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## **Role models: Expatriate gender diversity pipeline or pipe-dream?**

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## **Role models: Expatriate gender diversity pipeline or pipe-dream?**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper examines the extent to which – and how – female expatriate role models support women to take up expatriate assignments in the male-dominated oil and gas industry.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The research uses data from a census survey of female expatriates supported by semi-structured interviews with a stratified sample of the survey respondents, triangulated with interviews with HR professionals and analysis of organizational policy relevant to expatriation.

**Findings:** Potential assignees value the information that women role models can provide on living in challenging, masculine locations. Role models are particularly important to women undertaking unaccompanied assignments and also when assignment periods exceed traditional lengths. Current female expatriates do not view themselves as role models, despite HR professionals recognizing their value in inspiring women's expatriation.

**Research limitations/implications:** This research was set in a sector with very few female expatriate role models. Further research is needed to understand the influence of role models on women's expatriation in different sectors and organizations with greater female role model representation.

**Practical implications:** Training for current assignees, time to be set aside within work duties, and communications links to enable current and returned female expatriates to connect with potential assignees are needed to widen expatriate gender diversity.

**Originality/value:** This research contributes to theory by linking the importance of role models to women's career stages. It proposes a new theoretical contribution by linking role model importance to the types of assignments women undertake. Practical suggestions for organizations are given to widen expatriate gender diversity via support for role models.

## **Introduction**

The literature highlights that mentors, role models and networks provide sources of organizational support for career progression. Yet, in the expatriate arena, there are insufficient women to act in a mentor or role model capacity and women are excluded from expatriate networks that are predominantly male in composition. These covert barriers are detrimental to women's career development (Linehan and Walsh, 2001). Currently, there is relatively little literature that attempts to disentangle these different forms of organizational support to look at their effects on women's international careers (e.g. Shortland, 2011). This paper focuses on female expatriate role models in the oil and gas industry to provide an original empirical and theoretical contribution to the field.

Expatriation is male-dominated and in the oil and gas sector this is especially so (ORC Worldwide, 2007). Although the sector uses high numbers of expatriates (Brookfield, 2009), they primarily hold engineering roles (Shortland, 2009) and such jobs are predominantly undertaken by men (Powell *et al.*, 2004). In addition, in this industry, the locations where

expatriates are based are often remote and women assignees are not just in the minority but can be the sole female expatriate (Inwood, 2007). As such, they are highly visible ‘tokens’ (Kanter, 1977). Although role models have been linked to women’s decisions to enter male-dominated occupations (Greene and Stitt-Gohdes, 1997), there is an absence of female role models in masculine industrial sectors (such as oil and gas) with their strong focus on engineering and science (Quimby and DeSantis, 2006). Role models can potentially influence decision-making by others even when they are not known personally to them (Gibson, 2004). Given this context, there is a strong rationale for examining role models as an intervention to increase expatriate gender diversity as a discrete research topic.

This paper aims to find out whether role models, defined here as female assignees who act as exemplars to encourage others, can help to raise the profile of expatriation as an attractive and accessible career choice, thereby encouraging other women to pursue international assignments. It also considers whether organizational support for role models might increase female expatriation. The research objectives are twofold. Firstly, to establish whether and if so how, female expatriates working in the male-dominated oil and gas exploration and production industry view themselves as role models. Secondly, to determine the effect that the presence and views of other women expatriates had on their own assignment participation decisions. The study is set within two oil and gas case study firms and addresses the following research questions:

1. How important do women perceive female expatriate role models to be to their international assignment participation and why?
2. To what extent – and how – do female expatriates view themselves as role models? To what extent – and how – are female expatriates viewed as role models by other women and by their employing organizations?

3. What organizational support is provided to female expatriate role models?
4. How might the oil and gas exploration and production industry and the international assignments offered within it be made more attractive to women?

This paper provides a unique theoretical contribution by proposing a model that explains the importance of female role models to women's international careers. The paper also gives pointers to Human Resource (HR) professionals as to how organizational policy and practice might better support the use of role models to increase expatriate gender diversity.

### **Literature review and theoretical background**

The extant literature suggests that working internationally provides career development and is a precursor to senior level corporate appointments (Caligiuri and Colakoglu, 2007; Dickmann and Baruch, 2011). Indeed, job, career and development considerations are identified as important factors that influence individuals' decisions to undertake expatriate assignments (Dickmann *et al.*, 2008). Women have always been in the minority with respect to expatriation (Altman and Shortland, 2008). Unconscious bias by men renders women's deployment in international roles as risky (Byrne, 2011). Women are thus potentially disadvantaged if they are unaware of career-enhancing expatriate assignments in other countries, see them as being unavailable or unobtainable, are denied access to them or gain little benefit from them when they do undertake them. Given women's widely reported success in undertaking corporate expatriation (Shortland and Altman, 2011, Tung, 2004) their minority status as expatriates suggests that organizations are not achieving optimal business outcomes in an increasingly globalized commercial environment.

A critical mass of female leaders may help to reduce turnover of women at lower levels in the hierarchy through the demonstration of women's potential for career advancement. However, women need to be able flow through the pipeline to the senior and executive ranks (Helfat *et al.*, 2006) if they are to become role models for others. Yet in here lies the rub – the pipeline to the top leaks, is blocked or broken. There are simply too few women reaching senior management to act as role models to show others how to overcome the challenges along the journey (Ely, 1994; Mattis, 2001; Salas-Lopez *et al.*, 2011; Sealy and Singh, 2010). This lack of women role models is identified as one of the greatest barriers to women's advancement (Catalyst, 2003).

Organizational action to increase the representation of female leader role models is therefore suggested as a potentially effective diversity intervention (Mattis, 2001).

Role models are described as “individuals whose behaviors, personal styles, and specific attributes are emulated by others” (Shapiro *et al.*, 1978, p. 52). They provide a basis for social comparison, enabling individuals to compare their own situations and experiences with those of the identified target and thus to evaluate their potential future achievements in the context of their own abilities, motives and actions. While providing a “template of the behaviors that are needed to achieve such success” (Lockwood, 2006, p. 36) role models can, in addition, provide a source of information, encouragement and support (BarNir *et al.*, 2011). Thus, individuals select a role model for what s/he is as well as for what s/he does (Gibson, 2003).

Gibson (2004, p. 137) highlights differences between behavioral models and role models. He notes that behavioral models are “based on the capabilities of the target and desire to learn by the individual”. In contrast, role models are “based on perceived similarity and desire to increase similarity by the individual”. This is significant as it highlights the importance of finding someone sufficiently similar for the individual to emulate (Sealy and Singh, 2010). Individuals

who identify themselves as akin to well-functioning, successful comparators who are ahead on the career ladder can be inspired by them to pursue a similar career path and engage proactively in career planning (including goal setting, skills development and proactive networking). By the same token, comparison with poorly functioning, unsuccessful targets can induce anxiety and result in dissuasion from following a career track (Buunk *et al.*, 2007). Whether a role model with outstanding achievements inspires and motivates others to achieve their best or demoralizes and deflates them depends upon whether their achievements appear attainable or impossible. Ideally, the role model demonstrates outstanding but achievable success aligned with what the individual hopes for; the individual needs to be able to identify their future self in the role model in order to be inspired (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). Role models in a similar field are thus likely to have a greater impact upon individuals than those who are not (Lockwood, 2006).

Gibson (2003, 2004) distinguishes between the attributes of role models that are: positive (admired and emulated) and negative (examples of how not to behave); global (a variety of identified skills, traits and behaviors) and specific (a single or small set); close (involving frequent interaction) and distant (with infrequent or no interaction); up (superiors higher in the hierarchy) and across/down (peers, subordinates or others). Individuals in their early career stage (acquiring self-concept; average age 30) emphasize the positive, global, close and superior dimensions; in mid-career (refining their self-concept; average age 38) both positive and negative, specific, close and distant, and superiors and peers are emphasized; while in late career (affirming their self-concept; average age 47) negative, specific, distant, and peers and subordinates are emphasized as role models (Gibson, 2003). For example, in Ibarra's (1999) research, professionals in transition to more senior roles observe role models to identify potential identities and thus enable experimentation and evaluation to shape self-construction. In Gibson



and Barron's (2003) research older workers, in environments where performance and relevant skills acquisition are more critical to promotion and job security than seniority, view younger employees with up-to-date technical skills as appropriate role models.

The theoretical literature relating to role models thus indicates that the attributes that individuals emphasize will change as they age and move through different career stages. These predictions, however, do not take account of gender. Yet, women's careers differ from men's; while men follow a linear career track, women's careers are described as circular, spiral or kaleidoscope in nature (O'Neal and Bilimoria, 2005; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005, 2006; Pringle and Dixon, 2003; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007). Women begin with early career focus and challenge, characterized by optimistic achievement. At this life cycle stage, it would be expected that role models would be of particular importance to them. Young women would be envisaged to admire more senior female expatriates, taking note of their range of demonstrated skills and behaviors and seeking interaction with them. In mid-career, when women's relational demands take precedence or need to be balanced with career outcomes, female expatriate role models (peers and superiors, whether known via a close relationship or not) would be expected to be of greatest relevance if they provided examples of combining a specific expatriate role with child rearing. Older women in late stage careers seek re-inventive contribution (O'Neal and Bilimoria, 2005) and authenticity (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005, 2006; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007); as such organizational expatriate careers are less likely to be taken up. That said if women do undertake expatriation in late career stage, specific skills and behaviors identified in peer and subordinate role models would be predicted to be of value. Close interaction with such female expatriate role models would be unlikely to be sought (Gibson, 2003).

By watching role models, individuals can identify resources, learn how things are done, evaluate information and make judgments as to their own potential success. Besides having a positive influence on career intention, exposure to role models has also been found to have a positive effect on self-efficacy (BarNir *et al.*, 2011). Self-efficacy concerns belief in one's own ability to complete a specific task or reach a goal successfully. It is developed enactively (by doing), vicariously (by watching) and through encouragement by others (Bandura, 1997). Research has shown that the effects of role models on self-efficacy and career intentions are gendered. Role models have a stronger influence on women's self-efficacy than men's and, in turn, on women's career intentions (BarNir *et al.*, 2011). Women are also inspired to a greater extent by female rather than male role models. This potentially reflects that women face more obstacles to career advancement and negative career stereotypes than men (Ibarra and Petriglieri 2007; Lockwood, 2006).

Role models may be complete strangers. As Gibson (2004, p. 142) notes "role modeling requires only one-way awareness". A role model, alternatively, may be well-known to the individual, also acting as mentor or sponsor. Mentors are higher ranking, influential, more experienced individuals who advise, counsel and enhance their protégés' career development (Kram, 1985). Sponsors hold positions of power and influence that enable them to "pull a person up through the ranks" (Mattis, 2001, p. 382). Sponsors may mentor the individual but they can also influence people's careers without acting in this capacity. As such, individuals' role models, mentors and sponsors may be different people; but they may also be one and the same person. Entering the managerial ranks also requires networks of work-based social contacts – but women have less access to these as well. This is due in part to time constraints in juggling work and

family responsibilities (Linehan, 2001) and through exclusion from ‘male buddydom’ (Nicholson, 2000).

Not only are the numbers of female role models small, but also role model status is gendered – women are less readily seen as role models than men (Murrell and Zagenczyk, 2006). Yet, once having held a gender atypical job, individuals are perceived as more suited to holding future atypical sex roles, suggesting that career history can help to reduce gender bias for women (Byrne, 2011; Hareli *et al.*, 2008). Inspirational role models have an influence on career choice (Quimby and DeSantis, 2006). Their life styles are also important in influencing the career intentions of those who have identified them as a target (Van Auken *et al.*, 2006) as is their ability to manage multiple roles (Quimby and DeSantis, 2006).

Role models are considered by women to be important in supporting their entry into – and successful participation in – international roles (Linehan, 2000). Although the issues expatriates face on repatriation (lack of recognition of achievements abroad, loss of autonomy and *ad hoc* organizational planning) appear similar for men and women, these are potentially more problematic for women, linked to their greater career uncertainty (Mayrhofer and Scullion, 2002). Hence, role models can help women by providing career contacts, support and assisting with work adjustment on return home as well as on expatriation (Linehan and Scullion, 2002). Yet, there is a dearth of female expatriate role models (Altman and Shortland, 2001; Hutchings *et al.*, 2010).

Role models can be observed vicariously and the individuals observing them can gain valuable development even without direct interaction. As such the presence of role models can be of particular value in the international environment where geographical distance, time zones, language differences and so on can hinder direct interaction (Gibson and Barron, 2003). Yet,

those who are employed in sectors such as oil and gas, engineering and construction can appear as ‘tokens’ (Kanter, 1977). They stand out and while this increased visibility potentially highlights their gender and the roles that they perform in a positive light, it also spotlights any perceived negative behavior and mistakes; their token status unintentionally sets them up as (perhaps unwilling) role models for others. Indeed, Ely’s (1994) research finds that rather than operate as role models, token women in male-dominated workplaces may act as ‘queen bees’, excluding and denigrating other women.

This study aims to provide insight into: whether female assignees are seen as role models; the importance of role models in encouraging women to undertake international assignments; how female assignees view their role model status; and the support provided by their employing organizations to fulfill being a role model to other potential assignees. It contributes to role model and women’s career theories, assesses whether role models can provide a pipeline to widen expatriate gender diversity by helping the masculine oil and gas industry and the job roles within it appeal more widely to women throughout their careers, gives pointers for organizational policy and practice in support of role models as an expatriate gender diversity intervention and identifies areas for further research. The next sections outline the method and report on the research findings.

## **Method**

Eighteen oil and gas exploration and production organizations with UK bases of operation were invited to participate in a study which set out to investigate the effects of a range of organizational policies and implementation practices that were envisaged to affect women’s decisions to take up international assignments. Two medium-sized firms, broadly comparable in

size and scale of operations, agreed to take part in this detailed project. They employed a total of 93 female expatriates (representing approximately 10% of their expatriate populations).

A triangulated research approach was used. Firstly, the international assignments policy documentation of the two case study firms was subject to analysis to gain an understanding of the two organizations' supporting policy and practice. Next, 14 Human Resource professionals with responsibility for policy design and implementation were identified. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with them to establish how organizational policies were executed in practice. The interviews were carried out in the UK, either face-to-face or, if the interviewee was based abroad, by telephone, and each lasted between 30-90 minutes. The 14 HR professionals were asked to comment on, and give examples of, specific initiatives and policies that were in place to increase the percentage of women expatriates. Six referred to role models when speaking about this issue. (See Appendix for the extract from the HR professionals' semi-structured interview schedule.)

Next, all of the 93 female expatriates were invited to participate in an e-mail survey to establish the importance of the policy components to their expatriate participation decision-making. All of those invited to complete the survey were current assignees (not repatriates or potential expatriates). An excellent survey response rate of 76% was achieved: 71 responses were received (Baruch and Holtom, 2008).

The survey participants were asked to state the importance (on a scale of 1 to 3, where 1 = not important; 2 = important; and 3 = very important) of the following in relation to their decision to participate in their current expatriate assignment:

- ❖ the presence of female expatriate role models currently on assignment (PFE)

PFE refers to Gibson's (2004) 'one-way awareness'. This survey question aimed to establish the extent to which women working on international assignments who were not known personally to the individual, but whose expatriate existence was known about, had an effect on the respondent's decision to take up an expatriate role.

❖ the views of female expatriate role models currently on assignment (VFE)

Drawing upon BarNir *et al.* (2011), VFE refers to where current female expatriates act as a 'source of information' by speaking about their experiences (either personally to the individual or publicly). This survey question aimed to establish the extent to which the dissemination of female expatriates' opinions while they were on assignment had an effect on the respondent's decision to take up an expatriate role.

❖ the views of female role models returning from an assignment (VFR)

Similarly, drawing upon BarNir *et al.* (2011), VFR refers to where female expatriates who had repatriated (to their home country/headquarters and who had been domiciled there for some while) provide a 'source of information'. This survey question aimed to establish the extent to which the dissemination of their opinions (covering expatriation and repatriation) had an effect on the respondent's decision to take up an expatriate role.

The survey questions (given in the Appendix) were designed to generate descriptive statistics to frame the interview research by setting context, rather than being a vehicle to produce detailed statistical analysis. Cross-tabs were run using SPSS to analyse the survey responses, for example by assignment length, pattern, location, and accompanied status.

Table 1 summarizes the participant profile of the survey respondents, providing data on a range of demographics. Due to the sensitivity of asking women for their actual ages, age data were collected by age band. As expected, there was a link between age and grade: 86% of those

in the junior grades (12 women) were under age 30; 82% of those in the middle grades (45 women) were aged between 30 and 44; while one of the two women in the senior management grades was between 30 and 44 and the other was over 45. The range of destination countries was wide but to preserve anonymity it was agreed that host locations would be reported at a regional level. Six women were the sole female expatriates in their host country. Of the 33 women who were accompanied, 31 were accompanied by their husband or partner and 15 by children. One woman was accompanied by her sister. The majority (51 out of the 71 respondents) were on long-term assignments.

- Take in Table 1 about here -

A total of 26 current female expatriates to be interviewed were identified from the survey responses via stratified sampling (Collis and Hussey, 2009). This ensured appropriate representation by grade, home/host location, current/previous assignment type and marital/accompanied status. The majority of the interviews were carried out by telephone as the assignees were abroad although some interviews were conducted in the UK, face-to-face. Interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and all were taped with permission. The assignees were asked for their views on which aspects of organizational support relating to role models and who had been of greatest importance in their expatriate participation decision. They were also asked if they thought that they acted as a role model to other women considering an international assignment. In addition they were asked whether and how expatriation and their industry sector might be made more attractive to women. The assignees were advised that a role model was defined by the researcher as a female assignee who acts as an exemplar to encourage others. They were asked to explain their answers (see Appendix for the extract from the interview schedule).

Twenty-one expatriate interviewees talked about role models; 11 commented on role models in their survey returns of whom seven were interviewed and six elaborated on their survey comments. Demographic details of the all the assignees who commented on role models are given in Table 2. Analysis of the comments from the assignees who were interviewed and/or surveyed and from the HR professionals ensured that the references made to each issue were representative and not merely individual concerns. All of the interviews were transcribed and coded in NVivo 8. A total of 50 references were made to role models. All participants were guaranteed anonymity and hence data reported here does not reveal real names or other information through which those involved in the research (individuals and organizations) can be specifically identified.

- Take in Table 2 about here -

## **Findings**

### *The applicability and importance of female expatriate role models*

As shown in Table 3, just under half (45%) of the survey respondents (32 women) recorded that the presence of current expatriate role models (PFE) and views of current expatriate role models (VFE) were not applicable to their assignment participation. Similarly 44% (31 women) reported that the views of returned women expatriate role models (VFR) were not applicable to their assignment participation. Typical comments that help to explain these data indicated that there were no female role models to speak of:

*“... most of my colleagues at work ... are male (tending to 20:1 ratios) so it’s not always possible to have ... personal female role models!” (# 34)*

Some women assignees commented that they had a “*sense of adventure*” and, as such, PFE, VFE and VFR were not considered relevant to them. The women enjoyed the prospect of



mastering their new posting by relying on their own energy and determination as illustrated in the comment given here:

*“Half the fun of being expat is taking these steps into the unknown.” (# 23)*

There were 39 respondents to each of the survey questions that asked participants to state the level of importance that they placed on role models in relation to their assignment participation decision (representing 55% of the survey’s participants). Eleven survey respondents commented on this issue. In the survey responses, only two women cited PFE, three cited VFE and one VFR as being ‘very important’ to their expatriate participation decision; whereas 11, 10 and 11 assignees respectively noted PFE, VFE and VFR as ‘important’ to their decision to take up an expatriate assignment.

- Take in Table 3 about here -

*The importance of PFE, VFE and VFR in relation to assignees’ age and grade*

Of those survey respondents reporting on the importance of role models to their expatriate participation, around one-third said they were of importance or high importance, while approximately two-thirds said that they were not important. This split in opinion required further explanation. The importance of PFE, VFE and VFR was analyzed by age and grade by performing chi-square tests. While there were insufficient cell counts and, as such, the significance of these data cannot be confirmed (Pallant, 2007), nonetheless, as shown in Table 4, PFE and VFR were of importance/high importance to a greater proportion of women in the mid-age and mid-career grades than to younger women and those in lower grades. Yet, by contrast, a higher proportion of younger women and those in lower grades regarded VFE as being of importance/high importance to their assignment participation than did their mid-age and mid-career female colleagues. It was also notable that a lower proportion of the mid-age and mid-

grade respondents reported PFE, VFE and VFR as not applicable to their assignment participation than did the other age and grade groups. The older and senior graded women reported the PFE, VFE and VFR as either unimportant or not applicable to their assignment participation.

- Take in Table 4 about here -

*The importance of PFE, VFE and VFR in relation to assignees' accompanied status*

The data indicated that PFE, VFE and VFR were important to a higher proportion of unaccompanied assignees than women who were accompanied on their assignments. Of the 11 assignees who reported PFE as important and 10 who reported VFE as important, eight were unaccompanied; of the 11 assignees who reported VFR as important, seven were unaccompanied. The women undertaking expatriation with their partners/family received encouragement and advice from them as illustrated here:

*"You are very much left to your own devices ... My decision was purely based on my own assessment of (location) and the job available and my husband's encouragement." (# 29)*

Unaccompanied women assignees reported colleagues' views and advice were especially helpful:

*"I have also been contacted for advice and support by several unaccompanied assignees who are on assignment and find it difficult and I have turned to other colleagues in similarly difficult times." (# 10)*

The women who reported that PFE and VFE were 'very important' to their participation decision were all accompanied on their assignments. These women placed significant emphasis on the career aspects linked to their move and the role that other women assignees played in demonstrating career potential from international mobility. Having "*more women at the top*"

was considered beneficial to changing the male-dominated environment of oil and gas firms. As international experience was considered important for reaching the senior management level in both firms, the relevance of more women undertaking expatriation was clearly recognized:

*“I still view it to an extent as an old boys network ... if I want to compete in that race ... I think having more women ... helps change the rules of the race to an extent, is very helpful.” (# 14)*

Both organizations had exploration and production operations in remote and hostile environments. Given so few women assignees were employed in such locations, the female assignees reported on the value of role models outside their organization, notably PFE and VFE of women expatriates in other oil and gas firms. Networks of external role models also enabled women to seek/share their views on the career and lifestyle issues associated with expatriate postings when there were no or few female role models in their own firm:

*“I think expat women experience particular difficulties when working in different cultures. Levels of sexism and ageism are often much greater in many of the countries where we work than in (home country) making it difficult for a young woman to be taken seriously ... I think contact with other women dealing with similar situations are absolutely invaluable in helping day to day morale in these situations”. (# 33)*

In summary, assignees were keen to acknowledge support given by family members in their decision to undertake an international assignment. The particular relevance of female role models to single status assignees unable to explore and discuss their decision with husbands/partners was highlighted. PFE and VFE of internal and external company role models in the oil and gas industry were considered to be very important in enabling career decisions

especially in masculine environments where cultural norms gave rise to particular difficulties for women assignees.

*The importance of PFE, VFE and VFR in relation to assignees' assignment type and location*

The survey data were also analyzed by assignment type. Long-term assignments referred to expatriation in excess of one year in both organizations, most usually around three years' duration; short-term assignments were typically six months' duration; rotational assignments involved 28 days on shift, followed by 28 days off in both firms; extended transfers operated only in Company A and referred to very lengthy transfers, required for an indefinite period.

Of the long-term assignees, 25% regarded PFE and 26% regarded VFE as being important/very important to their assignment participation; 27% stated that VFR played an important/very important part in their decision-making process. The figures for those on short-term assignments were 50%, 44% and 38% respectively. These data indicated that female expatriate role models were more important in helping women to make the decision to undertake short-term assignments than they were to those undertaking long-term assignments. This could be linked to assignment policies that support accompanied mobility for long-term expatriation whereas short-term assignments were typically undertaken on single status.

Women assignees also considered the location of the assignment as a relevant factor in determining the importance of having a role model's input into their decision-making. Finding out what life would be like working in unfamiliar, geographically distant and challenging places was considered particularly valuable. While the data were very limited, rotational assignees (whose mobility was also undertaken unaccompanied) placed importance on PFE, VFE and VFR. Given that rotational assignments were typically used in remote and hostile locations very few women were employed there. For example, Company B's rotational assignee population was

97% male. As such, the women assignees involved in postings to these locations placed emphasis on actively assisting newcomers. This helped to create a sense of camaraderie amongst the women assignees, reducing their sense of the overwhelming masculinity of, for example, expatriate desert camps where women comprised such a tiny proportion of the population.

As assignees on extended international transfers relocated on an indefinite basis, it would be expected that VFR would be unimportant in their participation decision and, indeed, this was so. Given the indefinite length of their assignments, PFE and VFE took on a greater level of importance than for women undertaking assignments of the traditional one to three year lengths:

*“I was single when I moved to (North America) and knew two close friends/colleagues in my first location in (host country). Without these good friends there with me, I believe that I would have found the experience much more traumatic” (# 68)*

In summary, women on unaccompanied short-term and rotational postings and women on extended length assignments placed particular emphasis on PFE and VFE. The presence and views of both the case study and other oil and gas firms’ female expatriate role models were also of particular relevance to women’s expatriate participation decision-making in remote, hostile and challenging locations where there were very few women expatriates employed.

#### *Self-perception and perception of female expatriate role models*

Eleven assignees who were interviewed commented on how they perceived themselves. Of these, only three saw themselves as role models for others. In two of these cases this was not linked directly to expatriation but to how the women perceived that they conducted themselves more generally in terms of their work quality, work ethic and career progress. For example:

*“In my home (country), I think yes ... I am seen as a role model. I think even internally here in (West Africa) again, but I guess it is more of a personal issue, I try to ensure that the quality of my work speaks for itself.” (# 45)*

The other nine assignees commented, in the main, that they did not believe that they were sufficiently senior in their organizations to be viewed in this light. However, they did report being used as “*sounding boards*” and being well-known. For example, being an expatriate enabled them to “*help people*”, share their experiences, prove themselves and raise their profile:

*“... (expatriating after maternity) shows that you can do it ... But I ... don’t think people hold you up and say this is a role model.” (# 2)*

Given the paucity of female assignees and the male-dominated expatriate environments, three of the female assignees described their experiences as “*trailblazing*” – but, in the main, even this did not lead to them considering themselves as role models:

*“(My) boss’s boss ... said, ‘(# 50), what a great story you are, trailblazing out there ... and doing fantastically’ ... but nobody has ever said to me ‘(# 50), you are a role model, and I could learn from what you have done...’” (# 50)*

Only one woman considered her trailblazing as engendering role model status. However, as the sole female expatriate in her company’s host location she noted that there was no one for whom to act as a role model:

*“You are basically blazing new ground at the company. So I’m a role model in that sense that I am one of the few. Is there anyone there for me to role model? Not really, there’s just no audience!” (# 63)*

In summary, the women assignees who were interviewed did not, in the main, see themselves as role models, despite being highly visible or one of the very few women who had

undertaken expatriation after having a family. If they saw themselves as role models, this was due to the quality of their work, not their gender or expatriate status. In essence, if the women assignees did not see themselves as role models, they were unlikely to see other women expatriates in this light. This helps to explain why PFE, VFE and VFR were, for the majority of survey respondents, either not applicable or not important to their expatriation decision.

#### *The HR viewpoint*

Despite not perceiving themselves as role models, six of the female expatriates interviewed believed that their organizations viewed them as such for example, through their “*strong sets of principles*”. Indeed, in contrast to the female interviewees’ self-perceptions, the HR managers’ perspective indicated that they believed that women assignees gained role model status by proving themselves through successful assignment completion. The HR representatives reported that there had been no women who had failed on an assignment within their companies. Once they had proved themselves to be successful they were seen as role models and this reduced the potential risk associated with posting other women abroad. This suggested that there was organizational pressure on female expatriates to be successful in their assignments and thus to inspire other women, although this did not appear to be an inherent expectation within male expatriation. This difference between the female expatriates’ perceptions of the importance of role models and those of their HR managers in both firms indicates that organizational policy and practice is required to support potential female expatriates.

#### *Organizational support for role models*

Company B’s expatriate selection policy addressed internal advertising and mandatory training for selectors. Company A had no written policy but operated a career path planning process and followed similar selection procedures. Both firms provided cultural, language and job-related

training addressing performance in role. Functional managers acted as mentors to assignees under Company B's policy but in practice this applied formally only to graduate trainees; informal mentoring took place in both firms. Policies covering long-term and rotational assignments were not developmental in focus. Short-term assignments policy noted these were used for projects and maternity cover, sometimes for development. Graduate placements were specifically developmental.

Neither firm had any formal, written policy in support of role models and neither offered informal organizational support to assist individuals to act as role models for female expatriates. The HR representatives believed that the lack of emphasis on policy development and practical implementation could be explained by the low numbers of senior women and women generally in their organizations and in expatriation:

*"I would say that we have limited female role models in the company simply because of the numbers of females ... in leadership roles." (HR - Learning and Development, Co. A)*

*"There is very little done about it and that is largely because there are no role models internally or very few role models." (HR - Development, Co. B)*

While there were only a few women in senior positions and in expatriate roles, those that there were, were not given time off or space within their duties to encourage other women:

*"... the company would want her to do her day job ... if we were serious about it that would be a way to encourage a positive action type approach ... to give her the space to do that." (HR - Training and Development, Co. B)*

This resulted in a 'catch-22' situation, confirmed by the female assignees. In essence, the paucity of women role models was cited as a reason for not providing organizational support to the few



that there were and why there was no encouragement to develop others to take on this responsibility:

*“... there are females who are in the more senior positions ... I wouldn't have said they are ... styling themselves as role models ... who you could try and emulate ... I guess they are busy doing their day jobs.” (# 35)*

Thus, while the two case study organizations did little to support role models directly through policy and its practical implementation, nonetheless successful women assignees were considered to act as role models by HR and other company representatives. As such, they had a positive influence on organizational decision-making on the selection and deployment of other women assignees.

#### *Making expatriation more attractive to women*

When asked “How might the oil and gas exploration and production industry and the international assignments offered within it be made more attractive to women?”, the assignees who were interviewed suggested a wide range of actions that might be undertaken by their employers (ranging from supporting dual career couples to presenting careers in the industry in schools). Yet, only two suggested action in relation to supporting and developing role models. Their ideas included sharing “*case studies of ... more females ... in terms of projecting an image*” and being “*more proactive to help and support women in preparing to go on an assignment (linking) those who have done it and some of the issues they have faced*”.

The interviewees suggested that if organizational policy and practice made greater provision to encourage female role models, potentially this might help to widen women's networks and provide access to a wider pool of suitable women mentors. However, any such arrangements would need accountability to be built in (for example, via sponsorship) to

maximize career contribution. In particular, interventions such as training and time off from work to facilitate mentoring, coaching and networking were considered particularly valuable.

The following section discusses the implications of the findings for theory and practice. The limitations of the study and directions for further research are then presented before conclusions are drawn.

## **Discussion**

### *Implications for theory*

Women's career theory characterizes young women as optimistic, pursuing early career focus and challenge (O'Neal and Bilimoria, 2005; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005, 2006; Pringle and Dixon, 2003; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007). Drawing upon Ibarra (1999) and Hartl (2004), it would be expected that young assignees in the early stages of their international careers who are seeking more senior roles would observe female expatriate role models in order to help shape their potential selves and identities as well as their career outcomes. As such PFE would be expected to be important to this group. At this career stage, such individuals are likely to be around age 30 (Gibson, 2003, 2004). Gibson's (2003) work indicates that early career stage individuals place emphasis on a close and global dialogue with role models. Yet, in the context of this research a high proportion of the youngest assignees (up to age 30) and those in their early career grades reported PFE as either not applicable or not important to their assignment participation decision. Younger and lower-graded assignees did, however, place more emphasis on VFE during their early stage international careers. Thus, the findings of this research present some challenges to existing theory relating to role models and women's domestic career paths; if

we are to apply the findings to understand the influence and importance of role models on young and early career stage expatriate women, a specific international assignment focus is needed.

The mid-age/mid-career groups placed emphasis on PFE, suggesting a more distant relationship with their targets in the context of this study. The importance of PFE suggests that potential women assignees seek assurance that there are other women in the locations where they are to be assigned. They also placed emphasis on VFR. This highlights their need to learn how career concerns on repatriation have been addressed (Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Mayhofer and Scullion, 2002). Gibson's work (2003, 2004) indicates that at average age 38 (which typically equates to mid-career stage), both close and distant role models are of value and the data in this research accords with this. Yet, women's 'kaleidoscope' career theory (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005, 2006) predicts that at their mid-career stage women would place emphasis on child-rearing and relational issues, balancing these with their careers. Given this, women assignees with children would be expected to be seen, and to see themselves, as role models. Hence, the views of mothers as to how they achieved career/motherhood balance would be expected to be important to women expatriates. Yet, the data did not support this. Although 15 assignees had children with them on assignment (and thus were visible as mothers), this was not identified as a factor that engendered role model status amongst those without children or among mothers themselves. This research thus presents a challenge to the mid-career stage of women's career theory in relation to expatriation, adding further weight to the need for an international assignment dimension.

In later life, women are predicted to pursue re-inventive contribution and authenticity in their careers so therefore we would expect women to have little appetite to undertake organizational expatriate careers. Indeed, there were only five women assignees in the two case

study firms aged over 45 and just one held senior management responsibility, suggesting agreement with women's career theory (O'Neal and Bilimoria, 2005; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005, 2006). However, in respect of role model theory, in contrast to Gibson and Barron's (2003) work, there was no evidence in this research context to suggest older assignees sought role models among their younger colleagues. This contradiction can be explained by the fact that expatriation demands up-to-date skills from all who undertake it. In recognition of this the case study firms supported job-related training effectively through policy and practice. In addition, the youngest assignees were, in the main, on developmental graduate training programmes. Although organizational policy and practice can explain this challenge to theory, it does also prompt the need for models and concepts to be revisited in order to explore international assignment differentiation.

This research also provided a potential new contribution to theory. It identified an assignment type effect on the importance of role models, linked to accompanied status and assignment length. A higher proportion of women on unaccompanied assignments (typically short-term and rotational patterns) regarded PFE and VFE as being of importance to their participation in comparison to women on accompanied assignments (typically long-term assignments). Accompanied assignees drew upon family resources rather than role models for support. However, although extended international transfers were also typically accompanied, the women undertaking these also placed emphasis on PFE and VFE. This was linked to the commitment that they were making in agreeing to undertake very lengthy periods of working abroad.

Figure 1 provides a model to depict this diagrammatically with the solid arrow lines representing high levels of influence and the dotted arrow lines limited influence on women's

assignment participation. It shows that PFE and VFE are predicted to have the greatest influence on women undertaking unaccompanied international mobility (e.g. short-term, rotational) and exceptionally lengthy assignments (extended international transfers). PFE and VFE are predicted to be of lesser or limited importance to accompanied women assignees on regular assignment lengths (e.g. on typical three year long-term assignments).

Despite lengthy expatriation being associated with lower repatriation intentions and greater readjustment and reintegration difficulties (De Cieri *et al.*, 2009) VFR was also of importance to a greater proportion of unaccompanied assignees (short-term and rotational) than to those on long-term assignments. This reaffirms the importance of role models linked to unaccompanied status. Given that the women in this study who were on extended international transfers were not foreseen to return to their home country, VFR was irrelevant to this assignment type. This is also depicted in Figure 1. Flexible assignment types are increasing in use by employers and traditional long-term assignments are in decline (Cartus, 2010). Drawing upon Figure 1 this suggests that the number of female expatriate role models will need to rise if expatriate gender diversity is to be improved as the types of assignments undertaken shift away from traditional three year accompanied postings.

- Take in Figure 1 here -

### *Implications for practice*

In this study, female expatriates did not see themselves as role models through their international assignments potentially aligning with a gendered status (Murrell and Zagenczyk, 2006). If they did acknowledge being a role model, they highlighted non-gendered issues including work ethic, capability and quality. In this way, the women assignees in this study appeared to identify themselves as behavioral models rather than role models (Gibson, 2004).

In contrast, HR representatives viewed female expatriates as successful, sending a positive, inspiring and powerful message to other women (and men) within both case study firms. Thus, PFE took on increased significance to HR personnel; they believed that PFE was necessary if line managers were to select women assignees. Yet, there was no organizational support in policy for role models and HR did not believe that their organizations would resource any such initiatives. This presents a ‘catch-22’ for women’s assignment participation: PFE must be clearly accomplished to pave the way for further female expatriation but without organizational resources or support to assist. The focus of the HR organizational representatives was on what a role model *is* – her presence – rather than what a role model *does* – her views (Gibson, 2003). In contrast, the women assignees focused on what a role model *does* – her quality of work, not who she *is*.

The divergence in views between organizational representatives’ and assignees’ perspectives is not new. For example, in Stroh *et al.*’s (2000) study there were differences in the views of female expatriates and their supervisors with regard to selection decisions. While the supervisors believed that their organizations had no hesitation in posting women as expatriates, the female assignees were less convinced. In this study organizations and female assignees view the function and importance of role models differently. Yet, in addition, we can see further divergence taking place. Current women assignees view themselves in a different light (primarily as behavioral models) from the way in which they view other female assignee colleagues (whom they cite as role models). This suggests that organizational action to enhance current women’s assignees’ self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) could help to sensitize them to their role model potential and the part that they might play in widening future expatriate gender diversity. This could be

addressed, for example, by focusing on training and development (BarNir et al., 2011) linked to future as well as current expatriate roles.

For expatriate careers in the masculine oil and gas industry to appear and to become more attractive and accessible to women, enabling conditions to connect current and returned expatriates with potential assignees are required. These might include time off work for training and for briefing other potential assignees, as well as the provision of communications links across time zones and geographies. These would facilitate potential female assignees to gain access to information, resources and practical support first-hand, learning directly from women expatriates, rather than having to rely solely on observation from a distance. While it is acknowledged that the lack of role models presents barriers to women's advancement along the career pipeline (Helfat *et al.*, 2006; Mattis, 2001), whether organizations will devote sufficient resources and support to addressing them is a moot point. Other interventions – such as training and development for potential women expatriates – can also affect their self-efficacy and could encourage women to pursue expatriate careers (BarNir *et al.*, 2011). However, regardless of the nature of the proposed intervention, senior, middle and line management commitment to widening gender diversity is required for it to achieve the desired outcomes (Mattis, 2001).

In addition to recognizing the importance of role models and providing support for the development of role model policy and practice, organizations also need to take a proactive approach to supporting mentors, sponsors and networks as these are also very valuable interventions that support women's international careers (Linehan and Walsh, 2001) and can be linked directly to role models (Burke *et al.*, 2006). Interventions to provide access to networks to potential women assignees (whether these networks are solely for women or open to all) can also help to provide information on and access to expatriate positions (Shortland, 2011).

## **Limitations and directions for future research**

This research was a limited exploratory study set within two case study oil and gas firms in a sector where there were very few female expatriate role models. Further research is needed to understand the influence of role models on women's assignment participation in different sectors and organizations with greater female role model representation. A broader research study to examine support interventions such as mentoring, sponsorship and networks and their interrelationship with role models as facilitators of women's expatriation would also be valuable.

This study examined the importance of role models to women on different assignment types, focusing mainly on accompanied status and length of the posting. Further research is needed to clarify and further understand these issues. Larger samples would enable researchers to test the model proposed in Figure 1 and link it to other factors such as assignment location.

This study was cross-sectional in design. A longitudinal study to examine the value of role models to women as assignment lengths shorten and patterns change and also to report on the outcomes of organizational interventions to support female expatriate role models would be valuable. While the findings of this research agreed with some aspects of existing theory relating to role models and women's age and career stages, they also revealed some contradictions and challenges. Further research is necessary specifically with regard to how role models can assist women's international careers, distinguishing these from career stages set in a home country setting.

## **Conclusions**

While the extant literature exhorts the ideological benefits of role models for women's careers, this study revealed important contradictions. Although HR stereotypically appeared to buy into



role models' inspirational value, the women expatriates had a different view. They did not, in the main, perceive female expatriate role models as important to their assignment participation. This was explained by: their relative paucity; women expatriates did not see themselves as such; and they were not supported by their organizations to assist others to consider expatriate careers. Women expatriates thus appeared to 'deselect themselves' from conforming to the organizational stereotype of gaining role model status through simply being on an international assignment. Instead, they focused on the quality of their work and work ethic, acting as non-gendered behavioral models. Nonetheless, this does not mean that role models are unimportant to female expatriates and as a potential gender diversity intervention.

This research study makes a new contribution to theory by identifying a link between the importance of role models and the type of assignment women undertake. Role models were of particular value to women who undertook unaccompanied short-term and rotational assignments. As assignment lengths shorten and flexible patterns of international mobility become more widespread, it is predicted that role models will become of greater significance in widening expatriate gender diversity. Young women and those in early career grades valued VFE in particular; while those in mid-age and mid-career grades were more likely to place importance on PFE and VFR in their participation decisions. This suggests a 'reality check', with women emphasizing practical support and dialogue. Thus, while female expatriate role models can potentially help to unblock the pipeline to women's international careers, if organizational support for them is not forthcoming this gender diversity intervention will remain only a pipe-dream.

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## Appendix

### Extract from survey questionnaire

1. How important was the support that you received from the following people in relation to your decision to participate in your current expatriate assignment?

	Support issues	Not important 1	Important 2	Very important 3	Not applicable to me 9
1	The presence of female expatriate role models currently on assignment (PFE)				
2	The views of female expatriate role models currently on assignment (VFE)				
3	The views of female role models returning from an assignment (VFR)				
4	Other, please state and rate:				

2. Please feel free to comment on any of the issues raised in this section of the questionnaire if you wish to do so.

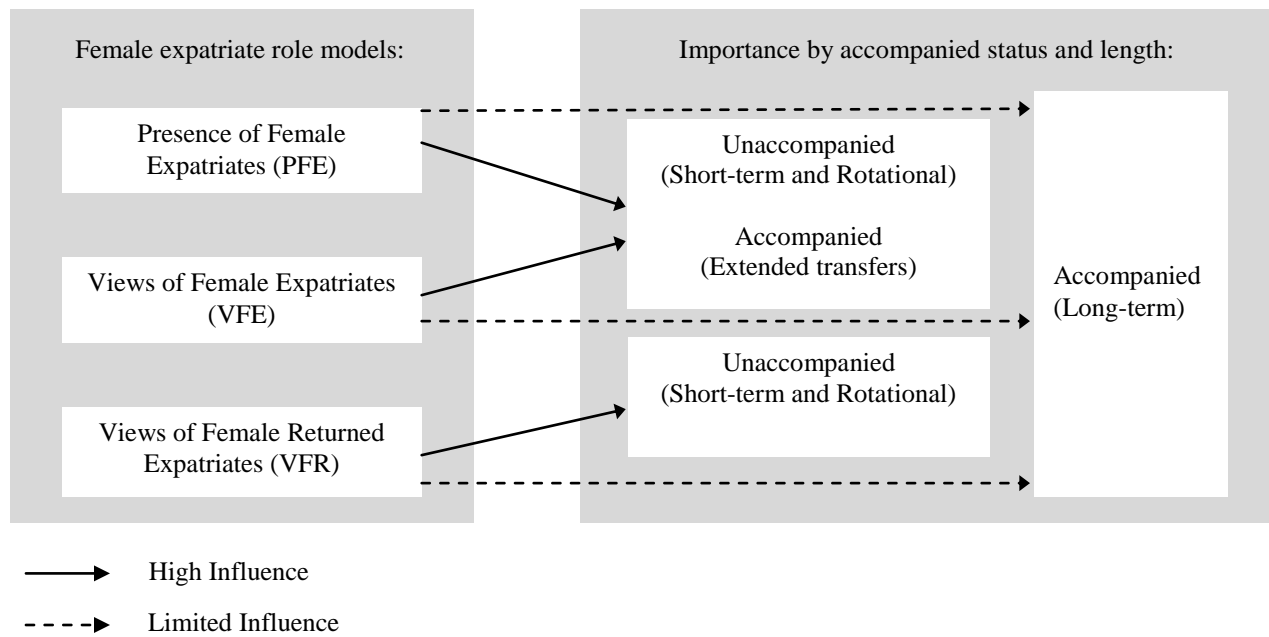
### Extract from interview schedule – women assignees

- ❖ Which aspects of the IA policy/who have been particularly helpful in supporting your participation? Explain.
- ❖ Do you think you act as a role model to other women considering an IA? Explain.
- ❖ How could (should?):
  - The oil and gas exploration and production industry be made more attractive to women?
  - International Assignments be made more ‘female friendly’?
  - Your employer better support women expatriates through policy and practice?

### Extract from interview schedule – HR professionals

- ❖ How do you make women’s participation as expatriates a priority in your company? Specific policies/initiatives to increase the % of women expats? Examples?
- ❖ Other policies/initiatives that support women’s participation as expats? Describe/give examples?
- ❖ What action is taken by oil and gas E & P sector as a whole to encourage women to take up expat roles? Please explain.

**Figure 1:** The importance of female expatriate role models to women's assignment participation



**Table 1: Survey participant profile**

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>Number of assignees (71)</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>Assignment length and pattern undertaken</i>		
Long-term	51	72
Short-term	12	17
Rotation	5	7
Extended international transfers	3	4
<i>Assignment status</i>		
Accompanied	33	46
Unaccompanied	38	54
<i>Host location</i>		
Western Europe	18	25
North America	12	17
East Asia	11	15
North Africa	10	14
Central Asia	6	8
Caribbean	6	8
Australasia	4	6
West Africa	3	4
Middle East	1	1
<i>Age</i>		
Below 30	18	25
30-44	48	68
45 and over	5	7
<i>Grade</i>		
Junior/lowest	14	20
Middle	55	77
Senior management	2	3



**Table 2: Demographic profile of survey and interview participants commenting on role models**

<b>Participant number and company</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Host location</b>	<b>Assignment type</b>
2, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	Caribbean	Long-term
5, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	West Africa	Long-term
10, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Unaccompanied	Australasia	Long-term
14, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	Central Asia	Long-term
17, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	Middle East	Long-term
20, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	Australasia	Long-term
22, Co. B, survey respondent	30-44	Mid	Unaccompanied	North Africa	Long-term
23, Co. B, survey respondent	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	Caribbean	Long-term
24, Co. B, interviewee	<30	Mid	Accompanied	Western Europe	Long-term
29, Co. B, survey respondent	45+	Mid	Accompanied	Caribbean	Long-term
33, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	Australasia	Long-term
34, Co. B, survey respondent	<30	Low	Unaccompanied	Western Europe	Short-term
35, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Senior	Accompanied	North Africa	Long-term
39, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	North Africa	Long-term
44, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	North America	Long-term
45, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Unaccompanied	West Africa	Long-term
46, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	East Asia	Long-term
50, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Unaccompanied	Central Asia	Long-term
52, Co. B, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Unaccompanied	Central Asia	Rotation
56, Co. A, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	East Asia	Long-term
57, Co. A, interviewee	45+	Senior	Unaccompanied	Central Asia	Long-term
59, Co. A, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Unaccompanied	North Africa	Rotation
60, Co. A, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	East Asia	Long-term
62, Co. A, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Unaccompanied	Western Europe	Long-term
63, Co. A, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	East Asia	Long-term
65, Co. A, interviewee	30-44	Mid	Unaccompanied	North America	Long-term
68, Co. A, survey respondent	30-44	Mid	Accompanied	North America	Extended international transfer
69, Co. A, interviewee	45+	Mid	Unaccompanied	Western Europe	Long-term

**Table 3: Importance of role models to women's assignment participation**

						Very important (3)		Importance Important (2)		Not important (1)	
	n	n	%	n	Median	n	%	n	%	n	%
Presence of current female expatriate role models (PFE)	71	32	45.1	39	1.0	2	5.1	11	28.2	26	66.7
Views of current female expatriate role models (VFE)	71	32	45.1	39	1.0	3	7.7	10	25.6	26	66.7
Views of returned female expatriate role models (VFR)	70	31	44.3	39	1.0	1	2.6	11	28.2	27	69.2

**Table 4: The applicability and importance of female expatriate role models to women's assignment participation by age and grade**

Age	Presence of female expatriate role models currently on assignment (PFE)									Views of female expatriate role models currently on assignment (VFE)								Views of female expatriate role models returning from an assignment (VFR)										
	Not applicable			Very important		Important				Not applicable			Very important		Important			Not applicable			Very important		Important			Not applicable		
	n	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
<30	18	9	50	0	0	2	11.1	7	38.9	18	8	44.4	0	0	4	22.2	6	33.3	18	9	50.0	0	0	3	16.7	6	33.3	
30-44	48	20	41.7	2	4.2	9	18.8	17	35.4	48	21	43.8	3	6.3	6	12.5	18	37.5	47	19	40.4	1	2.1	8	17.0	19	40.4	
45+	5	3	60.0	0	0	0	0	2	40.0	5	3	60.0	0	0	0	0	2	40.0	5	3	60.0	0	0	0	0	2	40.0	
Grade																												
Low	14	9	64.3	0	0	1	7.1	4	28.6	14	8	57.1	0	0	3	21.4	3	21.4	14	9	64.3	0	0	2	14.3	3	21.4	
Middle	55	22	40.0	2	3.6	10	18.2	21	38.2	55	23	41.8	3	5.5	7	12.7	22	40.0	54	21	38.9	1	1.9	9	16.7	23	42.6	
Senior	2	1	50.0	0	0	0	0	1	50.0	2	1	50.0	0	0	0	0	1	50.0	2	1	50.0	0	0	0	0	1	50.0	