overseas myself for around 20 years and wanted some time to reflect on my experience; maybe other women’s perspectives would shed some light. Secondly, I had spent a lot of my time abroad sharing stories with other expatriates and I wanted to record some of these stories, (a) because I found them interesting and (b) because I thought they might interest and help others in similar situations. I think I was drawn to focusing on women for two reasons: I had generally found women to be more forthcoming than men, and I assumed that their experiences would be closer to mine. I chose this particular group of women because they happened to be sitting on my doorstep in Lilongwe. One thing that emerged from the women’s stories was that, while there was a commonality to their experiences, the interplay of each woman’s personality, background, circumstances, and past and present experience made for intensely personal perspectives.

Marian van Bakel

‘A piece of cultural cake? Dutch diplomatic life in the United Kingdom’

In the expatriate literature, the emphasis lies on expatriate assignment in far away countries, because it is assumed that assignments in nearby countries do not pose as many problems. However, research suggests that expatriate assignments within Europe are not without problems. Little is known about postings of diplomats. This paper aims to give insight into the way that Dutch diplomats live in London and into the difficulties they encounter there. In the first section, the Dutch Diplomatic Service is introduced. Then, based on interviews with Dutch diplomats and partners of diplomats, a description is given of Dutch diplomatic life in London. In the second section, special attention is given to cultural differences between the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For this purpose, additional interviews were conducted with expatriates and partners of expatriates.

The study found that diplomats do not encounter many cultural differences in the UK, whereas expatriates indicate that cultural differences do cause difficulties and that a sound preparation is important. An explanation for this difference might be that expatriates have more contact with locals on a social and a professional level than diplomats, which makes cultural differences more salient for them. Additionally, in contrast with expatriates who are often selected ‘at the coffee machine’, diplomats apply, are selected and trained for an international job. In conclusion, the results indicate that certain people, e.g. diplomats, adapt more easily than other people, e.g. first-time expatriates. It is important to realise that there are cultural differences between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands that can cause difficulties for

certain people. A preparation for these differences can be necessary or at least useful, especially when an expatriate is sent abroad for the first time.

Judy Moody Stuart

‘The changing expectations of a global employee's dependents, and their recognition in a large company: the genesis of Outpost and SEC.’

In the late 80s Shell engineers and scientists worldwide were harder to recruit and definitely less mobile, often constrained by a spouse who was trying to run her/his own life. So in 1991 the Exploration and Production department initiated an independent Survey (called Outlook) which was sent out in 1993 to all expatriates on the move (including Omanis, Nigerians, Malaysians, Turks, Australians Americans etc.) each being given a parallel identical copy for their spouses to fill in, testing aspirations and worries of both partners separately. The issues that emerged from the Survey were focussed into six groups, two of which concerned the spouses alone: Spouse careers and employment, and Spouse recognition and involvement. Task-force groups were set up with about twelve persons including spouses, meeting perhaps four times in Company time in The Hague, to devise new systems that responded to the central concerns of each designated group. A systemic change resulted: the unit of expatriation within Shell was changed by HR from “an employee” with or without dependants, to “the family” which could be a one-person family.

Thus in 1995 the SEC Spouse Employment Consultancy was set up, accessible in Shell Central Office The Hague providing a self-referral data-base of spouse activities – whether voluntary, paid or career – enabling country-specific information to be shared directly between spouses, with an enthusiastic HR professional to give free advice and a training allowance for any moving spouse. Outpost (over fifty information network centres in over forty different countries) was set up in The Netherlands as a not-for-profit foundation “Stichting Outpost” funded via the Shell HR budget, with the cost reclaimed from a levy on the employee’s Business department. The Outpost Foundation has a Board: three Shell employees, two spouses, one spouse/non-Shell outsider. The Shell-spouse Director and her team of volunteers and paid workers have acted between Shell and the spouse, arranged Global Conferences, publish Destinations magazine, provide a forum for health and education matters, a welcome service, maintain the electronic network. Two years prior to this, Shell wives of thirty-six nationalities had gained recognition by writing, editing and publishing independently for charity, an anthology of philosophy and anecdote *Life on the Move* from sixty countries over sixty-five years. Recently an off-site confidential professional archive of Shell family letters, diaries, journals etc has been set up.

Susie Inwood

‘Globally Mobile Families: A Corporate Perspective on How to Prepare and Support Families on Assignment’

The performance of BG Group plc's international business is critical to the future success of the company and is directly affected by BG's ability to resource its international activities with the most suitable employees. Obviously this includes proven technical competence but also, critically, compatible domestic circumstances and the ability to adapt to changes in both professional and home life.

The guiding principles of the Group's international assignment policies include helping the family unit to stay together by allowing, wherever possible, the assignee to be accompanied by their family on assignments whilst recognising that, due to a variety of factors, some assignment locations will necessarily be unaccompanied. All assignees and accompanying dependants have comprehensive pre-assignment medical examinations, a face to face briefing with HR and with the external tax adviser and, where appropriate, with the Company's security adviser.

Accompanied assignments are conditional on the accompanying spouse/partner attending these briefings and then undertaking a familiarisation visit to the host location. Cultural orientation briefings are mandatory for "first timers". Language training is encouraged.

A "case manager" provides a "one stop shop" ongoing support and advice service using telephone, E mail and websites.

Personal effects are shipped to the host location or stored. Other benefits include free host country housing, utilities, a car and medical insurance plus expatriate allowances, educational support, flights home and flights for dependants to visit.

A Partner Support Programme now provides £2,000 (tax free) a year for courses/distance learning/career advancement or change of direction which may be accrued and used within 6 months of repatriation.

Experience over many years and with many assignments has shown that the payback on the investment of thorough pre-assignment preparation and support, and a good benefits package, significantly increases the success rate at which the family adapts and the assignee settles productively into the new role.

Emilie Salvesen

‘Family support systems in the British diplomatic service’

Traditionally, the position of the consort of a British Diplomatic Officer was based on the premise of dedication. Nowadays, The Diplomatic Service Families Association (DSFA), largely funded through an FCO grant and recognised as a real partner for the FCO Administration, works to implement the spouse/partner premise of Michael Jay, Permanent Under-Secretary at the FCO: 'the only right model is the model that's right for you'.

One focus of the DSFA today is to make its membership fully aware that the premise of dedication no longer exists in the FCO. For many younger partners this is a self-evidence. Other spouses do not accept that it is true or possible to put into practice. More work needs to be done before it is a reality everywhere and for everyone. The

DSFA for its part encourages and helps spouses and partners to define their own position.

Information is key to making informed decisions, and the DSFA presses consistently for adequate information to be made available to spouses and partners as they and their officer-partner decide which overseas posts to bid for. A steady rise in bilateral agreements has increased the number of countries in which diplomatic spouses/partners can work legally outside the UK Mission. A training fund available to each DS spouse/partner posted overseas allows them to train in a 'portable skill'. FCO policy encourages spouse/partner employment in UK Missions. A link with the University of London Careers Service links DS spouses and partners to expert guidance on how to use their education and skills to maximum effect in a global life-style. Spouse Compensation recognises the loss of earnings for spouses and partners while on a posting. The DSFA Employment Adviser provides comprehensive information (in handbooks and through individual consultation) on the opportunities and difficulties of pursuing a career in tandem with a DS officer. Education, Special Needs, Welfare and Disability are also areas where families, especially at the time of bidding for posts, can receive detailed information through the FCO and the DSFA.

The decision for postings rests increasingly with the officer (diplomats bid for overseas jobs, they are not 'sent'). The FCO and the DSFA deem it essential that bids for postings be made bearing in mind all family circumstances, so that the officer and his/her family have as full an ownership of the decision as possible.

Emefa Takyi

An initial glimpse into the lives of Ghanaian diplomatic wives in London

This paper explores a preliminary investigation into the diplomatic experience of some Ghanaian diplomatic wives in London and examines the extent to which they socially integrate themselves into the society of the host country. Their perceptions of migration, their responsibilities as diplomatic wives, their definitions of their own identities and a little about their children's experiences on the diplomatic terrain are all highlighted. Although my sample is quite small and solely reflects the views of a significant few (half of the actual number), there is no doubt that its tentative findings establish several patterns that could form an extremely useful and credible basis for a major project on Ghanaian diplomatic spouses in the future. Thus, the research question that underlies this study is "what is diplomatic life to a Ghanaian diplomatic wife in London?"

Patreeva Kitcharoen

Pains or Gains? Family perspectives on Thais in the UK

The implications of migration for family economic well-being may be clear, but the social, emotional, and psychological aspects are more ambivalent. There is tension between what is good for a country financially and what is good for social welfare, in the short and longer term. This paper draws on two recent studies.

In 2000, my informants were divided into two groups. The first worked in Thai Embassy in London and the second in Thai restaurants in middle England. It became clear that Thai diplomats and their families had received huge amounts of support at all stages of their migration, while the restaurant workers had received no support at all. The adaptation processes of these two groups to life and work in England were very different.

In 2001, I began an in depth analysis of the migratory experience of Thai women in low status unskilled jobs again focussing on restaurant workers, in county towns of central England. Secondary case studies are of a small family restaurant in the industrial north and a quasi legal restaurant in London.

Using ethnographic data, the paper compares the experiences of women in different family situations. It discusses their perceptions of the work that they are doing and its implications for their immediate families, in the UK and in Thailand. It explores their “pains and gains” in terms of economic and emotional implications, gender roles and family relations.

Anne Coles

The passage of time: Changing expatriate patterns and challenges: Results of a survey of British diplomatic partners and spouses.

Life has changed enormously for British Diplomatic spouses over the last 30 or so years, partly because of changing social attitudes in the UK and partly because the FCO has made great efforts to provide the flexibility that today’s families need. This paper presents the results of a questionnaire distributed to partners of diplomatic officers in 2003. Those questions that were quantifiable were analysed in SPSS, while the ‘open questions’ were analysed qualitatively. There was a good response with over 400 replies.

What are the characteristics of a lifetime of moves? Over a fifth of respondents had first gone overseas in the 1970s or late 1960s when life was very different. They ‘married into the Service’ and it was then assumed that they would loyally devote their lives to ‘the Diplomatic Family’. First posts are important and the memories of them remain in vivid detail. Diplomats tend to spend two-thirds of their careers overseas and thus respondents over 50 had, on average, already served in 5 overseas posts, each one typically lasting 3-4 years. Half the respondents felt that moving became harder with the passage of time. Only 15%, mostly the youngest, felt that it must get easier because of ‘experience’. There may be a generational effect: a fifth of spouses had lived abroad as children and many of their own adult children were overseas.

The paper analyses some key findings:-

For today’s diplomatic spouses work is important, in terms of both income and identity. Male spouses, in particular, feel that lack of employment affects their personal status. Two-thirds of spouses overseas had work of some kind, but it was usually part-time and the pay was generally less than they would have earned in the UK.

To what extent do spouses still feel an obligation to carry out ‘diplomatic duties’? In 1995 the FCO confirmed this was no longer expected. Yet many continue to do so. Half thought that their input could, albeit indirectly, make a difference to their partner’s career. However, there was now a choice: 75% considered that they did about as much as they wanted to.

Family roles and responsibilities change with each overseas posting. Dual career couples adapted as the balance of domestic and economic responsibilities changed. A few families temporarily divided. Although the proportion of children in boarding schools has declined, separation was still usual at the secondary stage.

Communications with family and friends have become more immediate and more fluid. Virtually all spouses used e-mail, particularly to contact friends, although phone was the main means of reaching elderly parents and recalcitrant teenagers. Over 60% of families with parents still alive had been visited by them at their present posts, half had had siblings visit and over a fifth had had more than 10 friends to stay.

To conclude, spouses seemed to find more advantages than disadvantages with diplomatic life. The main advantages are firstly enjoyment of life abroad, then the lifestyle, followed by the officer’s satisfaction with his/her work and meeting interesting people. The main disadvantages are separation from family and friends and reduction in the spouse’s career prospects.

Judith Thomas

Expatriate Women Living in Compounds In the Middle East.

The definition of “expatriate” is one who is living outside their country of origin, the action of leaving one’s country for another. The dictionary uses such terms as émigré, refugee and outcast. Our topic focuses on what it means to be an expatriate in a very specific context, that of a woman living in a particular area – the Middle East, it investigates a particular type of living arrangement – that of company compounds. A corporation – leased compound is usually separate from the general community, the complex may be surrounded by high walls with strict security operating. The houses are of uniform design and within the location there is a variety of sports facilities, swimming pools, weight and fitness rooms, saunas, tennis and racquetball courts. The size varies from maybe seven hundred houses of one major company, to smaller compounds where half a dozen houses of differing companies are located.

A result of our study was that this particular housing model increases and encourages specific problem areas of concern. This restricted lifestyle within the context of being abroad and away from the familiar, gives rise to associated pastoral and faith problems such as depression, competitiveness, alcoholism, a sense of alienation, increased marital breakdown and other subsidiary issues.

Our study focused on providing guidelines for those involved in the pastoral care of this specific category of women. A seminar was devised as an aid in developing a paradigm shift and it was intended that this would engender foundational growth for the women involved and provide a basis for later support groups.

The viewing lens through which the women evaluated their circumstances was seen to be an integral factor for their well being and spiritual growth. Interviews and a general survey provided a basis for the material.

Meike Fechter

Home(s) away from Home: Expatriates and the Internet

The Internet is often celebrated for creating 'fluid' identities, encouraging subversive strategies, and reflecting the transience that characterises many people's lives. With regard to Euro-American corporate expatriates living in Jakarta, Indonesia, especially women, I suggest that many value the Internet instead as a source of social continuity. This is often articulated in terms of 'home-making'. 'Home' does not refer to a geographically fixed residence, but a sense of home, which can be realised through social relations and shared discourses on the Internet. I suggest that the Internet enables a range of practices of home-making for expatriates, the most important being the reproduction of social relationships.

Expatriate wives often regard the Internet, and especially Email, as crucial, as these technologies help them to overcome the isolation they experience in Jakarta. A specific aspect of this is practising 'kinship online'. This refers to expatriate wives keeping in touch with elderly relatives and children during their postings abroad. As these women become caretakers via Email, they utilise modern technologies to perform rather 'traditional' female duties, which rather emphasises their, in many ways, socially and ideologically affirmative position.

Finally, I illustrate how a Internet discussion forum for expatriates is used for reproducing senses of home. This includes discourses about expatriates' 'home countries', but also about Jakarta as their 'temporary' home. The online community created through this forum contributes to feelings of 'home' through shared experiences of living in Indonesia as an expatriate. I thus argue that Internet practices are crucial for maintaining multiple senses of 'home' in expatriates' transnational existences.

Reflections

It was an incredibly rich day with a very wide-ranging collection of papers. Discussion was inevitably far too brief and for many participants the real reflection followed the event. Taking the subject forward will be exciting and a challenge. Firstly, there are major conceptual and analytical issues that need to be addressed. Perhaps feminist scholarship can contribute to a theoretical framework. Secondly, we recognised that, inevitably, there were major groups of expatriate families that were not represented at the workshop, for example academics, experts working overseas for national firms and NGOs. There are a huge number of foreign professionals working in the UK, for example in the Health Service. Importantly, we did not discuss the growing number of professional female expatriates. Thirdly, there could also be practical outcomes in the form of better understanding of cross-cultural issues for those going overseas. We plan to take these ideas forward.

A postscript and a historical perspective

Cecille Swaisland

The Role of Wives in the Diplomatic and Colonial Services Compared

Cecille Swaisland is a member of IGS and the author of 'Forty Years of Service 1950 to 1990', a history of the Women's Corona Society' (1992). She was abroad at the time of the workshop but sent us this contribution, which has been slightly shortened.

Although there were considerable similarities between the Diplomatic Service (DS) and the Colonial Service (CS) in that they both employed British citizens in overseas posts over many years, there were considerable differences when the specific topic of the role of wives is considered.

What constituted these essential differences?

Postings

DS - World-wide, mainly in capital cities, but return to the same place rather unlikely.

CS - Mainly to rural areas in tropical countries with all the lack of amenities that implied. Return to the same country was almost certain because knowledge of language and law was necessary for administration.

Family

DS – Children could sometimes be schooled at post but boarding school became inevitable later.

CS – Generally no local schooling possible so boarding was often necessary from 7 years.

Household

DS - New arrangements at each posting with no continuity of staff.

CS - Staffing more permanent, often throughout the period of service...

Wives: Social life and employment

DS – Wives had difficulty in making permanent friends. They were mainly restricted to embassy duties and entertaining. Employment was frowned on during the early years despite the wives own skills and interests.

CS – Wives moved in a mainly male world and could be frustrated by lack of employment. The more permanent placings did, however, allow more outlets in service to the local community.