

AGAINST ALL ODDS

THE THRIVING FEMALE EXPAT

A study by Katharina von Knobloch
(2021)

Share
the Love

empowering expat partners

The Thriving Female Expat: Against all odds
by Katharina (Kate) von Knobloch
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I have talked to 30 female breadwinners working abroad, and this is what I found out

As an Expat Partner Career Coach, I work with women who want to re-enter the workforce after moving abroad, after extended maternity leave in a foreign work environment, or after returning home and are overwhelmed by the potential options ahead. They often feel uncertain about the gap in their CV and struggle to sell their expertise. I work with these women to gain clarity on the next career steps and support them to present themselves in a professional context and taking action. They rediscover a sense of purpose and a professional identity next to their global family life.

While I focused my research and coaching over the last couple of years on the struggles of the accompanying partner, I always kept an eye out for the female breadwinner. The one who deliberately chose to pack her bags aims for an international career against all odds. I figured that there is not much of an understanding or even friendship between those two groups of women, and I wondered why one is struggling with regaining a sense of identity abroad while the other took matters into her own hands. Is the grass greener on the other side? Is one giving up on emancipation and the other betraying the traditional family model? Obviously, the answer is not that black and white, and I was curious about the grey areas in between and what Expat Partners can learn from the decision-making process and challenges of the Female Expat.

So I took matters into my own hand, dug a bit deeper, and interviewed 30 astonishing Female Expats from all around the world. In this report, you will find the essence of this work alongside references to great studies and papers in that field. Sharing stories is my most favorite instrument to make the world a better place. By sharing approaches, challenges, and ideas of others, we create visibility for burning issues and present potential solutions simultaneously. All these 30 women are role models in a certain way. The variety of their personal approaches and choices shows that there is not only one path to develop a successful career abroad. Reading through their quotes, one gets a feeling for their different personalities and their view on the world.

All women have been incredibly inspiring in the way they portrait their unique and very personal stories to a stranger. One can feel that these women know that they are more the exception than the norm and that by showcasing their story, they aim to contribute to a more equal world for working women in the future. They all shared in a very authentic and often vulnerable way about their struggles and mentioned their hope that more women would follow in their footsteps. Throughout this research, I talked to very confident women pursuing a more male characteristic career plan and women who used their career as an enabler for an independent life. I spoke to women who are more interested in foreign adventures than the perfect career, and I met women who found themselves in this experience by surprise.

I am grateful that this work reminded me how diverse we all are in our ambitions and desires but how unified we are in our challenges and struggles.

This report aims to showcase both: the diverse paths of Female Expats and the everyday challenges they face when conquering the world.

Thank you for your interest in this study and for spreading the word.

Kate

„One can feel that these women know that they are more the exception than the norm and that showcasing their story will contribute to a more equal world for working women in the future.“

Kate (Author)

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1. Methodology

1.1 Research Question

This study describes the working expat woman and her chosen life model. It sheds light on the decision-making process and cultural, corporate, and societal challenges along the way. It aims to answer the following questions:

How does the female breadwinner & expat think and feel about career and family planning?

What sets her apart from others who struggle to thrive abroad?

What are her personal struggles?

Which barriers did she need to overcome to find herself in this position today?

1.2 Research Approach

To answer the research questions, 30 women have been interviewed via 30-45 minutes video conversations. A standardized questionnaire was developed beforehand, and each conversation followed the same sequence of questions.

The research question was published on www.sharethelove.blog and social media to gain research participants. All 30 women were sent abroad by a company or have chosen to become an expat on their own initiative. This research does not focus on the Expat Partner who found work after moving abroad but the Female Expat. She proactively sought her next career step in another country and took her family with her or decided to go alone.

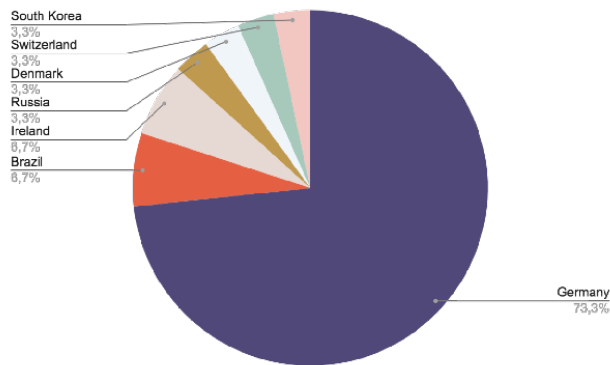
All conversations have been recorded and transcribed. The responses have been added to the qualitative analysis program MAXQDA, a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods data analysis. Each transcript has been coded to deduct quantitative conclusions from a qualitative format. This way, patterns in actions, motivation, and world views became visible, leading to 4 different personas of expats. This approach also enabled insights into the most common expat myths. It provided data on the most common challenges for female expats, their motivation to move abroad in the first place, the role of motherhood and family planning, career planning, and the influence of personality traits on the expatriation experience. Throughout this report, the quantitative outcome will be accompanied by quotes from the participants for illustration. All quotes are anonymous, and no real names or company names will be used to allow privacy. This anonymity ensures that all recorded conversations were very open, authentic, and genuine to begin with.

1.3 Participants' demographics

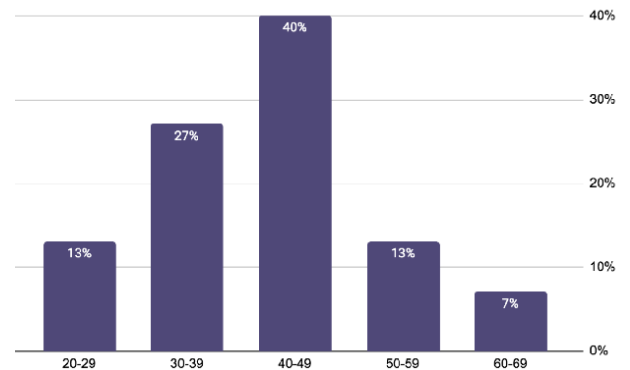
All participants are female, living abroad, or just recently returned home after working abroad. They are between 26 and 61 years old and stretch over 4 generations.

They embody all kinds of family status reaching from single mums, traditional family models to the proactive decision to choose work over family. While there was no chosen focus on the birth country during the recruitment period, most participants were born in Germany or Europe.

Birth country of participants



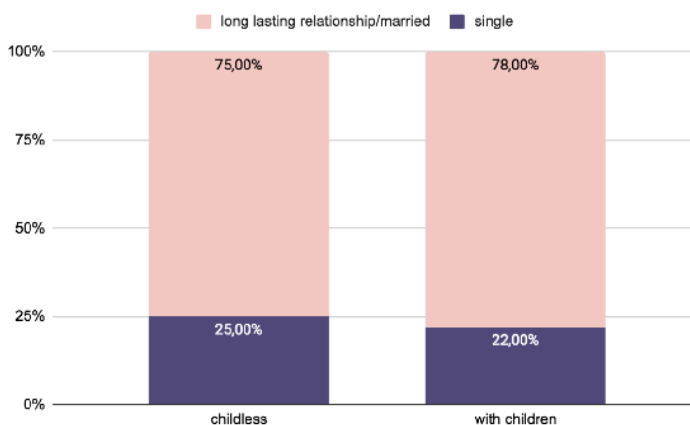
Age of participants



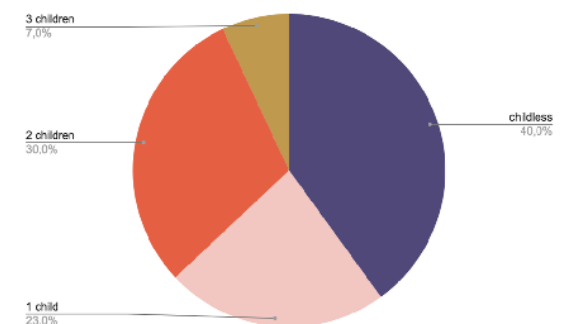
Almost 70% of participants are aged between 30-49 and represent generations X and Y. As the literature suggests, age plays a vital role in motivation and family planning. Hence, the following report will include the criteria of age in the conclusions.

60% of the interviewed women are mothers, with 78% living in a long-lasting relationship. 40% have no children for various reasons. Of that percentage, 33% plan to have children in the future, 42% have decided against children, and 25% are still undecided. The question of whether to have children or not, considering it is possible in the first place, is affecting the whole expat experience and will be taken into account throughout the report.

Family status

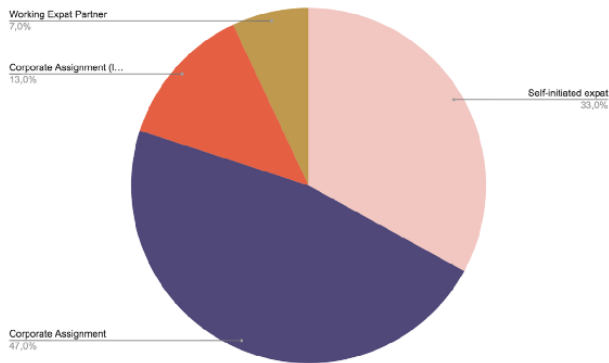


Number of children



The absolute majority of women interviewed were sent abroad by a company. These can, in turn, be subdivided into their type of contract, whereby again, the majority has a secondment contract. The second largest group comprises self-initiated expats who have proactively looked for a job abroad and changed employers. Expat Partners are only represented to a small extent, as the distinction between Expat Partners and working Female Expats was emphasized. The Expat Partners in this round were initiated abroad by their partner but had a job from the beginning.

Type of expat



Almost 60% of the women surveyed have already been abroad for more than 11 years and are also very rooted in their new home country. Only 7% plan to return home in the short term. Two women returned shortly before the survey and are open to a further stay abroad. The vast majority of 87% currently plan to continue living abroad.

The women interviewed work in a variety of very different industries. More frequently represented were women from the banking, IT, and automotive sectors. 37% of all women interviewed are holding a position with leadership responsibility.

- Banking (4)*
- IT (4)*
- Automotive (3)*
- Marketing (2)*
- Tourism (2)*
- Development Aid (2)*
- Journalism (1)*
- Consumer Services (1)*
- Medicine (1)*
- Metal (1)*

- Fashion (1)*
- Consulting (1)*
- Architecture (1)*
- Law (1)*
- Research (1)*
- Art (1)*
- Culture and Education Policy (1)*
- Logistics (1)*
- Food Manufacturing (1)*

2. Terminology

Talking about terminology is a very sensitive topic. Especially in our modern time, we are very cautious when using labels. Many are becoming more aware of the negative impact labels have on people's lives and question the meaning behind labels used. We are often more defined by labels than we want to or are aware of.

For several years now, I have been focusing on women who live abroad or want to gain a professional foothold abroad while accompanying their working partners. Accordingly, I have already encountered a variety of terms for them. In the beginning, there was the rather disrespectful term "trailing spouse". This term described, somewhat accurately, women who, motivated by their partner's work project, gave up their own careers and found themselves in a kind of dependent relationship abroad. Even today, many women perceive life as a corporate Expat Partner as a journey into the past, which often entails a return to the classic distribution of roles on a personal level as well. It was a question of time when this term was publicly defined as undesirable. After all, most expatriate partners are highly educated and committed women who struggle in this passive role.

I have switched to using the term Expat Partner in my own work because it is much more universal. Expat Partners include all expatriate partners, whether they are working or not, and whether they embarked on this adventure intentionally or unintentionally. It includes women as well as men. In contrast to the traditional (often corporate) expat, it provides for the partner's dimension since, unlike the expat, the latter does not work in his familiar environment from day 1. The partner first has to reorient himself abroad, and this phase is so essential that professional fields such as Expat Partner coaches have emerged.

Now, the term expatriate in itself has a different tone than that of migrant or immigrant. As the editor of this study, I see it crucial to address this differentiation in terminology.

In our society, we tend to define the term migrant as unfavorable, while the term expatriate or short expat has a positive connotation. While the migrant is often tolerated at most, the expat is perceived as a highly educated manager. However, both groups have chosen to work abroad, and both find themselves in a cultural environment that is unfamiliar to them. Primarily for similar reasons: To improve their standard of living. I am therefore aware that by choosing the term expat rather than migrant, I further contribute to widening the gap between these two groups.

On the other hand, through my coaching practice, I experience the Eureka moment that occurs when the Expat Partner sees for the first time what studies and academic papers there are on identity crises and expatriation and what hope, belonging, and understanding is drawn from them. All thanks to the keywords "Expat" and "Expat Partner". Since this study aims to help more women develop their careers abroad, I will use the terms "Female Expat" and "Expat Partner" in this paper. In the following, I will offer a short definition of these terms to allow a better understanding.

Female Expat

Following the definition by McNulty and Selmer (2017), the term Female Expatriate describes any female (either legally or self-identified) who leaves her country for a fixed or indefinite period.

- The term Female Expatriate includes:
- organizational assigned expatriates (OEs)
- those on long term / short term project work
- self-initiated expatriates (SIEs)
- those involved in international commuters and frequent flyer roles

The Female Expat is the family's breadwinner or at least provides a substantial part of the family income.

Expat Partner

In contrast to Female Expats, Expat Partners have followed their partner on an overseas posting. Most Expat Partners are not necessarily continuing their career abroad, although they are primarily well-educated and ambitious. Several research papers have analyzed the critical barriers for the partner to continue their work abroad, and much information can be found on sharethelove.blog.

3. The lack of Female Expats

3.1 The numbers we know of

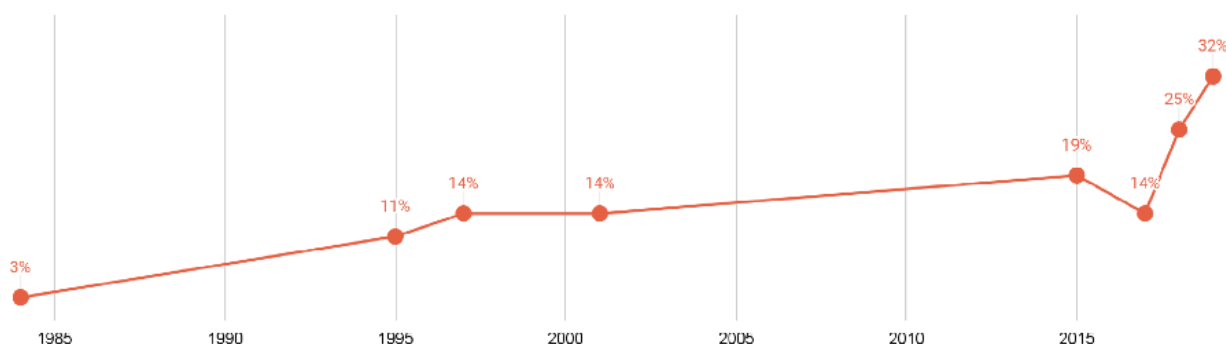
The first estimate of the female share of international assignments dates back to the research by Adler in 1984. Adler is a leading figure in this field and followed the role of the Female Expatriate in numerous publications over centuries. 37 years ago, Adler predicted the proportion of the Female Expat amongst international assignments to be 3%. Almost 26 years ago, Florkowski & Fogel estimated that the proportion of women had risen to 11%, while other papers estimated a slightly higher number a few years later. The most representative data goes back to the SantaFe report from 2020, stating that women comprise about one-third of company-assigned expatriates.

After decades of shallow representation of female expats, we saw a massive jump in 2018 and 2019. Suddenly 25% and even 32% of the globally assigned workforce were female. However, it has to be noted that there is a huge disparity within the different industries, with the pharmaceutical and healthcare sector leading the way for gender disparity.

In 2020 the percentage of female expats had stalled at 32%, contrary to the forecast of global mobility experts (SantaFe, 2019 & 2020). The female proportion stagnates at about one-third of the workforce, while the World Bank estimates that over 42% of the workforce is female in most countries.

While these numbers show a considerable increase in women's proportion, the industry and country of origin still portray the female expat's ratio with huge disparity. The Mercer report of 2018 states that 14% female proportion was found stressing the regional differences as the figure is 10% for the Asia Pacific but closer to 20% in the United States. The report also differentiates between industries and states that the energy and high tech sectors have some of the lowest percentages of women in their expatriate workforce (ranging from 8 to 11%). In comparison, the ratio for the life science sector is 23%. Also, companies in the service and retail sectors tend to have a higher rate of women expatriates.

Proportion of female expats over time



No matter these variations, parity still seems far off, and Mercer predicts parity not to happen before 2050. The recent consequences of the worldwide pandemic highly influence the way we work and juggle work and family. While it most certainly has pushed new work trends and accelerated the acceptance of home office and remote work across borders, it also forced many mothers to shift their focus back on their families (Mercer, 2021; The Atlantic, 2021).

“Although the number of female assignees has risen steadily over the past 20 years and is double the amount from nearly two decades ago, companies still send significantly more men on international assignments than women. And this remains an issue; not only for companies looking to fill essential talent gaps but for women themselves, especially in terms of the long term impact on their careers.”

BGRS

“Overall the participation of women in the expatriate workforce is increasing too slowly. The parity objective is a long way off. At the current pace, it might not be reached before 2050.”

Mercer

“Systematic change is needed to ensure women thrive and come back to the workforce (which did not happen after the last economic crisis). Before the pandemic, women had unique financial challenges. Post-pandemic, they have been disadvantaged by benefits that are based on earnings, overrepresentation in the industries most ravaged by COVID-19, and the burden of increased caregiving responsibilities. If left unaddressed, the fallout can have profound and disproportionate impacts on women’s longevity.”

Mercer

3.2 The global glass ceiling

Many have researched this topic (Harris, 2002, Linehan and Walsh, 2001, Vance and Paik 2001, and van der Bergh and du Plessis, 2013. Despite dual-career couples and the gender debate in leadership positions, women are often overlooked for international assignments. Hence women are underrepresented, and their careers are stagnating due to the „glass border“.

“Women who wish to pursue careers abroad have to overcome many barriers such as tokenism, stereotypes and first have to break through the glass ceiling in their home country before being able to breakthrough the glass border “

(Van den Bergh, du Plessis)

According to research, this global glass ceiling is full of myths and yet challenging to breakthrough. Many arguments why there are so few Female Expats seem to have fallen out of time. I have challenged each of these reasonings in my 30 conversations with Female Expats. I have not infrequently been met with amazement or incomprehension that these reasons still contribute to this disparity.

In academic research, many papers are tackling the questions of the missing Female Expat with the most common 3 potential reasons for this low number and partially debunking these reasons as modern myths.

These three reasons or myths referred back to the essential work by Adler (1984b, 1994) decades ago. Adler concluded that 3 myths lead to the low number of female participation in international assignments:

Myth 1: Individual (the woman does not want)

Myth 2: organizational (biases in the selection process)

Myth 3: cultural (host country prejudices)

In the following, I present a definition of each myth, a short overview of the work that has been done already to question those myths, and the responses of my very own research amongst 30 international savvy and professional women.

3.2.1 Individual

The supposed lower willingness of women to accept international assignments

What does it mean?

This myth expresses that women have been socialized into a female gender role and are consequently not interested in international assignments. Beyond their control, the natural focus lies on family life while seeking power and linear corporate career success are not emphasized. As a result, women reject foreign assignments or assess their qualifications as not good enough compared to male colleagues.

Is that true?

Since the 80s, many researchers have been investigating this myth. Adler herself revealed in her empirical studies that there was no difference between female and male MBA students. Many researchers after her looked into the reasons why women might shy away from international opportunities. While there is most certainly a different approach of career planning between men and women (more on that here 7.1), the female identity can actually be of advantage when pursuing a career abroad:

- Taylor & Napier (2002): Female Expats in Japan reported advantages through greater visibility, better skills in building interpersonal relationships compared to men, and more remarkable ability to adapt to the life of an outsider abroad
- Bastida (2017): There are no significant differences between gender and work performance among 139 Spanish medium and high-skilled workers. While the work performance was mostly the same, women had higher interaction and work adjustment levels than men.

What the Female Expat has to say about this

For the women interviewed, working abroad was a choice they have actively made. While for some, this meant sacrificing the traditional family life or having children, others managed to take their family with them on the road. Most interview partners have been very proud of the fact that they established this global life for themselves. From these study findings, one can conclude that the willingness of women to go abroad is more based on personality (similar to men) and the question of how to incorporate family and personal life. However, many participants stressed that their expatriation came at a price (sacrificing the traditional family model) or that the partner was crucial in the decision-making process.

Western managers are reluctant to send women abroad

What does it mean?

This myth expresses the idea that western managers are hesitant to send women abroad. As international assignments are costly, women are seen as a high-risk operation. Managers either see the woman itself as a risk factor or the surrounding context. Arguments often mentioned are physical safety, hazards involved in traveling in developing countries, isolation and loneliness, possible negative reactions of superiors, subordinates, clients, and colleagues towards women in managerial positions (Adler, 1994, Janssens et al. 2006).

Is that true?

Many research papers conclude that women are struggling with the male-dominated hierarchy that leads to male managers judging the suitability of female subordinates. Typical difficulties within the international transfer process (as mentioned in Janssens et al. 2006) are:

- Selection procedures, training, and preparation (Mayrhofer & Scullion,2002)
- Senior managers' prejudices (Adler,1994; Harris,1995; Stroh et al.,2000)
- The exclusion of women from formal and informal networks is fundamental for upwards mobility (Izraeli & Adler,1994; Linehan & Walsh,1999; Mayrhofer & Scullion,2002).
- The fact that expatriate positions tend to be relatively high in authority and status (Edstrom & Galbraith,1977)

What the Female Expat has to say about this

All 30 women interviewed managed to overcome any potential corporate barrier in the international transfer process. Some argued that their industry is gender-neutral and did not experience discrimination (e.g., Banking & Tourism). Others mentioned that they had been discriminated against and benefited from their confidence and strong character to overcome those barriers and a strong will for a life abroad. (more on this here 6.1.4)

3.2.3. Cultural

Women are not effective in other cultural environments

What does it mean?

This myth expresses the idea that women are less effective in other cultural environments because of prejudices by foreign managers against female managers. This is supposed to be especially relevant in women-unfriendly environments and leads to less efficiency.

Is that true?

The work by Adler (1987, 1994) does not support this myth. In this context, the so-called Gaijin syndrome is mentioned. According to this, all foreigners are foreigners regardless of their gender. Hence, women are seen as expat managers rather than being compared to local women.

What the Female Expat has to say about this

Within the conversations with the 30 Female Expats the cultural barrier was way less dominant than anticipated. Only a few reported that cultural differences and prejudices by local men have been a real showstopper. For some, this challenge was more a motivator and increased their work effort. For others, it felt like paving the way for the next generation. Others actually profited from being a woman - mostly in very male-dominated cultures (e.g., Dubai). More about this here 6.1.2.

Conclusion



The potential reasons for the low percentage of Female Expats are manifold. In any case, all three myths portray that women are not able to actively change these obstacles. Common barriers are societal pressure on women's roles and life priorities, male-dominated HR processes, and local cultural prejudices against women. While many studies show that these are not true, they are still being discussed as the main reasons for the lack of female senior management abroad.

“My philosophy: I will never be rich but rich in experience. Living abroad is part of my personal bucket list.”

Anonymous participant

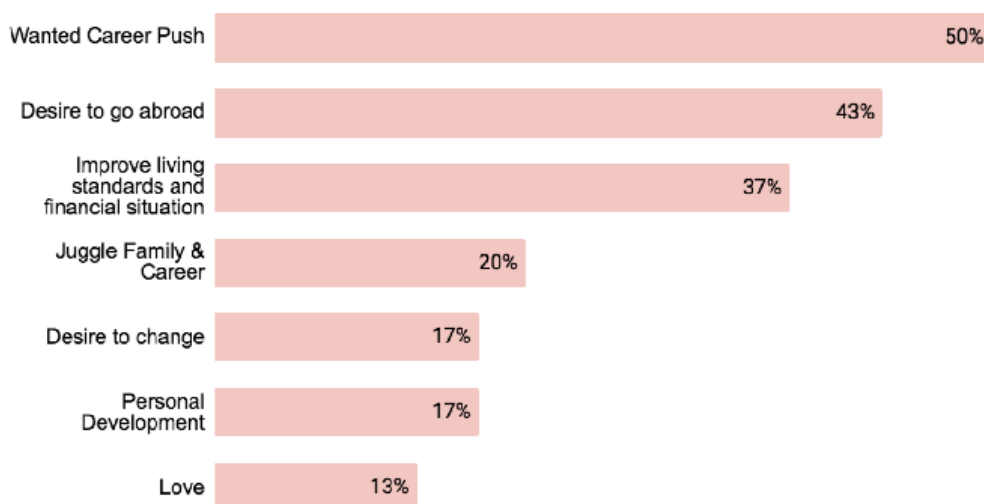
4. Why women choose to move abroad

4.1 The motivation to move abroad

What makes women seek a life abroad? What drives them? The 30 conversations I had can be divided into two camps in this regard. Half had personal reasons for going abroad. These include, for example, love, self-development, a desire for living in a foreign country or in a more severe context to live in a safe country. Especially women from South America reported looking for a higher standard of living in Europe and want to become financially independent.

Still, others, especially women from Europe and Asia, are attracted by professional prospects. Either their career at home has stalled, and they hope that projects abroad will positively affect their salary and position, or they are looking for more challenging tasks or find it difficult to coordinate family and career in their home country.

Reasons to move abroad (multiple answers possible)



In her own words...

In search for change

"I wanted to see something different and didn't feel comfortable in my surroundings. I applied to many different countries, not specifically just the Emirates."

"I wanted change. A lot had changed in my company at the time and I wanted out."

In search for foreign adventures

"I wanted to gain experience and live abroad. That has always appealed to me. It was not primarily to make a career."

"I always wanted to live in the USA. That was always my dream, I was curious about life abroad."

"I wanted to make a difference and I have always been itching to work abroad."

"I really wanted to live in Africa and spend some time in the bush. Therefore, I have trained to become a safari guide."

"I always wanted to go abroad and my career choice was based on that. I was a product manager before and saw that business trips don't really give you an understanding of the country and culture. When I didn't get a sabbatical, I quit and traveled through Africa for a year. Through the development aid, I got the opportunity to live this global lifestyle."

"My philosophy: I will never be rich but rich in experience. Living abroad is part of my personal bucket list."

In search for a better life

"South Korea is a conservative country and I wanted to break free and live in a country without limitations."

"I do love Brazil but after the 4th robbery in front of my building, I decided to move abroad."

"I wanted to improve my living standards. Brazil is not really safe and I wanted to have more security. Also, I wanted to improve my economic situation. Now we can save money and buy a house and a car."

In search for personal growth & a career push

"Also it was for my career as I could not raise the ladder anymore in Russia. My manager told me I have to go to the headquarter which is based in Germany."

"I went to Switzerland because I wanted to study international relations and I couldn't do that in Germany at the time. I was there in Geneva and that was very obvious for the topic."

"The job market was more attractive abroad. I was a freelancer in Germany and the projects in Dubai were much more interesting. Urban planning in Germany is not really exciting and Dubai was my dream."

"My career in Germany stagnated a bit at that time and the foreign assignment was a great career opportunity. Basically, I was interested in the Scandinavian countries and curious about life abroad, but I also wanted the challenge and to push my career."

"Shortly before my 32nd birthday I left and the career was the main reason. I had also just separated and wanted a fresh start."

"Definitely personal and professional growth. I wanted to live abroad because I see it as a valuable experience in an increasingly global world. Professionally, I am in a global company and I also see it as important to have been abroad. Curiosity about foreign countries also, but above all, I wanted to further my private and professional education."

"My intention was to combine living abroad and having a career. I looked for a job in Germany and was then transferred to the UK, which I accepted at the time mainly for personal reasons. The postings after that were more career-driven."

"Also, global work experience is a classic requirement to be transferred to management and I thought why not now instead of later."

"Back in the UK it was hard to be taken seriously especially as a young professional and I wanted to see whether other cultures are the same."

"I studied humanities and political science and knew that with my birth cohort there were hardly any interesting jobs in Germany."

In search for a better financial situation

"I got a lucrative job offer right after the internship and at the same time there was an economic crisis in Germany and many of my fellow students have been without a job."

"Humanitarian reasons also played a role. I want to have a positive impact on my work. But the question of money is also relevant for me. I earn much more abroad and it is financially more interesting for me than working in Germany."

In search for a better daycare system

"But the main reason was that as a young mother in Germany I had no daycare and could not work."

4.2 The accidental expat

While the examples above show that the reason for a career abroad can be manifold, there is also another trigger. An international career does not just happen. Many women have taken their fate proactively into their own hands, writing applications on their own initiative or expressing interest to their employer in a project abroad. But some women stumbled into this adventure rather by chance. Especially as an Expat Partner coach, I meet women repeatedly for whom life abroad came as a surprise and either welcomed it with open arms or shied away from it. In this study, I also encountered some women who did not proactively want to go abroad. An opportunity was offered to these women. They were persuaded by their employer or suddenly found themselves in the role of Expat Partner. These comments describe this situation very well:

In her own words...

"I have to be honest and say that I didn't really have any motivation to go abroad. I was very happy with my job in Germany. But it was always an unwritten rule that you have to go abroad once to make a career. And when I was asked, I accepted."

"In my early 20s I wanted to live abroad but did not have the opportunity. When my husband got this opportunity to move to Belgium I decided to join him. This gave me the push."

"I fell in love to be completely honest and decided to move to Rome because of him. After that it was opportunities that triggered this global lifestyle."

"Back on the job, the opportunity came up to open the office in London and I was very happy to take that chance."

"I always wanted to go abroad, but I never really pursued it and didn't have the courage. But my bank always had a partner bank in New York and needed someone and I was offered the job. We declined once because the USA did not appeal to us but then took up the second offer."

4.3 The role of their own upbringing

For many, the parental home also plays a role in the decision to leave. Interestingly, this applies to both directions. Some reported that their parents themselves hardly left the home country and were very sedentary, and they wanted to break out of these structures to some extent and were curious about the world. For others, their parents were role models and exemplified international life. It was only logical for these women to do the same. The following quotes by two Female Expats illustrate how different their own upbringing influenced how they chose their own way of life.

In her own words...

"My parents never took me on vacation and I spent my entire childhood in the local swimming pool. When I had my own money I traveled to Chile with a friend and it blew me away and fascinated me. It was so impressive, the culture, the vastness."

"I just always wanted to travel and see the world. I always wanted to work abroad and also decided to study abroad. I love to meet new people, maybe it is also due to my upbringing as I was the daughter of a diplomat, never thought it would be Germany though."

5. Motherhood & Global Career Ambitions

As stated in the first chapter, one of the central myths of limited access for females to the global workforce is the societal pressure on women to focus on family planning. Still today, the idea of women focusing primarily on family while men focus on their careers is part of many cultures worldwide. Hence, it is worthwhile to dig deeper and analyze how the Female Expat handles all the expectations around her role. Is it possible to have it all? A fulfilling career AND a happy family? And if the answer is yes, how does she do it? Dual-Career Couples do already struggle in their home country with the support of extended family around. The Female Expat has the additional challenge of a missing support village, the added mental load for caring about the cultural and social integration of the children, and dealing with an unfamiliar daycare system. So, let's look into the data of the 30 women interviewed and their unique situation.

“Is it possible to have it all? A fulfilling career AND a happy family? And if the answer is yes, how does she do it?”

5.1 Family models of the Female Expat

While 60% of the interviewed women are mothers, 40% have no children for various reasons. Although most women without children are married or in a long-lasting relationship, only 33% are planning on motherhood in the future. 42% have decided against children, and 25% are still undecided. Whether to have children or not, considering it is possible in the first place, is affecting the whole expat experience. Hence, I would like to elaborate on the different experiences of mothers and non-mothers. How do they experience the challenges abroad? What are their views on the world? Is there a significant difference in their career planning and outlook on Female Expatriation?

In the following, I anonymously portrait the motivations and views of the individual interview partners. These statements provide information about the reasons behind the decisions and show which difficulties are associated with them.

Some key take-aways about balancing family life and career:

- Women stress the additional need to focus on the family during their time abroad.
- The majority sees the role of the partner as a must-have to have a career AND children.
- Especially in countries with lower costs, establishing an own support network with nannies and babysitters is very common. Especially single parents stressed that this way they can continue their career while going back home would not be an option due to higher costs and lower childcare availability.
- The range of views on what is possible and what is not is enormous. Even among Female Expats, every life model is unique, and not every solution is equally desirable. While some want to consciously give up their job, others change employer and continent as a single parent with a 4-month-old child (more on that in chapter 5.1).
- There is both incomprehension and admiration for mothers who decide to give up their careers and focus on their families.

5.2 Why some choose not to have kids

Another exciting dimension is to look at the reasons why Female Expats choose not to have kids. Since the problematic compatibility among dual-career couples is particularly evident abroad, it is only logical that some women actively decide against having children. Here are some statements from women who have consciously made this decision:

In her own words...

None of the family concepts spoke to them

"My best friend is matching the opportunist family concept and has built a law firm while having twins on her arm. I admire that a lot. I could not do that. Because none of these models suit me, I have decided against having children."

Desire to focus on own projects and dreams

"I do not plan to have kids for various reasons but I see from friends of mine who do it the opportunistic way that it is not working and they feel guilty in both worlds so I would do it in a more pragmatic order. Especially at the management level I already feel that I have several children and I do not need more children in the evenings when I am home. I am not a kid person."

"I do not want to give up myself and live my dreams. It definitely needs a partner to divide the tasks. It is certainly not easy and requires organizational skills and will mean short nights."

Desire to focus on career

"I don't think I would be a good mum right now as I am very focused on my career, I would do my best to make it work but my main focus is on my career. A partner is not a requirement and he could also stay in the way. I have a very masculine nature and my partner is more female. We already talked about that he would take care of the child if I had a good position as he is working freelance."

Unsure about the future of the world

"I don't know what my life will bring but at the moment I don't know how I can reconcile children and career because I don't have a livelihood if I don't work due to my self-employment and would therefore be forced to combine work and my role as a mother at the same time."

"I am undecided whether to have a child or not. Does this world need a child? Or is this world too dangerous for a child? Children are no guarantee not to be alone in old age, my fiancé already has 8 children with his first wife. He would like to have more and I'm 33. I'm still undecided and let it come to me."

Other reasons mentioned were not being able physically and starting a family was never a natural wish.

5.3 Approaches of handling motherhood & career

In the paper “Career and family expectations of women in international management: A view across generations” by Moeller, Napier, and McGourty (2014), three different family models are discussed, which are also represented in the individual interviews of this study. A fundamental distinction is made between the models of the choosers, the pragmatists, and the opportunists. All three models describe the interplay between parenthood and career and show which compatibility concept the mother or the parents as a couple feel comfortable with. The three concepts describe the woman’s attitude towards the appropriate balance of work and family time. Here is a brief description of these three models.

Overview of different Family Models (as seen in Moeller, Napier, and McGourty, 2014)

CHOOSERS

Baby Boomers 1946-1964

Women feel that they could not have it all and should decide between being a mother and caregiver or a committed professional.

The authors see that most common amongst the Boomer generation and state, “This forced-choice comes from societal mindsets of those born between 1946 and 1964 when women (and men in their generation) believed that women could not have it all.”

PRAGMATISTS

Gen X 1956-1981

This concept is more common amongst Generation X and states that you could have it all but not simultaneously. Women who sympathize with this model often reduce their job commitment when children are little or need more attention. They argue that realistically speaking, both (family and career ambitions) at the same time are not possible with the commitment they prefer, and their mantra is “there is a time and a place for a career, and then there is a time and place for family.”

OPPORTUNISTS

Gen Y 1982-2000

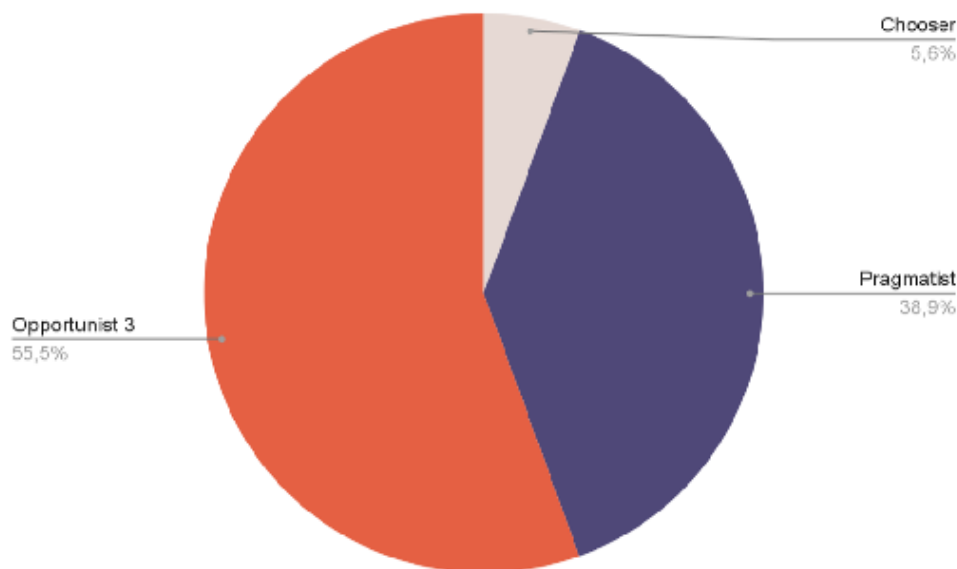
The authors claim that this family model is mainly preferred by Generation Y, labeling them as the most adaptive generation always aiming for the “ideal state of life.” They refuse to decide between the two roles and seek to thrive in both worlds.

Technology is seen as an enabler. These women have a greater sense of flexibility about their lifestyles and a stronger desire to pursue international careers.

All interview partners have been asked to reflect on their own family concept and state which of the above most matches their own lifestyle. While I also asked Female Expats without children to share their perspective on this, the following data refer to mothers only as there is a difference between visualizing a lifestyle with all its consequences and actually living it.

The chart shows that the opportunistic family concept is the most popular amongst Female Expat Mothers (56%). However, all three concepts are reflected in the group of interviewed women, and the pragmatist attitude remains very popular. Only the Chooser model seems to be less represented. Interestingly, however, there are quite a few Choosers among the women without children who have consciously decided against children and favor a career (see chapter 5.2.).

Lived family model of participants



So how do the Female Expats in this study look at their own family model? What are the main challenges and reasons behind them? Let's have a look at their own words.

In her own words...

Prioritizing family over career:

"I don't think I'll stay in research much longer. Right now it is still possible to work but in the long term I would like to put the priority on the family."

The family needs special attention when living abroad

"I see myself between a pragmatist and an opportunist. I think both are possible, but it is also important to look at the whole family situation - especially abroad. If both move abroad, take a higher job, it doesn't go well and the family falls behind. Especially women have to take care of their own energy."

"I am clearly a pragmatist. The third scenario is also possible, but not without one area suffering, and that is always the family. In my case, I first made a real career and then concentrated completely on my two children. In retrospect, I am very happy with this model."

The partner as an essential pillar to continue career

"When I got pregnant I thought I could have both at the same time and my husband would stay home. But I couldn't breastfeed at work because my child didn't drink and I couldn't sleep at night. That didn't work so I took a leave of absence and we moved to the country my husband is from so he could work and I stayed at home. We repeated this when our children were teenagers and I felt they needed a mother at home. In the other phases, I worked full time and my husband was a family man. For both of us, it was important that we raise the children ourselves and not the nannies."

"Clearly an opportunist, because I've been living that way for 11 years. But that wouldn't have worked without a partner. I went back to work when my child was 4 months old. My husband took over 50% and took care of the morning and I made sure that I came home early at noon."

"I always wanted my first child before 30 and then had it at 29 but I didn't factor in my career or plan for it at the time. It never bothered me to work while I had children. When the kids were 1+3 years old I was the sole breadwinner and my husband had taken care of the kids. I felt a bit sorry for that and was glad to be able to be a mother, but it always worked out somehow."

"If I were to do it again today I might be the opportunist but back then the kindergartens were only open from 9-12 and so we had to decide on a career. We chose my career and my partner stayed home with the children."

Reducing workload or responsibility for the sake of the family

"That's why I gave up management responsibilities in order to do more justice to my role as a mother. In the management role, I permanently had a state of anxiety."

"I don't want to miss the time with my children because it was the foundation for our relationship and they are still very much close to me even though I am on business trips a lot."

Establishing a vast support network

"I am an opportunist but never with equal dedication. Family was always first. I do admire the chooser type of person because it means that you own that role completely. I can't make sense of the second type as you can't have a career after a complete stop. There is never a right time for children. In Asia, we always had a support network of nannies. My partner did not take parental leave but we established our own support network."

"Both at the same time is only possible if you have support in the form of parents, au-pair or partner."

Giving up on perfection

"Motherhood was uncharted territory for me. It took a lot of my flexibility but I also started to be kinder to myself. I learned that I have to be flexible with my family and career ambitions. I can't have a perfect career and be the ideal mother. I stopped being so hard on myself and did not work long hours and not beat myself up as I used to do."

Possible thanks to local childcare system

"It works out somehow. But that's also why we chose Norway instead of Germany. In Norway, work-life balance is better than in Germany because the care situation is much better. Also, my partner has taken a very important role. In Scandinavian culture, it is much more common to support the woman and take her career ambitions seriously."

"With the expat contract I have and the local costs it was no problem to always have a nanny and so I could go back to work even without parental leave. This has been super compatible and the question of how and when I go back did not arise."

Learning from role models

"I am totally against the chooser concept because it is possible and means to me giving up. Sorry for being judgemental. I also don't agree with the second category as you can't pursue a linear career. I had role models that showed me it was possible and that gave me confidence."

“For me, children just didn’t happen. I didn’t proactively decide against it. But I have noticed all the options in my environment. Especially in Germany, I see the Chooser type. Great women who are in the middle of their careers and then sacrifice their careers for the family. I don’t understand that and find it a waste. But I have also seen career women in India and the USA who have children and have built up a support system that supports them. They don’t have to take over the bad and exhausting parts but spend the good time with their children. I find that very pragmatic. I have seen that for many single mothers in particular, it has never been as easy as it was during their time as expats thanks to the support network and the benefits around it.”

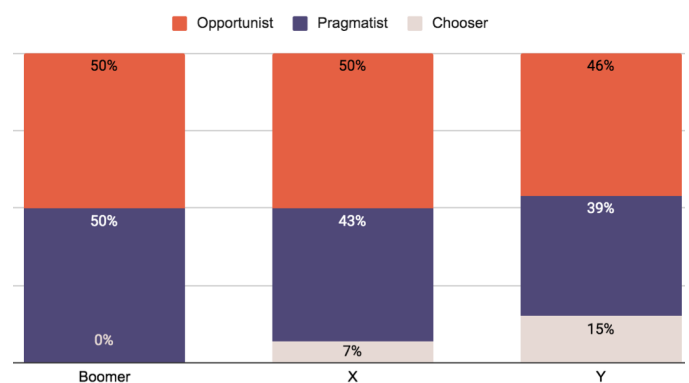
Anonymous participant

5.4 The family model: A question of age?

According to Moeller, Napier, and McGourty (2014), every generation has its own definition of a successful life and what is feasible and socially accepted. They clearly saw a correlation between each generation and a preferred family concept.

However, in this sample, opportunists are found in all three generations, including the Boomer generation. And contrary to the assumption that the Chooser model is no longer favored in generations X and Y, the proportion is highest among 20-49-year-old women in this sample.

Family model according to generation



*No Generation Z as none of the participants in this age group had children at the date of recording.

5.5 The single Female Expat mum

Of the 30 interviewed women, 5 have been raising children abroad as single parents. This, by nature, adds another level of complexity and assertiveness. Let's have a closer look into the viewpoints and decisions of these women and how they coped with their enforced challenge of balancing family and career. Three women live the opportunist family model, constantly investing the maximum energy on both (their children and their job). While two have lowered their career ambitions to be able to focus more on their children.

The majority (80%) have been triggered by a huge desire to live abroad and improve their living standards. Two of them stated that only by living abroad have they been able to juggle both career and childcare as a single parent. All of these 5 women are very career-focused and follow a male characteristic alpha career (more on that in chapter 7.1). 4 of the 5 single parents have indicated a huge passion for their work and feel free in their own decision-making. All of the single mothers have distanced themselves from the opinions of others regarding their family concept. In the following, I present a couple of key statements by single mothers to stress their attitude:

In her own words...

"I decided to work instead of taking parental leave when I was pregnant and a single parent. I lived on 400 DM net a month in Munich and hit up my father for money."

"When my son was born it was normal in Asia to have a maid at home who takes care of the household and everything. But when he was born, I didn't want a stranger in the house and spontaneously changed everything. As a mother, you prioritize life differently. I haven't been able to travel much in the last few years, but my son was 4 months old when I left <company A> in Asia and joined <company B> in the US. I had a mentor at the time who pushed me to take that step. Friends and family back home declared me crazy."

"As a single mom, I was forced to be an opportunist but I consciously slowed down my career a bit and stagnated on the VP post for my kids. It was important for me to be a good mother. I stayed in Asia because I found an infrastructure there that allowed me to do both. In my home country, this would not have been possible."

The sample of these 30 women shows how diverse the question of motherhood in the context of an international career can be. Each woman found her own way of doing things and has her own beliefs and values. Many stressed the importance of having a partner when aiming to have both: A prosperous global career and a family life where there is time for children. The quotes stated in this chapter show that supporting either a working daycare system or a partner who steps back from his own career to support the children is essential. From talking to these women and listening to their worries and expectations on the future of Female Expatriation, one can see that finding a balance between motherhood and career is the crucial challenge for Female Expatriation. BGRS, one of the leading international relocation companies worldwide, argues that women still shoulder primary caregiving responsibilities next to their career and that missing partner support is crucial in women's willingness to accept assignments.

“In addition, despite the trend in some countries where more men are choosing to stay at home to become a caregiver in dual-income families, globally, the majority of professional women still shoulder primary caregiving responsibilities for their family. These considerations, along with very real concerns about the impact of an international assignment on their spouse/partner’s career, may lead many women to self-select out of consideration for an international assignment. Indeed, according to the 2015 Global Mobility Trends Survey, 35% of company respondents to our survey feel that spouse/partner concerns were impacting their ability to attract international assignment candidates.”

BGRS

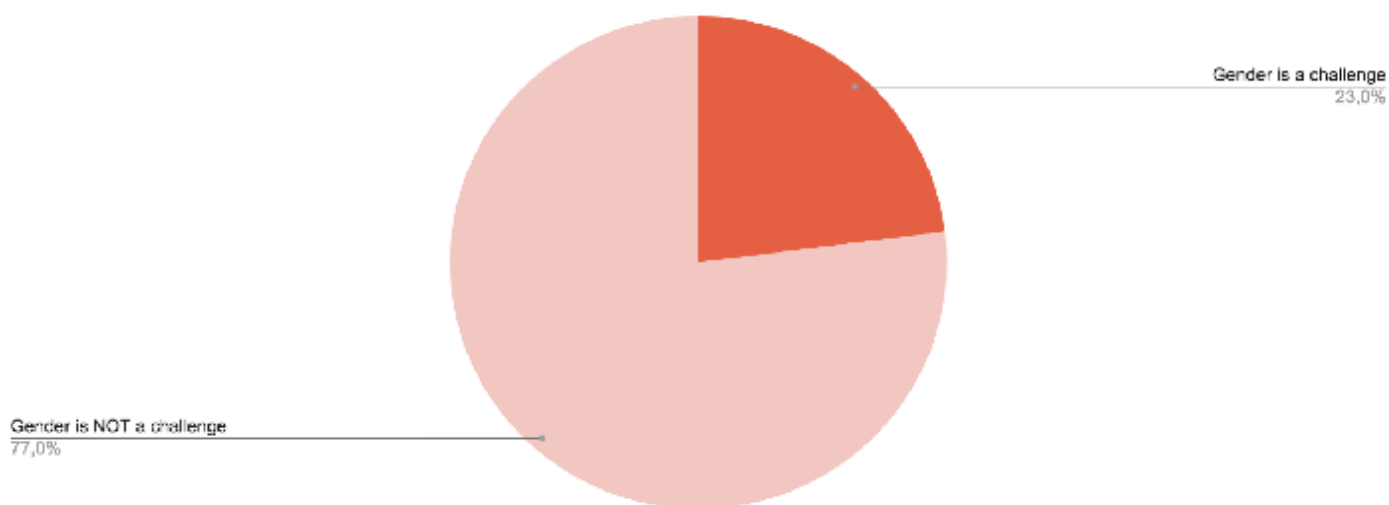
6. Cultural & corporate challenges

6.1 Perceived cultural challenges

The cultural aspect naturally takes up a lot of space in discussing the Female Expat and expats in general. As discussed in chapter 3.2.3., the distinct cultural struggles for women based on their gender is one of the myths why women are sent abroad less. The fear that women will be less effective in foreign cultural environments because of culture-bound prejudice was already mentioned by Adler (1984b) about 40 years ago. The myth circles around the fact that women are about to face a “women-unfriendly environment in the host country will thus render Female Expatriates ineffective” (Janssens et al., 2006). In the case of corporate assignments, cultural training is often offered to reduce friction on-site, and it is not uncommon for the question to arise as to whether women, in particular, will be accepted by male superiors and other stakeholders abroad. Some companies seem reluctant to send women abroad for fear of less acceptance than male candidates. Numerous studies have proven this fear wrong (Taylor, Napier 1996, Bastida, 2017).

When reflecting on the 30 conversations with Female Expats, it was interesting to observe how unimportant the cultural conflict seems compared to other topics. This may be because most of the women interviewed have chosen the adventure abroad proactively and therefore inherently have an open, adaptable and resilient character. At the same time, many women have already come into contact with the glass ceiling in their home country. They have already proven themselves in the professional context. They embody a self-confident appearance right from the start and do not allow culturally influenced conflicts to get to them because of their gender. While experiencing cultural differences, the vast majority of 77% of participants stated that they do not experience any particular difficulties because they are women.

Perception whether own gender is an additional challenge



While their private life might be affected differently, they mostly feel free to operate on a professional level the same way as men do. However, 50% of women interviewed stressed that it is tougher for women and that they invest more time and energy into their work than their male colleagues. However, this is often mentioned as compensation for motherhood or not to be seen in the cultural context as they have experienced the same amount of pressure before going abroad.

Participants declared different reasons for missing gender challenge when working abroad:

- Generally open-minded host culture towards female managers (e.g., Dubai)
- Generally open-minded industries with a focus on gender equality (e.g., Banking, Tourism, Development Aid)
- Better acceptance of working mums in host countries compared to home countries (mostly mentioned by German mothers)
- Gaijin syndrome (see chapter 3.2.3)

Those participants who perceived increased cultural differences based on their gender declared:

- Perceived host countries prejudice towards working women (e.g., Switzerland)
- Working in male-dominated industries (e.g., IT)
- Less individual rights for women on a private level in the host country (e.g., Saudi Arabia)

The following statements by the participants show both sides. While the majority did not connect the real cultural challenge with them being a woman, others perceived an increased challenge by being a mother (more on this in chapter 6.1.5.), and some by living in a more female hostile environment.

In her own words...

Profiting from country culture

"In general, China and the region around Shanghai is very emancipated. I see a lot of women in leadership positions. It is professionally very emancipated here. I don't see that in Germany and that's why I wanted to go to China to understand why it works here and not in Germany."

"Interestingly, the host culture, the Swedes, welcomed me with open arms and respected and accepted me from the start, while my German colleagues did not respect me because I was young and not a specialist yet when I was sent abroad."

"Rather not. In New Zealand it doesn't play a big role. It was more difficult for my husband to find a job in Germany."

Profiting from company culture

"The gender or me being a mother was never an issue for me. Maybe I was lucky but there was nothing bad to report. Also the work within the EU parliament is very focused on equality."

"In real estate finance, gender does not play a major role."

"In development aid it is already very balanced and I think it remains this way."

"In the fashion sector, there are generally more women, so I didn't have a special position that would have been negative."

"I don't think so. My director is a woman and the company is very female lead. Also it is part of the EU government which is also very equal so I don't see any particular challenges due to gender."

"Banking seems to be a fairly equal industry. The topic of women plays no role in their professional lives."

Statements of cultural challenges specifically due to being a woman:

Gaining respect took longer

"The problem is often to be perceived as a person with expertise even though I am a woman. Especially in India this was not easy. Not necessarily by the doctors but by men who were below me in terms of hierarchy. Also because of the caste system."

"I have to assert myself more, people think less of me, I'm blond and they think that I don't fit in with the IT industry. It has gotten better over time, but also because the country culture has changed and I now have a completely different demeanor."

"In a professional context, I had to work very hard to gain the respect and recognition that my male colleagues automatically had. It took me a long time, especially with the Japanese and Koreans. When I drank the Japanese under the table in the evening and was in the office at 9 o'clock the next morning, I finally had the recognition."

Interference on a personal level

"I have experienced the restrictions more on a personal level. For example, I was not allowed to ride a bicycle or do sports in public. I also had to be veiled in high temperatures. That interfered with my personal rights as a woman."

6.1.2 The foreigner (female) bonus

13% of the women interviewed experience advantages actually since they are a woman. Especially in Arabic countries, women report being treated superior in daily situations. Others reported increased visibility similar to other studies before (e.g., Taylor & Napier, 1996).

Here are some statements of women feeling in a better position than men due to their gender. However, it needs to be noted that these women experienced their gender to be advantageous in combination with their European heritage.

In her own words...

"As a white woman, I have a foreigner bonus. In Mali, I got marriage proposals all the time. I'm relatively tough and I don't worry about it."

"I never had any difficulties because of my gender. Being a German woman was rather an advantage."

"As a European, I am regarded with great respect, I have no problem getting an appointment at a bank, and locals keep their distance in the supermarket. As a European, you are considered educated and rich - especially if you come from Switzerland."

"I feel better accepted in Dubai than in Germany. As a woman, I have never felt so safe and in such good hands as I do in Dubai. I am respected as a woman and benefit, for example, from shorter queues for women only. There is also the foreigner bonus that I experience as a white European woman."

6.1.3 The foreigner disadvantage

On the other hand, some women did not necessarily find their gender a disadvantage in the workplace but rather their national background. While European women abroad often noticed a foreigner bonus, interviewed women from South America and Asia experienced difficulties due to their origin. The question of whether women are accepted in a foreign cultural context is consequently much more complex. It is more about the mix of gender, motherhood, and nationality that influences the cultural barrier in a professional (but also private) context abroad than sex alone.

In her own words...

"I don't think it was harder for me and I did not have to get a senior management position to be sent abroad. It was harder for me because I am a Russian woman. That is definitely a factor. The company had to take care of the formalities such as the work permit and I also don't speak German which makes it more difficult."

"I find senior management positions more tricky, especially for Asian women. It would be much easier to be a European manager in order to be promoted."

"It was challenging for me to get a job and it took me about 30 interviews and half a year of work as I do not speak Dutch. So I guess my nationality is more of a disadvantage than my gender."

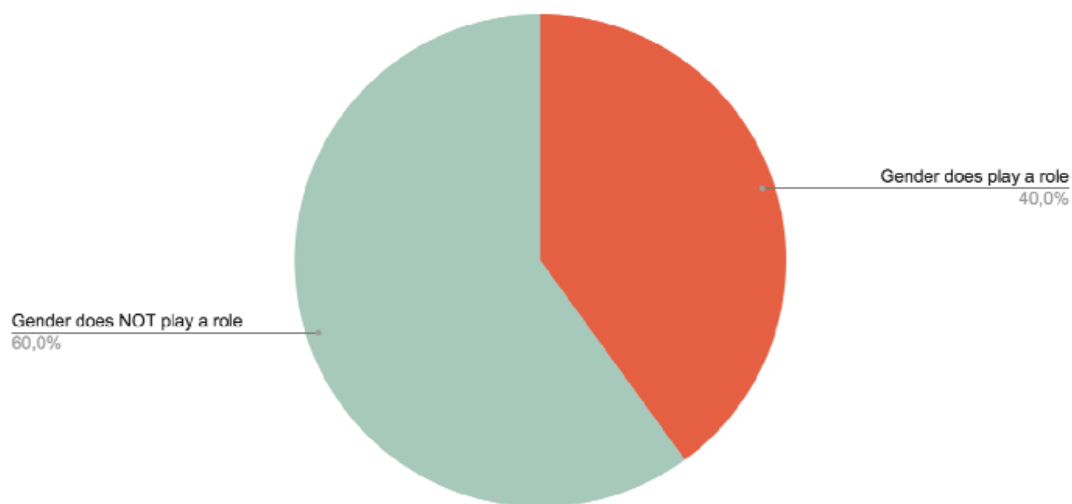
"I am a feminist so gender is always an issue for me. I always have this feminist lense on the topics. I am also a Latina so I have this double glass ceiling. When other men find out that I am Latina the tone and the vibe of the conversation changes somehow and becomes more sensual and sexual. That is really disturbing me. People also tend to think that I followed my partner but that is not true it was the other way round and it is important to me to make that clear."

6.1.4 The corporate glass ceiling

When you consider that only a fraction of postings is allocated to women, you wonder what is happening in the selection process and the posting process. It is generally assumed that a particular hierarchical level must be reached to be proposed for a posting. This is contradicted by the fact that there is always the possibility of self-initiating a foreign assignment. This was done by 33% of women within this sample. Therefore, the question is whether there is really a difference between men and women in the classic assignment process and what conclusions can be drawn from it. According to the second myth by Adler (mentioned in chapter 3.2.2.), international assignments are costly, and women are seen as a high-risk operation and are therefore less likely to be favored within the selection process for an international assignment.

Talking to 30 Female Expats about their HR experience within the selection process, 60% stated that their gender did not play a role, while 40% perceived it as an additional barrier to overcome.

Perception whether own gender is a challenge within assignment application



Women declaring that their gender did add an additional barrier within the selection process mentioned:

- Biases by home management regarding the compatibility for the job
- Reception of inferior expat packages (compared to male colleagues in a similar position)
- Less attractive destinations, projects, or clients to choose from compared to male colleagues
- Less attractive follow-up contracts after repatriating compared to male colleagues in similar positions
- Generally, more stagnating careers after expatriation compared to men

The following quotes show how these women have experienced these situations. One can see that it's not about investing more as a woman (which many do) but more structural disadvantages that impact their whole future career prospect.

“Men tend to move up and women tend to stagnate more. From my HR perspective I can say that there is definitely a glass ceiling in corporate assignments but not in self-initiated expatriates.”

Anonymous participant

In her own words...

“So from my point of view, you have to make more compromises, especially with the positions and the salary package. My husband is also an expat in the same company and it bothers me that we are always seen as a couple. I don't think they understand that I also want a great position and not just any position. From their perspective it's kind of a luxury problem as my husband already has a great position.”

„My company preferred to send single males abroad and justified it with the posting costs. I was classified as expensive although I know of many men with family who earn significantly more and also have larger houses. The posting packages are very different depending on gender. I was denied a posting to London due to cost. Now the job is done by a man who flies home to family every weekend and has a larger apartment so his family can visit regularly.“

“I had to prove myself abroad. My boss at that time didn't want women because he didn't trust them but after I was there for half a year he hired more women.”

“At Deloitte at that time I asked again and again but was never sent. This may have been due to my gender or the position. In my case, however, my gender does not play a role because I am very self-determined. I open the doors for myself, but I also notice again and again how my environment reacts irritated that I travel alone as a woman.”

“When I was looking for an internship in Dubai, there were German companies that explicitly did not want to send women to the Middle East. But then I found one that supported me completely, a man sent me and wanted to take me on afterwards.”

“The question was rather which positions do you get as a woman and I did not experience a glass border but a glass border between subjects. As a woman, certain destinations and subjects that would have appealed to me were denied to me for a long time.”

“After Russia, my husband (in the same company) had a follow-up contract and I was not offered one.”

“An opportunity arose for which I was not asked because I was newly married and they thought it was out of the question for me. Only when I proactively looked for an exchange partner for me was I offered the position.”

“I experienced that higher positions were filled by men. In Brazil there is a higher social pressure on motherhood.”

On the other hand, the majority of 60% of participants declared that they did not experience disadvantages within the selection process based on their gender.

Reasons mentioned were:

- Expatriation has been self-initiated, so the corporate glass ceiling was avoided
- A conscious focus on corporate assignments without leadership position and climbing up the ladder after moving abroad
- Profiting from more gender-equal industries or generally higher proportion of women within the company

The reasons mentioned showed that these women found ways to escape the traditional selection path by either taking up their own initiative or profiting from more gender-equal industries and company cultures.

In her own words...

"I agree with the statement although in my case the first move was self-initiated and so I did not have to break through the glass ceiling but applied abroad and managed my way up."

"I moved abroad without a promotion and only later I got a leadership role. In German companies in any case - there you have to reach a certain rank in order to be transferred abroad. In my case I took the matter into my own hands."

"Not for me personally, but I can imagine that others feel the same way. Gender did not play a role in my case. You have to reach the position of VP to be sent but it was not harder for me as a woman to get to this position."

"At that time, the women's quota was a very big issue for us, so I was approached proactively."

"I come from a male domain (IT) and consulting and at no point did this play a role."

"Interestingly I never had a professional life in my home country so I can't speak for that. I left Denmark one day after my graduation. Abroad it was never an issue for me to get work."

"My gender did not matter in the selection process. At the GIZ or at the embassy, it is always very balanced and does not play a role."

"In the case of a classic posting, I would agree, but not in the case of a self-initiated expatriation. Gender did not play a role in the selection process."

6.1.5 The job performance of the Female Expat

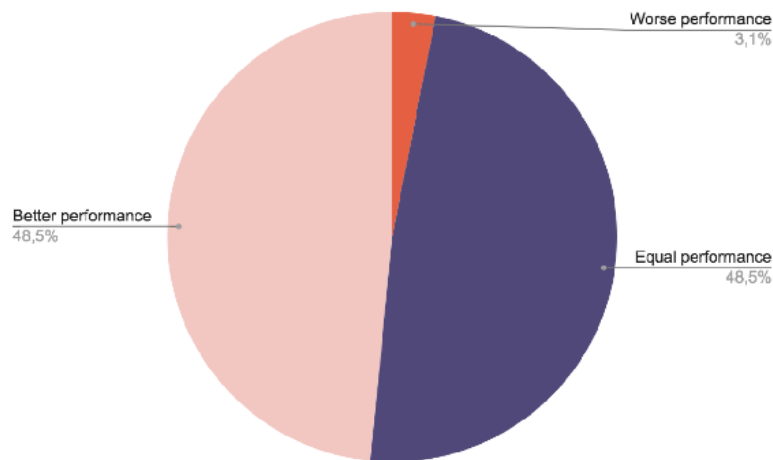
In literature, the question has been raised whether women are so underrepresented in international assignments only because their work performance is not equivalent to that of men.

Research around the question of whether women are as suitable as men were conducted by Bastida in 2017. The researcher compared the work performance of 139 Spanish medium and high-skilled workers (37 women and 102 men) during their international assignment. Bastida (201-) did not find significant differences between gender: "Overall, it seems that the success of women on global assignments has been generally confirmed." Instead, it was found that women have an easier time integrating locally and thus indirectly operate more successfully in their projects. Bastida (2017) concludes: "In addition, and in line with these studies, I found that Female Expatriates have significantly higher interaction and work adjustment levels, but also a higher general adjustment level. This finding gives some support to previous research that has suggested that Female Expatriates may be better positioned than men to handle an expatriate assignment."

In my interviews, I also asked how the women assessed their work performance compared to male colleagues. The reactions ranged from the thoughtful reflection of their own work performance to quick, self-confident evaluations or even irritation to the fact that this is even a question. For many women, it is a matter of course that their work performance is equal, if not better, and they justify this with better education or higher soft skills and efficiency.

While just under half of the respondents rated their job performance as equal, the other half rated their job performance as better. Only one respondent rated her work performance worse, which was explained by being less present at work due to breastfeeding.

Evaluation of own performance (all women)



Not surprisingly, the fact whether the woman had children plays a huge role in her own assessment of work performance. Women without children were significantly more self-confident than mothers. 75% of women without children stated that their work performance was better than men, while only 28% of mothers said the same. At the same time, motherhood affects how committed women are to their profession. For example, several women report that they increased their work effort to compensate for the fact that they are perceived as mothers and not committed employees.

Single parents also report that the lack of a partner takes up working time. Mothers seem to have to prove themselves more and therefore invest more effort in their daily work.

In her own words...

Urge to compensate for being a mother/woman by working harder than men

"I had to work really hard, I always had the feeling that I had to work harder than my male colleagues. I used to think it was because of my perfectionism. I had the feeling that I had to compensate for my gender by working more overtime."

"I was told by a male boss to stop working so hard and now I have a female boss and she is pushing me much harder. I guess women try to prove themselves much more."

"I go the extra mile, because I have to prove myself as a woman again and again. Means more energy input, pay much more attention to details and what is between the lines. I work harder to get positive feedback. Especially to get recognition in these "old white man" circles, or a certain standing, which is essential in my job."

"Equal but as a mother I had to prove myself more."

"Maybe better than the men's. Now also with children my work has become more efficient and I can better manage my working time."

"I am a feminist so I tend to see many nuances. In my master degree 90% have been women (HR) and I realized that we women had to work more when there have been guys in the group. Men have been more lazy yet it was easier for them to get the positions afterwards. I personally prefer female leadership as it is more empathic and the typical male leadership is outdated for me."

Completely equal perception of work performance with male colleagues

"In Germany I had many male colleagues where the performance was completely the same and here abroad my doctor (boss) trusts me as much as a man."

"Same. We as a family found it very easy to adjust abroad. In my opinion, it depends more on the character than on the gender."

Equal work performance in general but better implementation with soft skills

"I can't answer that question. I would say equal, even if the adaptability is certainly better."

"I would classify my work performance as higher simply because I have a different spectrum of possibilities at my disposal. Men often act only through the instrument of hierarchy. I don't need hierarchy to gain respect. I am very self-confident and can resolve conflicts beyond levels of hierarchy. I have a more diverse methodology at my disposal."

"I have in no way had the feeling that I do my job better or worse than men or have to perform better just because I am a woman."

"I have never come across the prejudice that men are better than women. This is not an issue in banking."

"I have a good example: my husband who is Spanish was with me for 8 years in Germany and in this time it was incredibly difficult for him to adapt and get used to the country and people. Now while the language and the mentality is not the easiest but the insinuation women work worse abroad or would be worse adaptable is factually crazy and unrealistic. I would say women are even more efficient than men especially if they are mothers as they have a motivation to work faster to get home to the child."

"I would consider my performance as equal if not better in some areas. My predecessor was a man and he was very direct and strict and I am more emphatic and solution-oriented which works better."

"In general, I think that women are better in terms of team leadership and education and have a more relevant point of view because they are less focused on their own ego. I consider myself democratic, equal/better than men, but I don't want to compare that by gender but rather by person."

"I think women in general can adapt better and historically that has always been the case. As a woman, everything changes when you become a mother, while for men things tend to stay the same. Women have more sensitivity and have already trained more before entering the profession."

Work performance is evaluated with male measurements

"Women value different things than men and my industry is dominated by men and men prefer more classic male characteristics."

Single Parent Syndrome

"I don't think there is a difference here. But I see a difference if you are a single parent or not."

No understanding that there is even a discussion about the different work performance of gender

<Laughs at statement> “My work performance is excellent. This statement is totally bullshit. It has more to do with the project and whether I am interested in it.”

“I find it ridiculous that there is this accusation that men are better at their job than women. From the whole team, I was the only one that got an outstanding evaluation. Now again, I started together with a male coworker and he got a poor performance review while I got an outstanding again.”

Profiting from home culture

“I would rate my work performance as better, at least here in China. In Germany, it was equal. But here, men constantly ask how something works instead of learning it themselves. I am much more proactive. Men constantly come and want help instead of solving it themselves. In my opinion, women are more solution-oriented.”

“My performance is about equal, maybe slightly better. Men need a lot more management, especially as a female leader. I also think men tend to talk more about the efforts they make, and women only bring it up when it's contextual (you hear about it after the fact). It varies from culture to culture as well. Definitely worked harder than male colleagues from Southern Europe, but those from Central and Eastern Europe and Northern Europe, we were contributing the same.”

“Not to do with my gender but with me being Russian. It is part of my culture to work long hours and to very dedicated to my job.”

“In Oman even better because most of the men are not so well educated and also can not communicate so strongly. The eagerness to work is also different. I am very fast and efficient, I am also emotional which many men are not and is a strength in tourism - we sell emotions.”

From the statements in this chapter, one can see that while the system is not predominantly female-friendly, these Female Expats found their own way to succeed. Whether they took matters into their own hands or focused on the work itself, these 30 women overcame all structural barriers by being devoted, resilient, and self-confident. While cultural and gender obstacles do exist, they do not lead to resignation. Where does resilience come from? Why is having a global career important for these women, and what career drivers do they have? More about that in the next chapter.

7. Career planning as the Female Expat

How do Female Expats manage their careers?
What role does their career play in their life?
What are their core drivers?

I wanted to get to the bottom of these questions in my interviews, so I first delved deeper into academic reading on the topic of career planning. Since many of the Female Expats assert themselves in a world that is still dominated by men, it is exciting to analyze whether they also plan their careers in a rather masculine way or have found their very own path. So this chapter is about observing how the Female Expat weights her career, what drives her to involve herself every day in a demanding professional context and why she has chosen this path.

7.1 The alpha vs. beta career

Several different career planning concepts exist to describe the differences between a typical male and a typical female career. One of the more well-known concepts is the differentiation between the alpha vs. beta career patterns. Based on the work by Sullivan and Mainiero (2007), van den Bergh and du Plessis (2013) argued that unlike the linear 'alpha' career pattern typically followed by men, women tend to follow a 'beta' career pattern that is more complex and non-linear by nature. "The 'beta' career pattern is driven by challenge and ambition in the early career, followed by the need for balance and focus on caring responsibilities during the mid-career and finally seeking authenticity in the late-career. The 'alpha' career pattern is characterized by challenge and ambition in the early career, followed by the need for authenticity during the mid-career and then seeking balance in the late-career phase (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007). So the alpha career can be described as more linear and straightforward, while the beta career is more flexible and allows for different work-life balances.

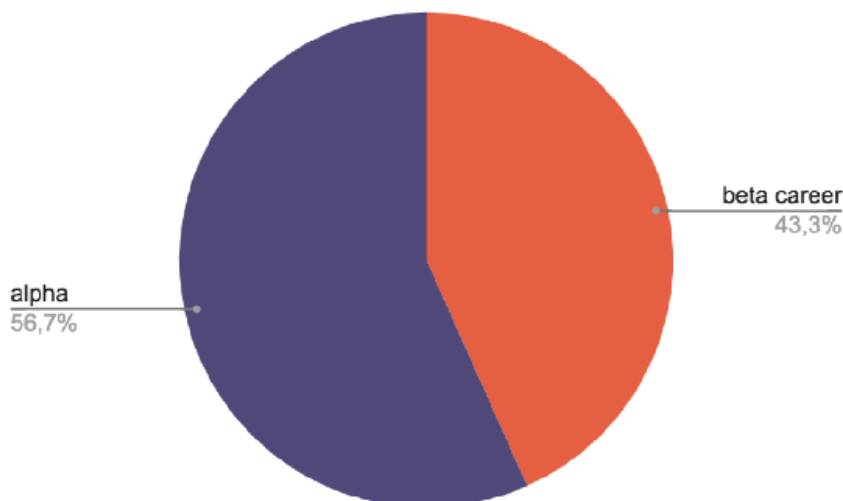
Description of the alpha vs. beta career path according to Sullivan & Mainiero (2007)

	Alpha Career	Beta Career
<i>early career</i>	Challenge and ambition	Challenge and ambition
<i>mid career</i>	Need for authenticity	Need for balance and focus on caring responsibilities
<i>late career</i>	Seeking balance	Need for authenticity
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Straightforward and often linear• Followed primarily by men	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complex, and often non-linear• Followed primarily by women

During the interviews, I asked the Female Expat to look at her own career and indicate whether she pursued an alpha or beta career pattern. Has the career been linear so far, and does she plan to stick to this linear concept? Or is the career more of a tool that is readily adapted to the current circumstances of life and consequently jumping from position to position is accomplished even without a career aspiration.

In this sample of 30 women, the split between alpha career and beta career is quite balanced. The alpha share slightly predominates and is mainly found among very ambitious women. The study results indicate that the Female Expat is more career-driven and prefers a male-oriented career more so than the average woman.

Distribution of alpha vs. beta careers

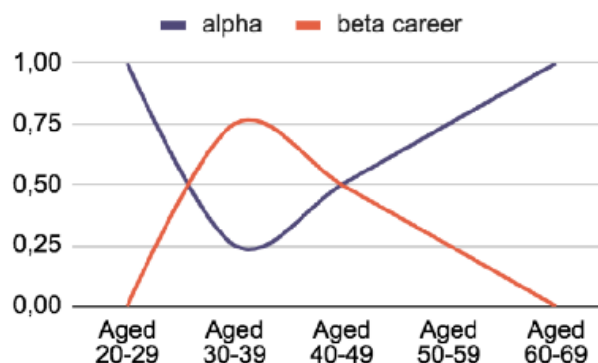
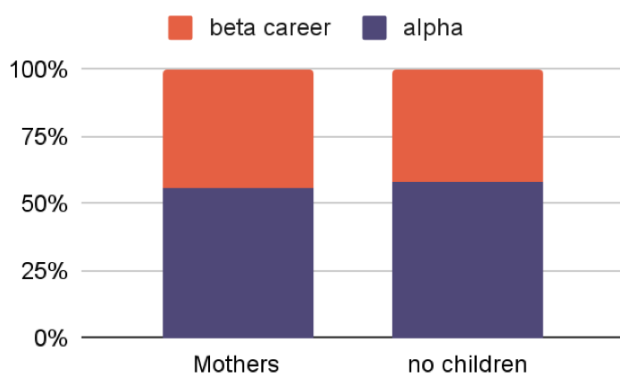


In particular, you might assume that mothers tend to have a beta career with the added caregiving factor. But this was not confirmed among the Female Expats. Instead, in these cases, the partner usually switched his career to the beta model.

Female Expats seem to be more emancipated in their relationship and have a higher stake in prioritizing their own career than the non-expat mother.

Adding the age parameter to the mix, it can be seen that all participants from the boomer generation and Generation Z pursue an alpha career. In contrast, the beta career is mainly followed by women between 30 and 39.

Correlation of career path & age



Female Expats seem to be more emancipated in their relationship and have a higher stake in prioritizing their own career than the non-expat mother.

The author

Examples of the Alpha & Beta Career Approach

The nature of alpha and beta careers is best captured by actual examples. In the following, I present excerpts from the interviews in which the women reflect on and classify their careers:

Alpha Career

Participant A

"My career went very steeply upwards in a linear fashion. I came to HongKong as an assistant designer and left 12 years later as a department director responsible for 45 people.... At that time it was mainly the money and the financial independence that motivated me to invest so much in my career. But also the reputation I got and the confirmation. That was the peak of my career. But then I didn't see any more prospects. I had my first child and left the company a year later. Today, my motivation is completely different. Health, family, mental balance and emotional equilibrium are now more important to me."

This woman left her career at its peak, quit, and became a mother. Referring to the third phase of the alpha model, the focus is now on family and seeking balance after decades of climbing the career ladder.

Participant B

"I had a classic linear career at (global consulting company) and was also in strategy consulting for quite a long time. Now, as CFO, I have reached the highest point and can move laterally at most. That's where I always wanted to be, and I've reached that goal."

This woman planned her career by the books. She has been ambitious from early childhood and prioritized her career throughout her life. Her profession was the center of her attention and is still today a considerable part of her identity. She does not have children and found fulfillment in having a prosperous career and a global lifestyle.

Beta Career

Participant A

"My career is by no means linear. I have already had quite an eventful career. In Germany it was very steep at the beginning, when my son was two we moved to Hungary, where I changed my job. Also here in China I don't build on what I have worked on before. Also in the future I don't expect my career to be linear but always adapted to the phase of life I am in. Self-efficacy is important to me in my profession. I want recognition for my role, I want to work for something good, I want independence and to realize my own dreams and not rely entirely on my partner...I see myself between a pragmatist and an opportunist. I think both are possible, but it is also important to look at the whole family situation - especially abroad. If both move abroad, take a higher job, it doesn't go well and the family falls behind. Especially women have to take care of their own energy. One partner has to be responsible."

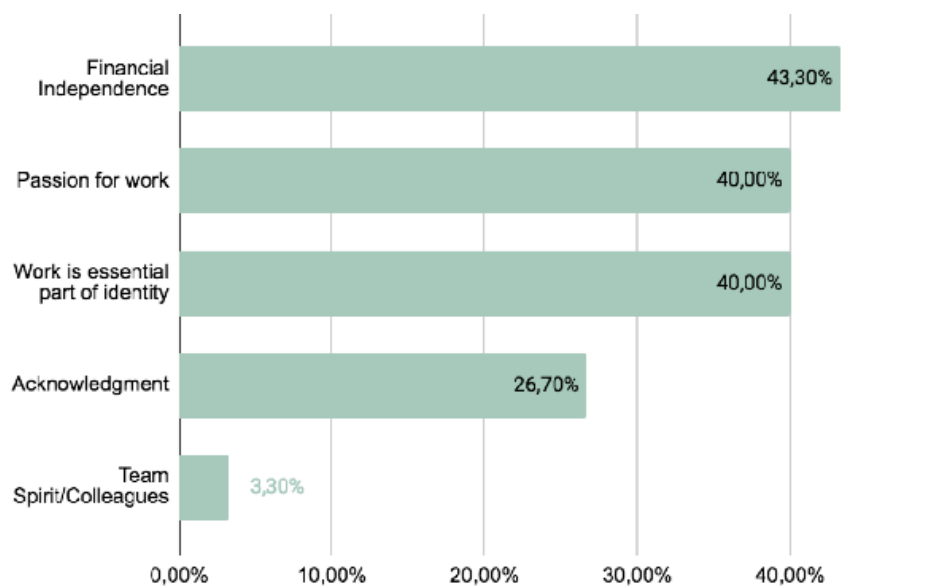
This woman did not pursue a linear career against all odds. While her work was part of her self-fulfillment and recognition is essential to her, she also stressed how crucial it was to her to prioritize family if necessary. She used her profession as a facilitator, gained acknowledgment through it, and switched roles when needed.

7.3 Career drivers of the Female Expat

As you can see from the previous excerpts, the Female Expats interviewed definitely had to overcome hurdles and bring a lot of courage, hard work and drive to be where they are today. I was interested in what triggered them and still trigger them today. What motivates them every day to not take the supposedly easier path? Some women embody the classic career type, while others are simply absorbed in their profession and love what they do. In the following, we take a look at the drivers behind their careers:

Since few women have a single career driver, the responses in the chart are multiple responses. A mix of 2-3 reasons was given in most cases, which were weighted differently throughout the career.

Career Drivers mentioned by the Female Expat (multiple responses possible)



Financial independence was a core driver for almost every second participant. This was especially relevant for single mothers and women from countries with the lower living standard than the host country.

When comparing mothers to women without children, no significant difference has been found in terms of passion for work, financial independence, or career being an essential part of their identity. However, there are substantial differences in terms of acknowledgment. Acknowledgments seem to be way more critical for women without children (50%) than mothers (11%).

Interestingly, many of the women interviewed talked about feeling very bad during periods without work. They struggled with low self-esteem, and it was not uncommon for their relationships to be negatively affected. I've heard similar things from conversations with my coaching clients in the not working Expat Partner role. They also struggle with their self-perception during times without work.

To illustrate, I would like to add some statements from the 30 Female Expats to stress how these career drivers are noticeable in their daily work. Many stress that they cherish to be taken seriously and enjoy having a real impact. Others think about the time without a job and the considerable identity crisis connected to this time.

In her own words...

Seeking challenges

"I'm a problem solver and I get absorbed in the role. When the company or the situation is really in the shit, I really enjoy it and can show my strengths."

Gaining acknowledgment

"I work harder to get positive feedback. Especially to get recognition in these "old white man" circles, or a certain standing, which is essential in my job."

"My father made me feel that he was disappointed that I never studied and I had the feeling that I wanted to prove myself more, but in the meantime I have gained so much experience. This has made me very self-confident."

"I get a lot of acknowledgment out of my career and it is rewarding my efforts. I have invested so much time in my education and have invested so much so I have certain expectations that my career is linear such as the male version of it."

"I would like to be taken seriously for my work."

"Self-efficacy is important to me in my profession. I want recognition for my role, I want to work for something, I want independence and to realize my own dreams and not rely entirely on my partner. Effectiveness is my driver."

Doing something good

"My profession fulfills me because I make people's lives concretely better. I get a lot of confirmation from it."

"Humanitarian reasons also played a role afterwards. I want to have a positive impact with my work. But the question of money is also relevant for me. I earn much more abroad and it is financially more interesting for me than working in Germany."

*"Since I was a kid I said that there is not enough kindness in the world and I am missing the human touch. I learnt that with one phone call you can change the day for another person and I love that I can make a change and the life of someone else better. That is my motivation."
"Career is very important to me and has a high priority. It gives me great pleasure to be part of change and I subordinate other things to it."*

In her own words...

Part of Identity

"The 5 years in which I was only a mother and did not work were a disaster for my self-esteem. I did not know who I was and had no self-confidence."

"The 5 years without a job were catastrophic for my self-esteem but I don't want to miss the time with my children because it was the basis for our relationship and they are still very much related to me even though I was on business trips a lot."

"Work is really important to me. I had the opportunity not to work and did it for a couple of months but it was not for me. I have nothing for respect for women who do not work. Work is a huge part of my identity. It is important for me to learn and to use and adopt my skills."

"For me, work has always been an escape/an anchor/my salvation from the crisis. Especially after the difficult divorce phase. The career then came automatically because I liked to work a lot."

"The career for me was always a combination of my identity but also financially important. When I first moved to Asia and I was on parental leave, introducing myself was challenging and I had to learn this. It was much easier for me back in Brussels when I was employed."

Financial independence

"At that time it was mainly the money and the financial independence that motivated me to invest so much in my career."

"Financial independence is very important to me. In terms of content, I want to be challenged, and I can't find that in Germany."

"My financial independence is incredibly important to me."

"Financial independence is a strong motivator to advance in my career."

"I didn't work for a year when I took care of the children and did a second master's degree, and at that time only because my husband thought we could manage it financially. But we didn't. I lived in poverty with two master degrees. Today it is important to me to stand on my own two feet, to earn well and to have earned a certain standard of living."

"My career is important to me for my financial independence, but also because it is thematically exciting and I get recognition for it."

Fun

"Career is very important to me and as a high priority. It gives me great pleasure to be part of change and I subordinate other things to it."

"Fulfillment. I like to work very much. My father was my role model and he always said that work was not work but joy."

"What I value most about my career is the social effect: team spirit, cooperation, collegial environment."

"I really enjoyed the job and that was my driving force. Not so much the money or the recognition."

"I'm passionate about the industry, love the subject matter, but it has poor opportunities for advancement and the salary is poor."

8. Character traits of the Female Expat

While each participant is telling a very unique story, certain character traits have become dominant throughout the conversations. While talking to these women, I saw a pattern evolving in how they described themselves and their position in this world. A mix of confidence, contentment, and pride resonated in most conversations. To learn more about the distinct attitude of the Female Expats, I watched out for moments when character traits such as confidence and resourcefulness showed. I checked whether these women are feeling in charge of their life or are struggling with the opinions of family and friends who most likely are living a very different life model.

„While talking to these women, I saw a pattern evolving in the way they described themselves and their position in this world. A mix of confidence, contentment, and pride resonated in most conversations.“

8.1 Locus of Control Theory (LCT)

Does it take a more women-friendly system for more women to go abroad as expats, or can women themselves increase their chances? Does society's opinion on motherhood and beta careers have to change first, or can each individual bring about change? It is fascinating to observe how differently these questions are answered in my work with Expat Partners and now also with Female Expats.

Following the discussion of the three different motherhood concepts (chooser, pragmatist, and opportunist - discussed in chapter 5.3), Moeller, Napier, and McGourty (2013) used the so-called Locus of Control Theory introduced by Rotter (1966) to illustrate how empowerment amongst the Female Expat changed over the last generations.

The Locus of Control Theory (LCT) describes how individuals perceive their influence in creating their own future. It shows the range of what individuals believe to be in control of themselves or the environment around them.

Very simplified and provocatively asked: is it one's own ambition that brings people a successful career, or is it social preference or even fate?

“Generally speaking, locus of control is a concept linked with expectations about the future and the extent to which individuals believe that they can control events that affect or will affect them....The catalyst behind each generation’s expectations about the pursuit of a successful international career is found in the dynamics/interplay of their internal and external locus of control.”

Moeller, Napier and McGourty (2013)

In that context the LOT differentiates between an internal and an external locus of control.

External versus Internal Locus Characteristics

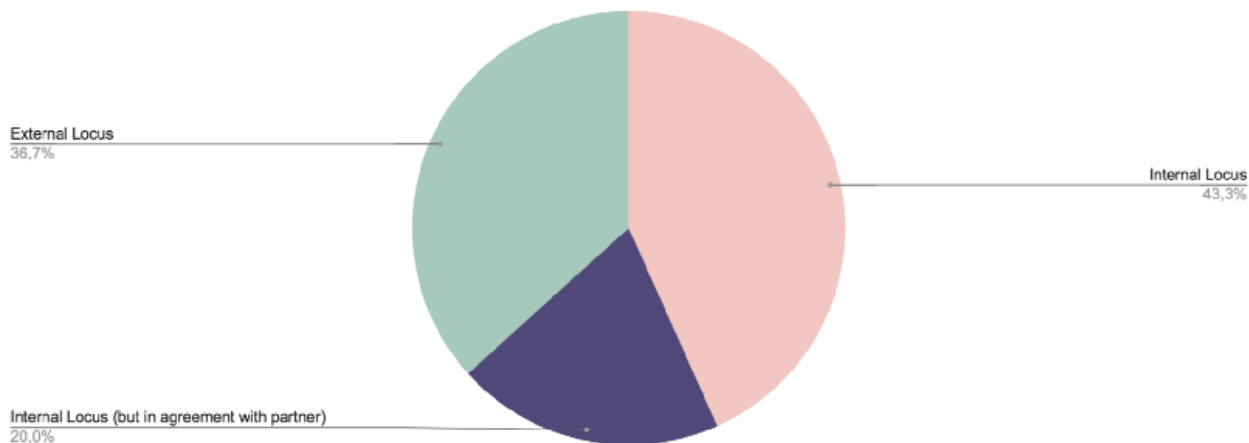
External Locus	Internal Locus
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The individual believes that her behaviour is guided by fate, luck or generally speaking external circumstances.• Life is happening to “her”.• The international career is a rare opportunity and one has to overcome many obstacles as a woman to get there.• The pursuit of an international career might have little benefit to the family and her role as a mother.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The individual believes her behaviour is guided by personal decisions.• I am in control of my life.• The international career is an opportunity available for everyone who wants it.• Strong mentality that everything can be done.

Moeller, Napier, and McGourty (2013) connect the LOT with the question of generation. They argue that the Boomer Generation and Generation X have a much more external locus while Generation Y aims for a much more empowered status than previous generations.

“There is a strong mentality among this generation generally that work can be done anytime, anyplace and thus is an empowerment factor. Generation Y is essentially an “opportunist” generation, striving for an ideal lifestyle balancing work with life responsibilities. If women feel that they can be recognized for their accomplishments, they will pursue the idea. It builds their self-esteem” (Moeller, Napier, and McGourty, 2013).

Consequently, different generations experience different realities that might lead to tensions. However, the same can be said for the relationship between the Expat Partner and the Female Expat. Expat Partners often perceive themselves to be in a situation where they have little control. Often missing work permits or issues with certification acceptance abroad trigger an external Locus of Control sentiment. Thus, the Female Expat, who is feeling fully in charge of her own situation, struggles to see why women just stop because the path ahead is challenging. They already broke the glass ceiling. So they often struggle to empathize with the worries of the Expat Partner and vice versa.

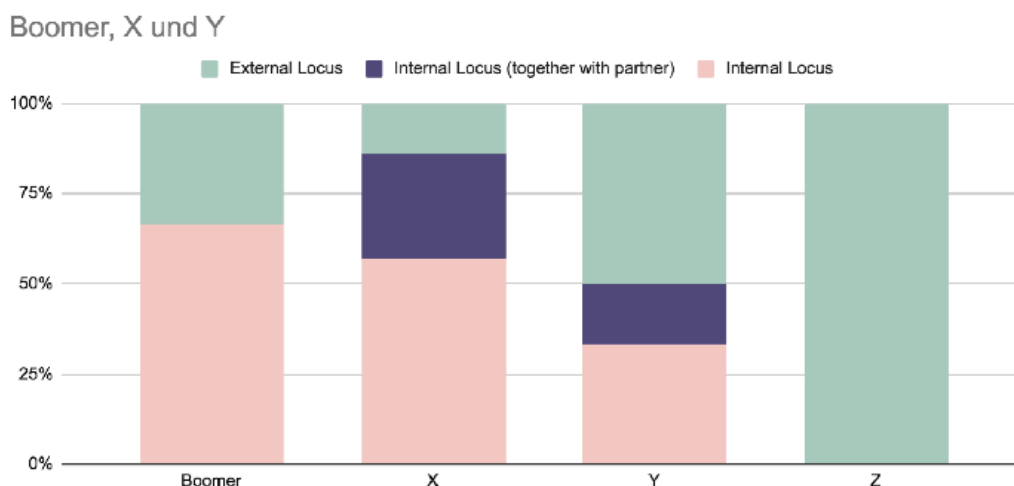
In this study, the following Locus of Control indications have been found:



Contrary to the assumption, younger generations in this study do not feel more autonomous in their decisions by default. The highest degree of internal locus has been detected amongst the Boomer generation and Generation X. Often, the sentiment of “pathing the way” and “breaking the glass ceiling” was the trigger. Their success confirmed that everything is possible if you push for it hard enough.

The responses by women feeling fully in charge of their lives and their future outlook similarly expressed this, stating that they are feeling “100% in control” or “very free.” While most women with an internal locus did not elaborate further as there was no question for them, others gave a bit more context.

Locus of Control representation per generation



In her own words...

Internal locus thanks to financial independence as a woman

"Very free also mainly due to my financial independence"

Distance to home country as an advantage and facilitator to distinguish oneself

"Now that I moved abroad I am feeling more free than before in Brazil. My family is far away and can't see what I am doing. I got the new position because I was lucky but also because I made myself available and showed my expertise on LinkedIn."

"Very free. Being abroad has brought us even closer together as a family. "

Upbringing as a reason for internal locus

"100% free, I was raised to be independent, I left my mothers house when I was 18 financing my own education."

"I feel very free and don't let myself be unsettled. I got that from my mother, who was born in 61 and divorced early. She taught me not to depend on a man and to be independent."

Internal locus since divorce

"I feel very free, at least since my divorce. If you define yourself by the opinions of others, you also make your actions dependent on the outside world. I do not want that."

Others limited their independence somewhat by involving their partner. Especially abroad, couples feel the bond or team structure to be particularly close, and decisions are made together even more than usual.

Internal locus in agreement with partner

"The only person I am listening to is my boyfriend. I changed my job lately because he realized I am not so happy any longer and so I decided to change jobs."

"Completely free, of course, in coordination with the partner.."

"Together with my husband, we make self-sufficient decisions."

"I can do what I want -but I discuss everything with my husband."

Women who had a more external locus mostly mentioned family or geographic restrictions as the main reason, just like these quotes illustrate:

In her own words...

Geographical restrictions: Not being able to choose the next destination

"In the employment relationship I am not feeling free. We can't freely choose where to go next and many countries are simply more exhausting."

"Generally very free. Also in terms of partnership. But since we both have expat contracts, we are not quite so free in terms of time periods and commitments."

"Mostly free. I do not feel free in the geographic decision on where to live and how long we will stay here but I feel very free in the type of work I am doing and the industry I am in. This gives me great flexibility. I feel free in my work choice."

Expectations of one's own performance

"On a scale of 1-10 if 10 is very free I am on a 6-7. I have my own idea where I want to go and if that doesn't work out I see that as a failure."

Societal pressure concerning the role as a mother

"I feel very free within my family, but we already notice the pressure from outside. I therefore weigh up when and how I want to position myself."

"I feel very free. When I hesitate my partner puts me back on track, supports me and pushes me to follow my career path. However I feel that motherhood is a natural discrimination."

"I was totally free. Until I married someone in the USA and had children. Now I am no longer so free in my decisions. I am also concerned about my parents getting older and I feel a sense of duty."

Upbringing and expectation of parents

"I feel very trapped in the values that I got from home."

"Interesting question. I feel deliriously free, but when I have to make another decision and share it with the family, I feel a lot of pressure."

Financial burden

"Somewhat free however I have always in the background this money topic. I have to earn enough to be free."

As expected, the Female Expat in this study shows a more internal locus. She is most constrained by expat contracts that do not allow for a geographic choice of home. Other factors such as the parental home and her upbringing, and the distance to the home country were listed positively and negatively and depend more on the character and attitude towards life of the Female Expat.

Most Female Expats draw strength from their own history and experience. They have learned to rise above adversity and use this in all their life choices.

8.2 The superpowers of the Female Expat

I kept noticing traits that I didn't know from my work with Expat Partners during the interviews. Women who are intrinsically motivated to embark on an adventure abroad and derive their own benefit from it naturally have a different charisma than women who have paused their existing, often successful careers to accompany their partners abroad. They are not necessarily unhappy. For many, this opportunity to experience another country and culture is a welcome adventure. Many Expat Partners can draw many insights from this time and develop as human beings. But the way they talk about themselves is different.

The women I interviewed for this study were almost all very self-confident. They have had to prove themselves many times before and have learned to communicate this to their advantage. They are proud of what they have achieved and also proud of the pioneering role they have. Whenever a statement was very proud, courageous, self-confident, etc., I coded it accordingly in the qualitative analysis system MAXQDA. Here are some examples of the shown superpowers:

Confidence

"Recognition was not important to me. It used to be different. My father made me feel that he was disappointed that I never studied and I had the feeling that I wanted to prove myself more, but in the meantime I have gained so much experience. This has made me very self-confident."

"But on a professional level, I always managed to gain respect. People knew I was no fun to be around. I'm 1.83 tall, and I commanded respect and was taken seriously. "

"I would classify my work performance as higher simply because I have a different spectrum of possibilities at my disposal. Men often act only through the instrument of hierarchy. I don't need hierarchy to gain respect. I am very self-confident and can resolve conflicts beyond levels of hierarchy. I have a more diverse methodology at my disposal."

"If you define yourself by the opinions of others, you also make your actions dependent on the outside world."

"In my case, however, my gender does not play a role because I am very self-determined."

Adaptability

"I think women in general can adapt better and historically that has always been the case. As a woman, everything changes when you become a mother, while for men things tend to stay the same. Women have more sensitivity and have already trained more before entering the profession."

Courage

"In my opinion, people are very biased with their opinions - especially in Germany. Nobody wants to leave their comfort zone. I have always thought outside the box. Limitations are only in the brain. The 1st step is always more difficult than the second."

Perseverance

"It is important to show presence and break out of the comfort zone and many women are not ready for that. Women always think they have to do more than men, but that's not true. I came over without a promotion and only later into a leadership role. But it was always the women who came to me and said I was so brave."

"I wake up everyday and I choose to fight for my career even though I do not have to."

"I learned that everything is possible but it wasn't easy. I fought hard for it and my daughter sees me as a role model today."

Resourcefulness

"Motherhood was uncharted territory for me. It took a lot of my flexibility but I also started to be kinder to myself. I learnt that I have to be flexible with my family and career ambitions. I can't have a perfect career and be the ideal mother. I stopped being so hard on myself and did not work long hours and not beat myself up as I used to do."

In addition to self-confidence, adaptability, perseverance, and resourcefulness, I noticed another crucial difference in contrast to Expat Partners, which makes it easier for the Female Expat to break new ground: They are less influenced by external opinions.

In my coaching practice, external pressure is a prevalent theme. Many women feel pressure to work or not to work, depending on what friends and family at home tell them, without assessing the exact situation on the ground. Many clients are guided by expectations instead of listening to themselves and making autonomous decisions. That is why coaching is such a helpful instrument in the journey of the Expat Partner to regain fulfillment in a different context.

In the conversations with the Female Expat, I noticed a high degree of autonomy. The majority of the interviewed women (73%) consciously distance themselves from expectations of career plans and family models imposed on them from the outside. The smaller proportion (23%) allows this to come closer to them. Interestingly enough, none of the participants over 50 are interested in other people's opinions and are acting way more self-sufficient.

On the following page are a few interesting voices that underscore this point when asked how relevant the opinions of others are for the Female Expat:

In her own words...

How important are the opinions of others to you?

"Not relevant but the voices were very loud. If I had done what my environment had advised me to do, I would still be living in my hometown today without children and would have a life that would not suit me."

"Now that I moved abroad I am feeling more free than before in Brazil. My family is far away and can't see what I am doing."

"I don't care about the opinion of society. It is my personal vision to live in a world where everyone can live according to their own ideas. Therefore, I personally like to communicate that I work full time and then I don't want to hear any opinion."

"No role at all. If it was up to them, I would still be in a boring job in Germany, so I don't care what they think and I'm not going to discuss it."

"The Asians didn't think much of me as a single mother, but I didn't care. I had the support of the people who were important to me."

"Not relevant at all. My brother is married to a drag queen and my father is together with a very young guy. So I have to not care to have a good life."

Others learnt to turn frustration into action

"The school and daycare comments were already painful. I was advised to send my child to boarding school when I was not at home anyway and my child had to repeat one year once. That was absolutely the price my child had to pay for my career. But these comments rather pissed me off and out of that came not frustration but aggression. I have then always clearly communicated that I do not tolerate this. It was always important to me that my child knew that I was behind him."

or distance themselves...

"It was emotional for me when they said I don't care enough about the child. Then, for example, I also kept my distance with my brother and communicated that I didn't feel respected."

"When you then hear that you would neglect your children, you take it to heart. But I have learned to deal with it and let it roll off."

"I was the bad mother (Rabenmutter) at that time and I think that was even more of an issue back then than it is now. I let it get to me but the decision was already made and we would do it again and again. But thick fur is important."

"I don't even go that far of the society but only focus on my mum's opinion. She was giving up her career for my education so she is supporting me. She did not like to see me taking maternity leave and liked it when I started my PhD during maternity. Also later when my daughter went to kindergarten at 8 months old she found it too early. So there are mixed messages. I listen to all of them and understand where the viewpoints are coming from but I follow my dream of a career and don't change my actions because of that."

"Not very relevant since they live a completely different life. They cannot imagine my life. My mother would like to have grandchildren, but when she brings this up, I answer specifically and objectively with counter-questions about how I could manage or arrange this, and then she says nothing more about it."

"I have built a shield on which everything bounces off. I don't give opinions of other people a dance floor - I pull everything through alone and have so far made all big decisions alone."

...many benefit from the diverse life models they can observe around them

"It has never happened to me that I was judged or condemned because of me not having children. My circle of acquaintances is very diverse. I see marriages that fail and happy marriages. My friend has just had a child at 50 and the husband stays at home. Just through the foreign countries I live in I see so many different life models around me that are not evaluated."

"By living abroad for so long, you come into contact with so many different people that you can pick out your own life model. I found that very liberating. But that only came after some time abroad. In the beginning, the Expat Partner image weighed heavily on me. That was a process of detachment."

..it gets easier the older I become

"In the meantime, not as relevant as before. My parents often asked me when I was coming back to Germany and when I was going to have children. That hurt me a lot in the beginning. But when I passed the age of 35, the questions became less and I am more settled in my life. Everyone leads their own life. My brother is very proud of me and always tells his children about me."

Struggles with family expectations

"It is very important for me. My father told me back then I do not need a master because I will marry anyway. My mother helped me but then she was disappointed when I was working at an NGO and did not earn a lot. Now they are happy with me. So it is important to me what they think but I do not change my actions based on their opinion."

***“By living abroad for so long, you
come into contact with so many
different people that you can pick
out your own life model.”***

Anonymous participant

9. The 4 types of Female Expats

Throughout my conversations with the 30 interviewed women, there have been repetitive triggers for moving abroad, similar reactions to challenges while being abroad, and similar views on defining a successful career and incorporating a career into life and motherhood. After including all the raw data into the qualitative analytics program MAXQDA and the coding phase, these patterns became more visible, resulting in four different personas amongst the 30 interview partners.

In the following, each type will be described in more detail. Of course, each individual biography and character of the participants is unique, and so different nuances of these types emerge. Nevertheless, knowing about those different types of Female Expats will be beneficial to the global mobility conversation in two ways:

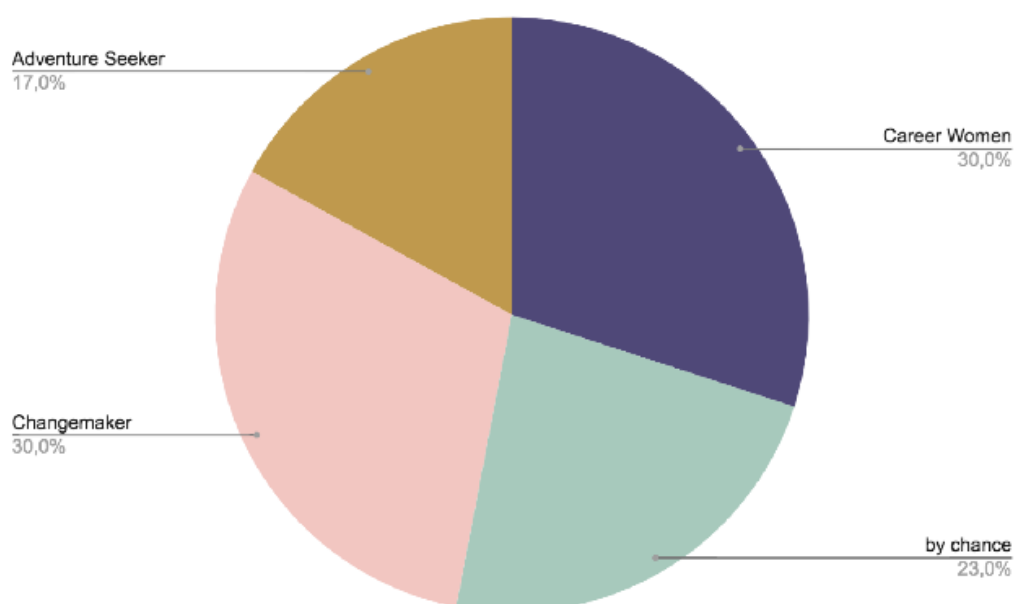
For companies

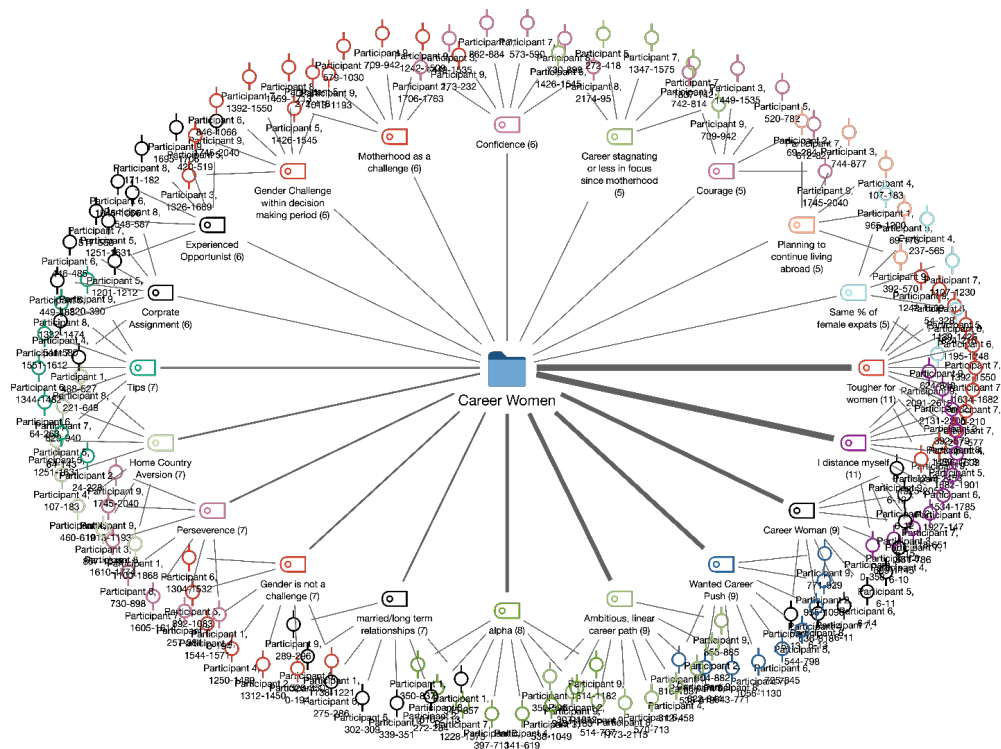
While more and more companies rely on gender parity for their international assignments, processes have hardly been adapted to the challenges of women. Mapping the different personas helps companies and their HR representatives better understand their employees' various challenges and preferences and avoid rejections or curtailment of assignments.

For the Female Expat

These four personas show that there is not this one type of woman who successfully gains a professional foothold abroad. It is an interplay of factors. Women have chosen different ways to fulfill this lifestyle. Their own path can be a completely new persona, not yet represented in this sample.

Representation of different persona amongst the interview partners:





9.3 The Changemaker

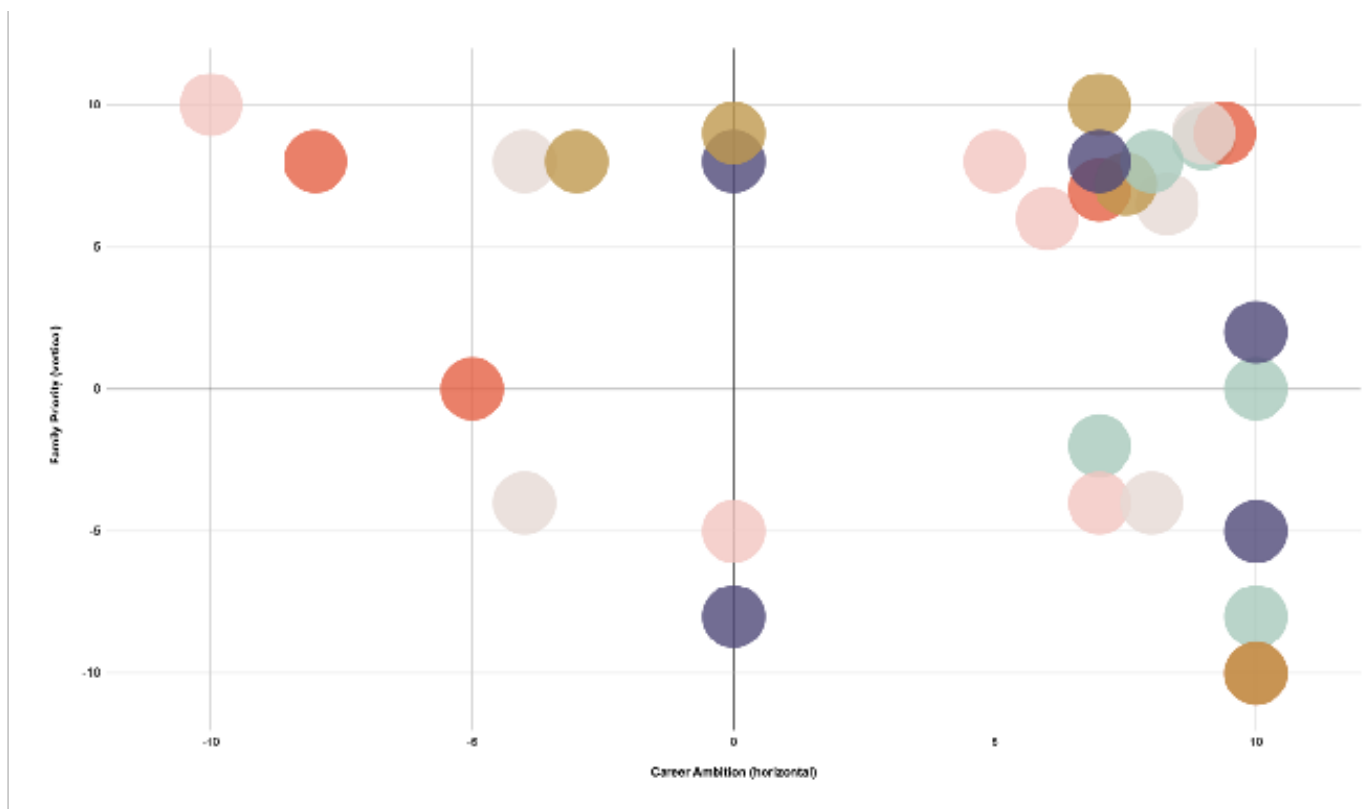
The resourceful, energetic woman who uses the global lifestyle as a facilitator

The Changemaker could not create the life she had in mind in her home country, so she took matters into her own hand. She did not find her local tribe encouraging and was seeking new inputs. Whether her career was stagnating or she couldn't access efficient daycare for her children, or wanted to improve her living conditions, the Changemaker takes her future into her own hands and doesn't wait for someone to do it for her. The fact that she is a woman is not perceived as a disadvantage in her daily life. She often pursues a straightforward, ambitious career and uses her profession as a facilitator to improve her life. Financial independence and recognition are fueling her career ambitions. She doesn't let opinions get to her, and she communicates very confidently and shows a lot of perseverance.

9.5 The manifold lifestyles of the Female Expat

Of course, 4 personas alone cannot fully represent the broad spectrum of different attitudes toward family and career planning preferences among expat women. To visually illustrate what became visible during the 30 interviews: Each woman found her very own solution and has her own motivations and challenges. What united them all was that they seemed very self-determined and did not question their own path, let alone defend it against the outside world. The vast majority of the participants seemed at peace with themselves. The aim of portraying their thoughts and attitudes here in this study in such great detail is to show the range of possibilities. Not every Female Expat is a career woman, and not every woman has seen foreign countries as an adventure. Each dot represents a female participant and her attitude towards family and career planning in the chart below. Thus, it can be seen at one glance that there are trends but no universal positioning. It also became apparent that attitudes often shift over life experience and preferences change. Female Expats do think differently about what should be prioritized in life. The family was a much more significant part of their lives for some, while others were more driven by their career.

The manifold life priorities of the Female Expat



10. The future of the Female Expat and its implications for global mobility and the expat partner

This study revealed that women of all ages are approaching their global careers with self-confidence and courage and are less irritated by social norms. Living abroad creates a distance, showcases different life models, and offers the invitation to choose for oneself.

For many interviewed Female Expats, a global career was the enabler for balancing family needs and career ambitions by offering a more affordable daycare system or a more accepting society of working mothers. Some satisfied their appetite for adventure and the unknown, while others found a shortcut to a leadership position.

While we see an ongoing war of talent, a term first coined by McKinsey in 1997, where companies are longing for highly educated and globally experienced employees, the number of female expatriates is slowly rising, but parity is not coming anytime soon. While the pandemic is triggering a second wave of war of talent and women have been challenged to balance work and family on a much more intense level, the future of female expatriation is still a question mark.

Many of the women interviewed saw themselves as exceptions - as lone warriors. Some were optimistic about societal changes and expected that female expats would no longer encounter the same rigid construct. Others continue to see the responsibility with the individual woman and have no confidence in societal change. Even within Global Mobility, there is currently disagreement about whether the number of female expats will increase significantly, and the unpredictability as an adjunct to the pandemic does the rest. As a coach and observer of these developments, I would like to emphasize how important it is that we understand the motives and challenges of Female Expats to respond to them. In our time, women are faced with great work-life balance challenges that are multiplied by a move abroad. Women who have moved abroad with family and a partner repeatedly emphasized how vital the support of their partner was in the interviews. Women who went abroad as a single often stressed that this was a decision to be able to actually work abroad. While society has become accustomed to female expat partners, male expat partners are still the exception, even though they appear more self-confident and self-determined nowadays. I want to end this report by quoting once again the wonderful interview participants who express in their own words how they evaluate the future of female expatriation. In the end, it is about giving the floor to women who have done it already and share their experiences.

Reading through these statements, certain feelings might be triggered. Many stress that a partner is essential or that women have to step out of the victim role. From my coaching experience, I can only encourage you to reflect on what reading through those statements does to you. I invite you to talk about it at one of our monthly global coffee dates or mastermind groups for career planning abroad.

I want to thank all participants for sharing so openly about their experience, for being willing to hop on a call with a stranger and answer those very personal questions to make the world a better place for international working women. It was an honor to listen to these powerful voices as it is an honor for me to support Expat Partners in finding their professional identity abroad.

“Girls and women need to realize that they have to take their fate in their own hands. No one is waiting for them. In Ireland we tend to wait till something happens but I learnt to take action on my own. I think careers will be more mobile and that is an opportunity. Women have to be more confident and learn how to sell themselves. A male CV is always overselling while the female CV is always underselling. You have to be proactive on LinkedIn and push yourself and reach out. You make your own luck.”

Anonymous participant

“None, in my opinion, women always put themselves in this position. It's 2021 and we still have this issue. It's homemade. Many women put themselves in this submissive position.”

Anonymous participant

“But there are two sides and women have to get out of this victim role. I think there will be more and more single women. In many areas it is not the question of men or women but rather how the women position themselves.”

Anonymous participant



“Companies are only changing slowly and I see that the current debate on diversity and inclusion is not only positive. For some women the promotion comes too early or is pushed too hard and men feel discriminated.”

Anonymous participant

“It is important to show presence and break out of the comfort zone and many women are not ready for that. Women always think they have to do more than men, but that's not true. I came over without a promotion and only later into a leadership role. But it was always women who came to me and said I was so brave.”

Anonymous participant

“I am often not sure if women really want to have it all. The partner often doesn't want to go and that limits women a lot. But I'm always annoyed when I see how many women carelessly sacrifice their careers for their husbands.”

Anonymous participant



“What I can say is that the partner is crucial. If you want to have a family and children, you need a supportive partner who either takes a back seat or is very supportive. Without that it is not possible. I wish to live in a world where both are compatible.”

Anonymous participant

“For many women who strive for the classic family model, a career abroad is difficult because the partner is rarely willing to go abroad with them. All the women I know in high positions are single parents or in long-distance relationships. But I also see that women are not deterred by difficult places. Many dare to go to very challenging places without fear but then the partner is often the sacrifice that has to be made.”
Conventional family models are rarely compatible

Anonymous participant

“In my estimation, it will remain very male. The partner is definitely the deciding factor. Women decide much more emotionally, are more often tied to parents and grandparents and have to decide between family and career abroad. Men often refuse to give up their jobs at a young age so that their wives can go abroad. Later, when it comes to retirement and the man no longer has career ambitions, it is easier for the woman.”

Anonymous participant



“I assume that there are more women who make a career. It is questionable whether men will go abroad with them. I have deliberately chosen a man who is absorbed in his role as a father and I do not have to be a mother only.”

Anonymous participant

“I think there will be more female expats. At our company there are more women coming from Russia than man. Although I do not see many Russian men accompanying their spouse. Women are more flexible and can adopt more easily. For me it was easy because I was single otherwise I would have had to chose between relationship or career. Conventional family models are rarely compatible.”

Anonymous participant

“But companies also have to improve foreign assignments and also take care of the partner and repatriation (e.g. daycare). Men will no longer be able to take their female partners with them as easily as before.”

Anonymous participant

“But I think that the classic expat packages will become less popular and the trend will go more and more to flexpets with less attractive expat packages but more flexibility and I think that will help women.”

Anonymous participant

Tips from the Female Expat interview partners

I listened carefully to how the Female Expat overcame challenges due to her gender and what they learned about them. Here are some excerpts:

“You need a clear will: a willingness to establish a good network and a strong will in everything you do. then it will work out.”

“I have taken a male colleague as support to help me in challenging moments about my gender. “

“Do not whine and proceed as a role model”

***“Change industries.”
(if you are struggling with your gender in the professional context)***

“You just need expertise and credibility and you'll be fine.”

“Be open and direct. If you raise the gender equity issue too high, you make it an issue without taking action.”

“From my German experience, I can say that you should be open about it and address things. That takes courage. If you don't have it, you can look for one-on-one conversations to address it clearly.”

“I think the prejudices about this among women are very bad and I always try to see it from the male perspective. How would a man see it?”

“I learnt a different communication strategy and to show my muscles. Sometimes you have to leave the stage and circle around the challenge looking around for supporters.”

About the Author

Katharina von Knobloch - Kate

Kate is a certified coach with a focus on Expat Partner Career Support. Originally from Germany, she has lived and worked in the UK, Spain, Taiwan, and the US. With her coaching services and publications on her website sharethelove.blog, she aims to empower and support the millions of women worldwide who have been brave enough to exit the job market and try to re-enter abroad or after time spent abroad and/or with their family.

With a background in Digital Marketing & Consulting, she started her career as an Expat Transition Coach after her personal experience as the Expat Partner. Expatriation can be a blessing or a disaster. It is her goal to turn expatriation into an eye-opening and empowering experience for Expat Partner worldwide.



SharetheLove Services

As an Expat Partner Career Coach, I work with women who want to re-enter the workforce after moving abroad, after extended maternity leave in a foreign work environment, or after returning home and are overwhelmed by the potential options ahead. They often feel uncertain about the gap in their CV and struggle to sell their expertise. I work with these women with the result of clarity on the next career steps, expertise on how to present themselves in a professional context and take action. They rediscover a sense of purpose and a professional identity next to their global family life.

Find out more

[Career Workbook for Expat Partners](#)

[1:1 Coaching packages](#)

[Mastermind Group Coachings](#)

[Global Coffee Date](#)

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