

# The Trailing Spouse: Barrier to Mobility or International Asset?

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**trailing spouse** (noun):  
the person in a relationship who follows  
the other person to a new location  
where that person has found employment

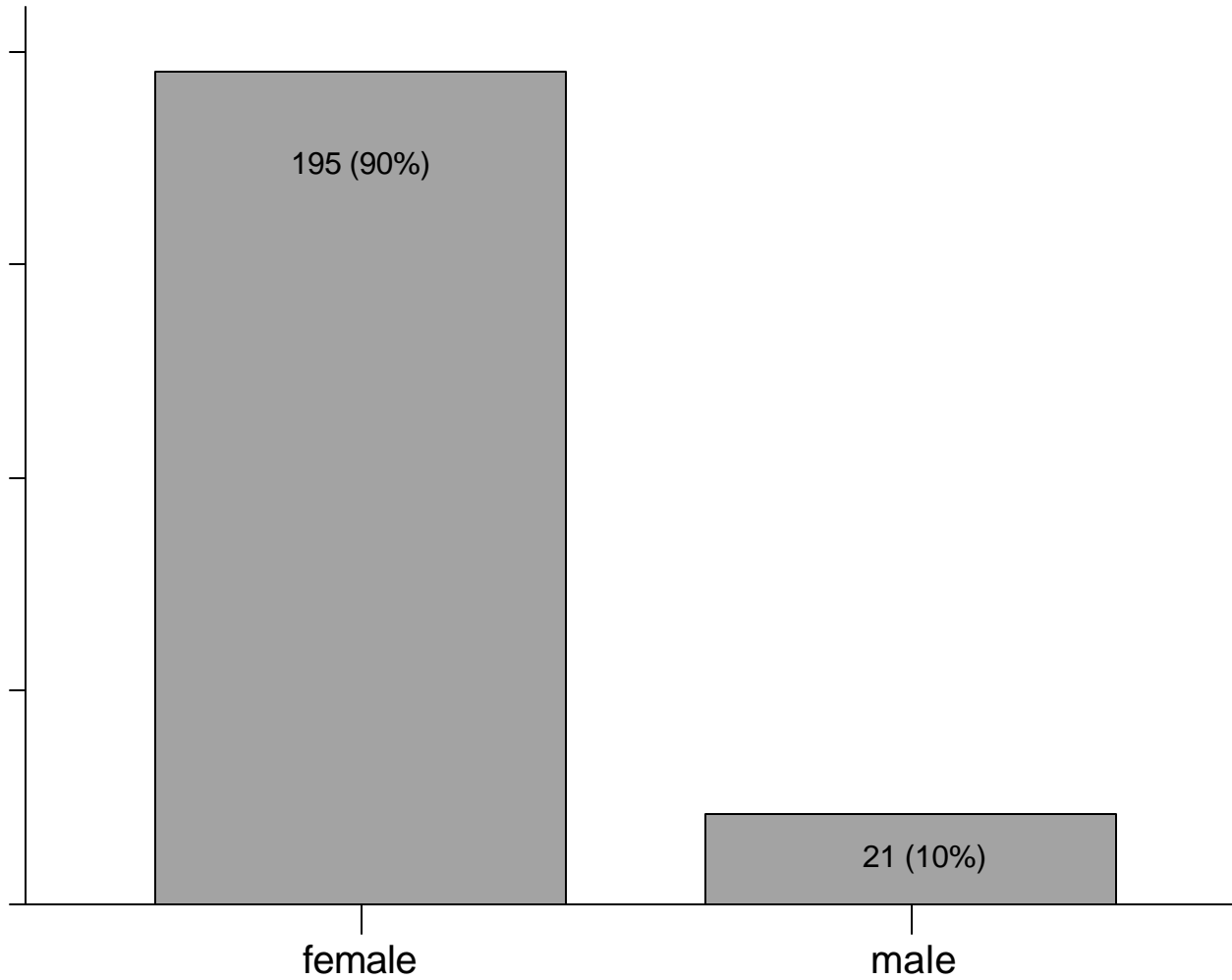
# Objectives of the Study

- **Investigate four major areas of expatriation from the trailing spouse's perspective:**
  - willingness to relocate
  - spousal adjustment
  - satisfaction with organisational support
  - relationship stress
- **Investigate the issues as determined by the trailing spouse rather than relying on the suppositions and assumptions of professionals regarding what it *supposed* to be important**
- **Provide a statistical basis upon which improvements to expatriate spousal programs and policies can be developed**
- **Use anecdotal findings to extrapolate important themes**
- **Conduct research in an academic environment to give credibility to the trailing spouse's unique needs and challenges**

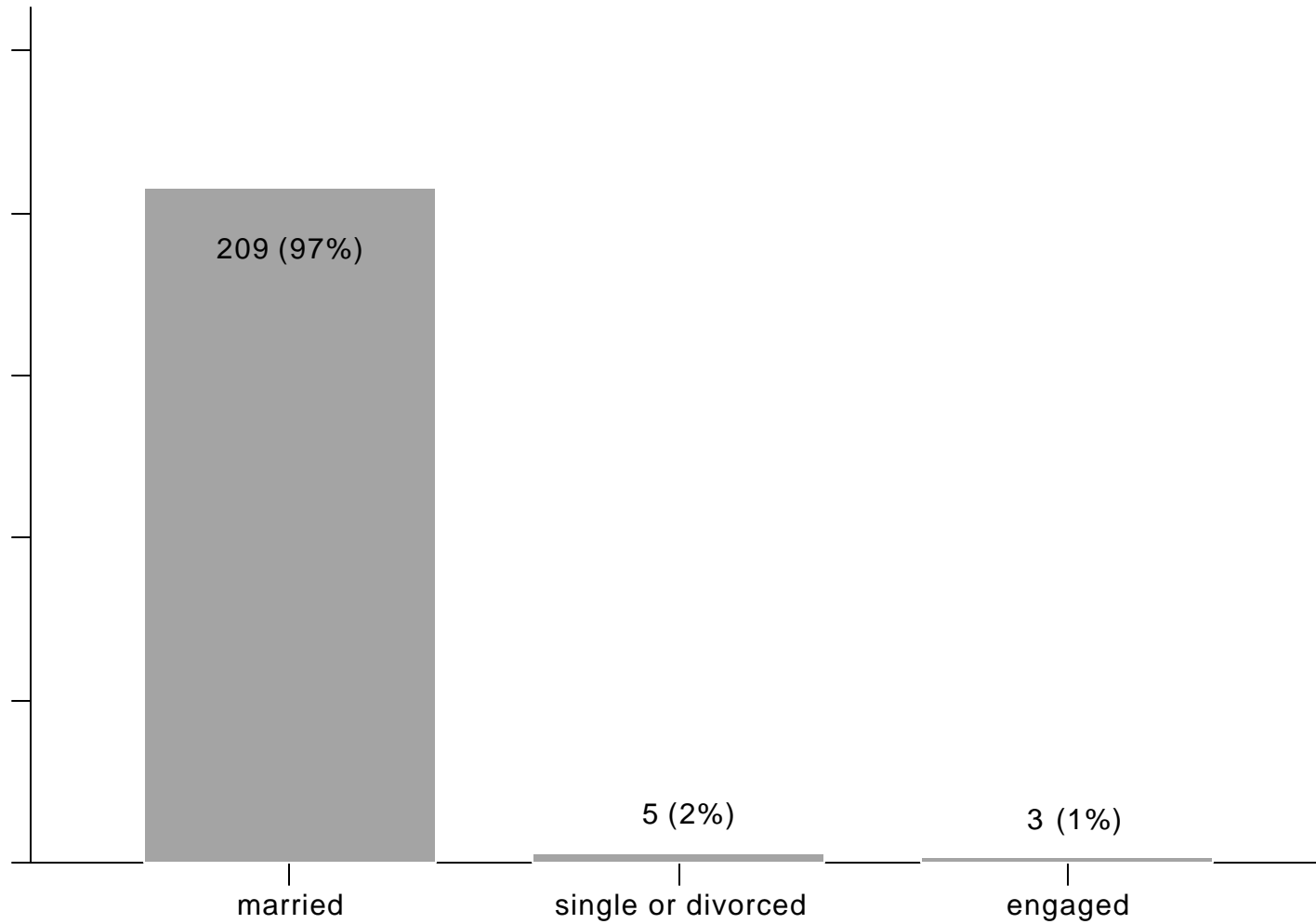
# Respondent Profile

- **216 trailing spouse respondents, to date**
- **Currently living in 48 host countries**
- **Originating from 26 home countries**
- **Online survey (at [www.thetrailingspouse.com](http://www.thetrailingspouse.com)) with 113 items used to collect data**
- **Study is ongoing**
- **97% completed survey online, 3% submitted by mail**
- **57% speak two or more languages**
- **69% have been married four years or more**
- **55% have children:**
  - **47% have some or all children with them on assignment**
  - **28% did not relocate with their children**
- **81% hold a tertiary qualification:**
  - **Bachelor's Degree (55%)**
  - **Masters Degree or PhD (26%)**

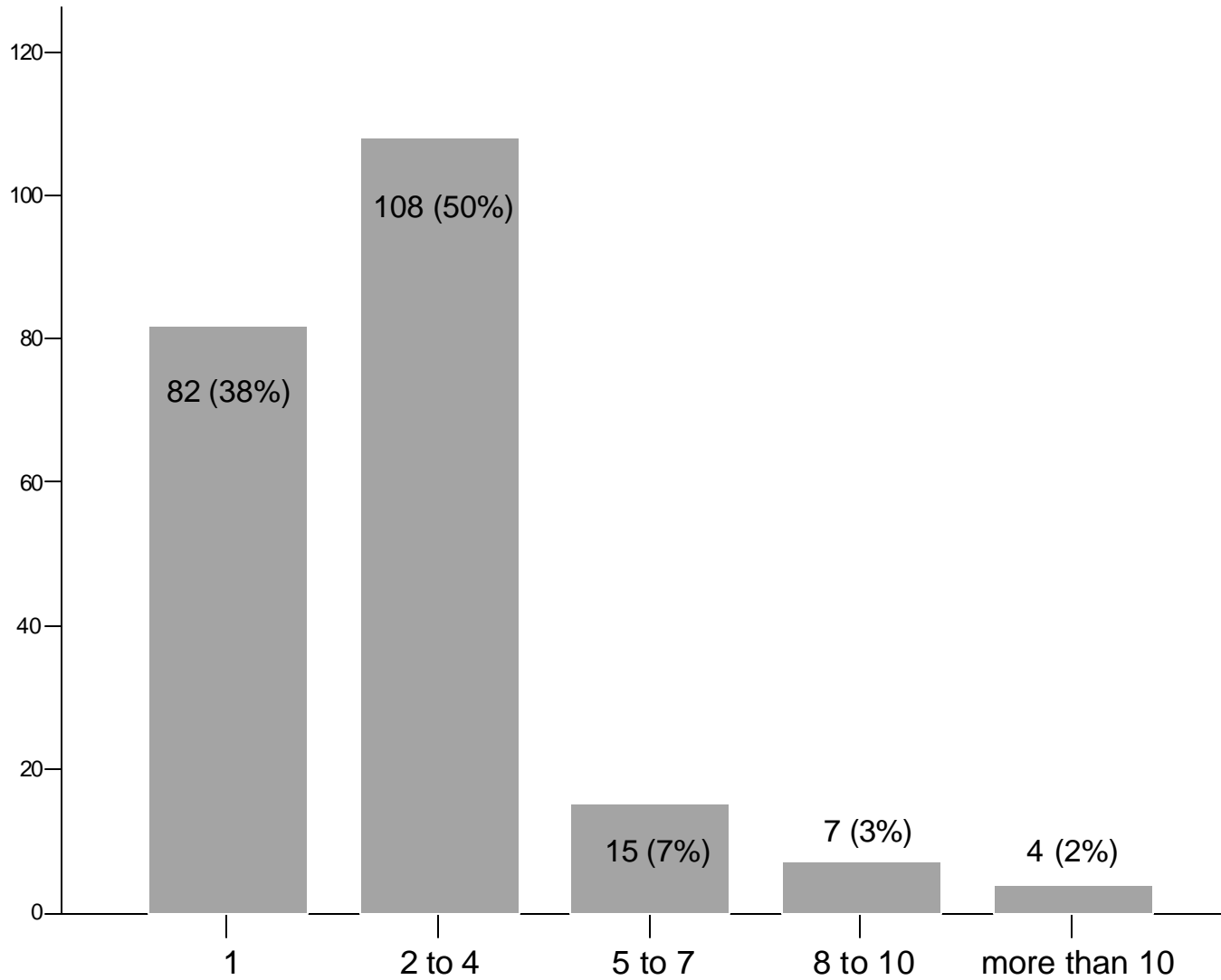
# Demographics: Gender



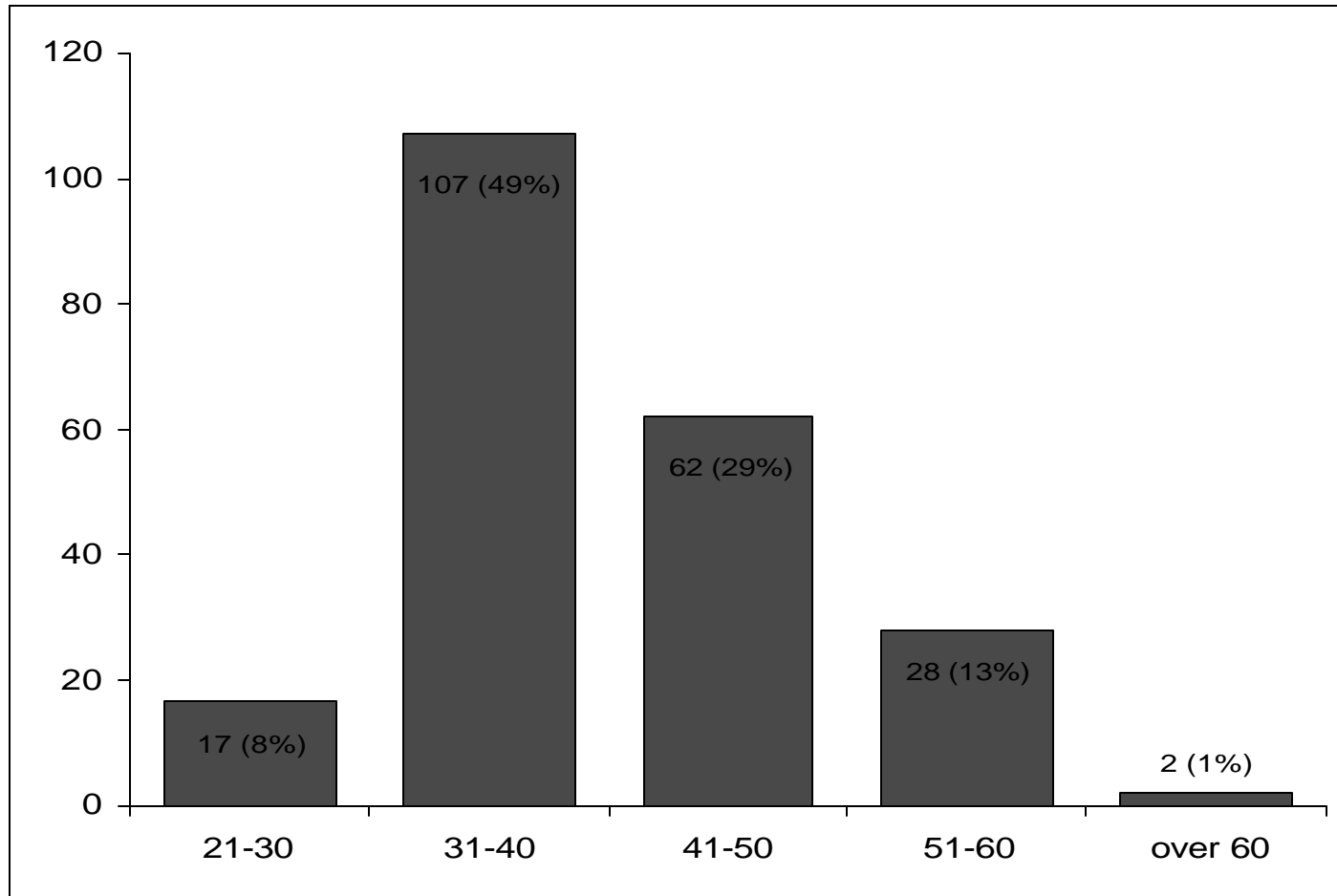
# Demographics: Marital Status



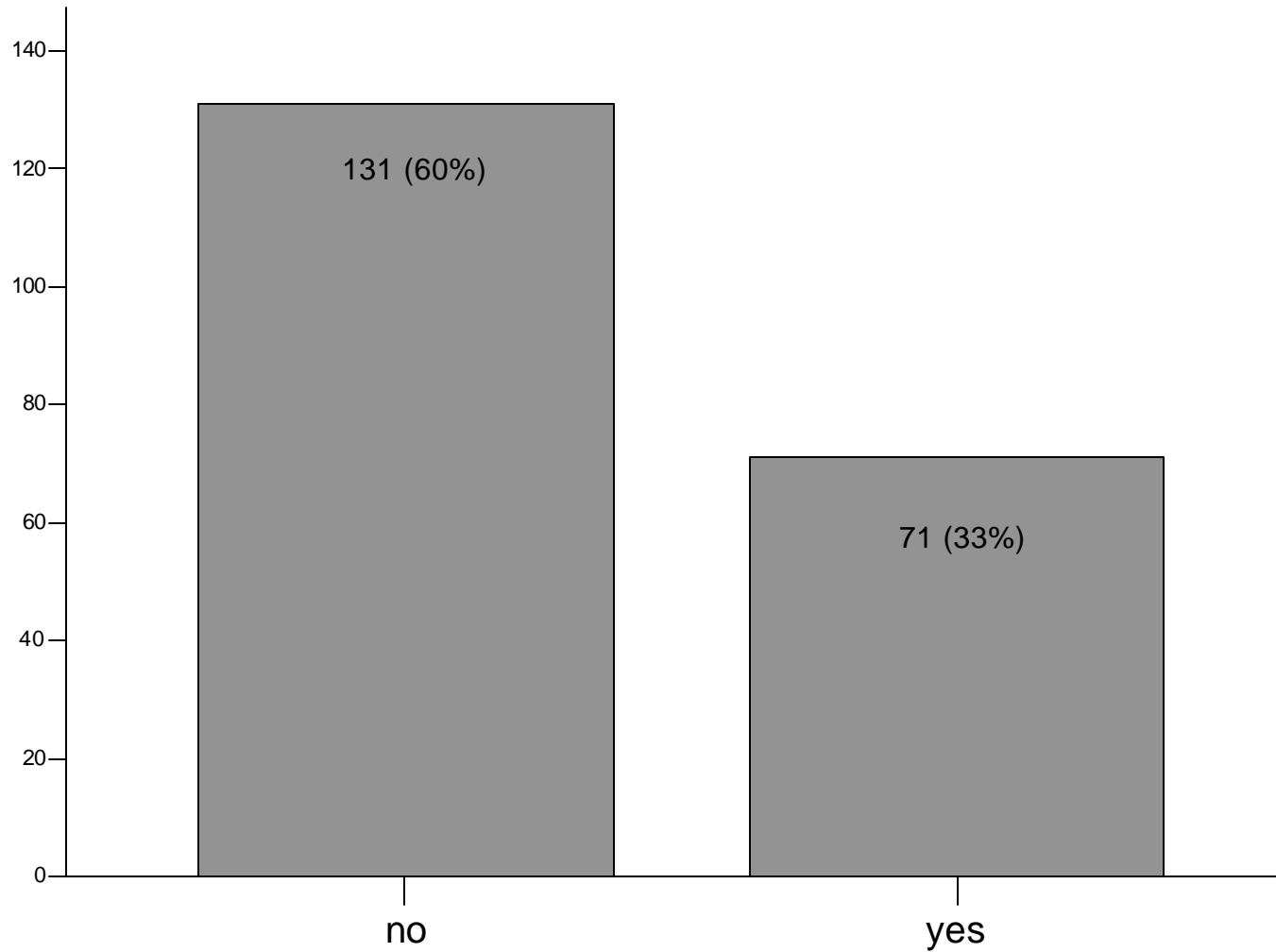
# Demographics: Number of Relocations



# Demographics: Age



# Demographics: Career continue after relocation?



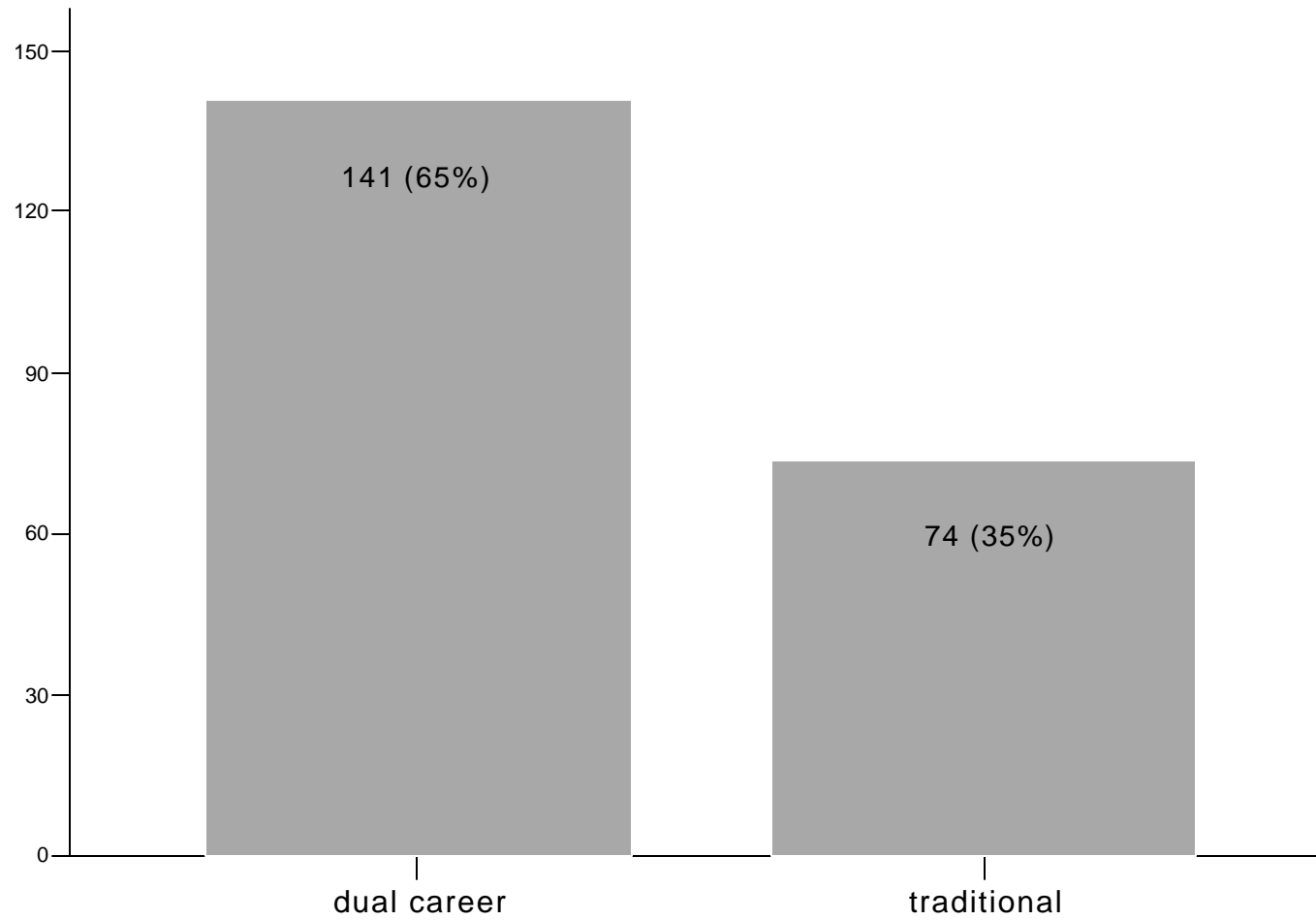
# Demographics: Reason career did not continue

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<i>Reason</i>	<i>n=216</i>
<b>Work-permit restrictions</b>	<b>53%</b>
<b>Language barriers</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Stay at home parent/start a family</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Qualifications not recognised</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>Not necessary financially</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Limited opportunities</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Company policy</b>	<b>1%</b>

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# Demographics: Family type



# Willingness to Relocate: Top 5 Factors for Success

<i>Item</i>	<i>n=216</i>
<b>Standard of education for children</b>	<b>66%</b>
<b>Company funded home-country visits</b>	<b>59%</b>
<b>Transferring spouse's attitude towards relocating</b>	<b>57%</b>
<b>Ability to re-establish a support network</b>	<b>56%</b>
<b>Perceived standard of living in host-country</b>	<b>54%</b>
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<b>Language barriers</b>	<b>11%</b>



# Willingness to Relocate

## Intended Geographical Location

*“I would not agree to relocate if the new location was ... ”*

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<i>Location Criteria</i>	<i>n=216</i>
Unsafe (crime was high or civil war was in progress)	83%
Health risk (medical facilities were inadequate)	68%
Gender biased (women could not drive or be seen in public alone)	68%
Politically unstable	63%
Too isolated	36%
Long extremes of weather	8%

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# Willingness to Relocate

## Duration of Assignment

*“I only agree to relocate when the duration of the assignment is ... ”*

<i>Assignment Duration</i>	<i>n=216</i>
Less than 2 years	8%
Between 2 to 5 years	36%
More than 5 years	1%
Indefinite duration	1%
Duration doesn't matter	54%

# Spousal Adjustment: Top 5 Factors for Success

<i>Item</i>	<i>n=216</i>
<b>Marital satisfaction (strong and stable marriage)</b>	<b>99%</b>
<b>Access to technology (internet and email)</b>	<b>96%</b>
<b>Organisational assistance</b>	<b>94%</b>
<b>Degree of intimacy with other expatriates</b>	<b>87%</b>
<b>Transferring spouse's overall job satisfaction</b>	<b>76%</b>
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<b>Transferring spouse's job security</b>	<b>34%</b>



# Spousal Adjustment

## Time Taken to Adjust

*“In general, how long does it really take you to adjust in each new location?”*

<i>Time to Adjust</i>	<i>n=216</i>
Less than 3 months	12%
3 to 6 months	28%
6 to 12 months	37%
1 to 2 years	20%
Never	3%

# Spousal Adjustment

## Adjustment Activities

*“Which of the following activities help you adjust in a new location”*

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<i>Activity (more than one item selected)</i>	<i>n=216</i>
Using internet or email	91%
Socialising with other expatriates	89%
Spending time with my spouse and/or children	81%
Keeping in touch with family back home	79%
Socialising with locals	74%
Learning the host-country language	70%
Getting involved with sporting clubs and associations	58%
Stress relieving activities, such as massage, meditation, yoga	46%
Voluntary/unpaid work	40%
Religious worship	11%

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# Organisational Support: Top 5 Factors for Success

<i>Item</i>	<i>n=216</i>
Assistance to set-up internet and email	94%
Housing assistance	94%
Ongoing organisational support <i>after</i> relocation	85%
Financial and time support for home-country visits	82%
Provision of extended time to adjust	82%
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Pre-departure training for trailing spouse	26%



# Organisational Support

## Level of Assistance Provided by Organisation

*“How good is the level of assistance provided by your spouse’s company when you relocate”*

<i>Level of Assistance</i>	<i>n=216</i>
Excellent	11%
Very good	19%
Satisfactory	32%
Poor	24%
None	14%

# Relationship Stress: Top 5 Factors for Success

<i>Item</i>	<i>n=216</i>
Trailing spouse's adjustment	83%
Perceived marital happiness ("being happily married")	80%
Trailing spouse's satisfaction with host-country location	76%
Transferring spouse's adjustment	74%
Trailing spouse's overall satisfaction	72%
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Children's adjustment	40%



# Relationship Stress

## Most Stressful Time During A Relocation

*“What is the most stressful time for you during a relocation”*

<i>Stages of Relocation (more than one item selected)</i>	<i>n=216</i>
Interview, selection and announcement of relocation	16%
Familiarisation trip to the new location (if provided)	5%
Pre-departure preparation and saying goodbye	56%
The actual pack up and move day	46%
Transition from one location to another (via air)	14%
Time spent in temporary or corporate housing	44%
First week in a new location	14%
First month in a new location	24%
First three months in a new location	34%
First year in a new location	14%
Entire relocation is stressful	4%

# Exploring Assignment Success

***“How would you sum up your expatriate experience in general?”***

<b><i>(more than one item selected)</i></b>	<b><i>n=216</i></b>
<b>A profound personal transformation – I really like the expatriate life</b>	<b>44%</b>
<b>It is the best thing that has happened to me</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>It has changed the way I view the world – I’ve become more tolerant, accepting and well-rounded</b>	<b>78%</b>
<b>It has strengthened my marriage and personal relationships</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>I would do it (another relocation) without question</b>	<b>53%</b>
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<b>I’m 50/50 – I like some of it and dislike other parts so I’m not sure I’ll do another relocation</b>	<b>13%</b>
<b>I would only do it again if some things could be improved or changed</b>	<b>20%</b>
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<b>It is less than ideal and I don’t like the expatriate life</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>I don’t like the expatriate life although I am grateful for the experience</b>	<b>13%</b>
<b>I don’t like it and I regret doing it</b>	<b>2%</b>

# Major Issue #1 – Lack of IHRM experience

Trailing spouses expressed an overwhelmingly urgent need for more qualified and experienced International Human Resource Management (IHRM) personnel to manage the expatriation process effectively.

Many of the trailing spouses responded in an overwhelmingly negative tone towards the level of assistance provided to them by their sponsoring organisation's IHRM department.

Personal relocation experience, either domestically or internationally, was identified as a potentially important qualification for professionals working in this field.

The major complaint was that IHRM is out of touch with expatriation. Too few IHRM professionals appear to have actual personal experience with the process and for this reason, too few appear able to address the real issues with the confidence or clarity required to effectively address a spouse's unique needs.

“... one of the things that has been continually disappointing to me is that corporate HR departments seem to be populated with people who have never relocated; their motivation is to get the employee into his or her new job as quickly as possible and there is little acknowledgement that the relocation process and transition into a new culture for the entire family is an important issue ...”

(#56)

“... I think the HR personnel here consider an overseas assignment like a long lasting vacation, therefore, the support is very poor and only a little understanding of the difficulties is offered. The available research is outdated and it only concentrates on the company members anyway, not on families and especially not on wives ...”

(#39)

“...in some locations the level of assistance is very good but that is not the case in America where HR seems to assume that life here will carry on and that it is a privilege to live here ... the company is finally trying to help but it is slow off the ground and I think it needs to be run mainly by HR people who have been expats and not by VP's wives who need something to do ...”

(#5)

“... I have never had any experience with help from my husband’s company ... before we left London on our first posting my interview with HR ended up with me being told to start having children as a form of entertainment. After that I never heard from them again ...”

(#21)

" ... HR wouldn't do anything even if it was suggested  
... their attitude is that we are living it large,  
so why should more be done? ... "

(#73)

## Major Issue #2 – Pivotal role of families

An acknowledgement by sponsoring organisations regarding the pivotal role of *families* during expatriation was identified as important.

There is a need for expatriate policies to address the concerns of the family and not just the expatriating employee.

The trailing spouse's lack of access to the expatriate policy was also identified as a significant shortcoming.



“...companies need to give more recognition to the value and support that the family give to the working spouse – an odd email to check how you are doing, one person you could communicate with. Helping wives with work visas and being proactive rather than reactive ...”

(#72)

“ . . . companies that relocate families need to spend time assessing the family needs instead of just expecting them to tag along for the ride ... I think companies need to spend a little more time and money on how to support the spouse and acknowledge the support job they do, after all, I know from personal experience that my husband couldn't do his job without me and our two children here. We need to be recognised and thanked for what we do. Not taken for granted . . .”

(#34)

“... the company needs to understand and acknowledge that as a trailing spouse I am performing an important role as a support network to my own family ...”

(#34)

“... I do believe that spouse’s add a tremendous amount of value to any MNC by organizing relocations, creating a social network, smoothing the experience for the working spouse etc, without any official recognition ... their support should be valued and I would really appreciate it myself...”

(#57)

“...work commitments seem to take priority  
over getting the family settled in...”

(#13)

## Major Issue #3 – Lack of communication

There is a strong need to establish or improve a direct communication link between the sponsoring organisation and the trailing spouse, irrespective of their non-employee status within the organisation.

Funneling information about the relocation through the expatriate employee was a major source of stress for many trailing spouses.



“... I am more concerned about the details of the move than he is and want to have it all planned out. He is more concerned with the work he will do in the new location. So he doesn't ask the relocation expert at his firm questions I want answers to. I feel cut off from a process that affects my life deeply ...”

(#25)

“... the frustration is getting information from the right people. The working spouse holds all the cards – social security number, work visa, credit history etc. Any problems usually have to be funneled through him and his work, which is such a waste of time for all concerned, when I’m sitting here at home with not much to do and perfectly capable of doing it myself. So I get mad at him, when it’s not really him I’m mad at but his company, for insisting that all communication go through him. What a waste of time – he has to deal with human resources all day instead of doing his job...”

(#71)

“ ... give me a contact within the company that I can call with questions. Even though we move because of my husband’s job, I end up dealing with all the logistical details of the move. I always have to ask him to remember to speak to “so and so” at the company re moving dates, costs, etc. I end up feeling like I am bugging him. It would be easiest for everyone if I could talk to the person at the company who handles transfers. Then I would feel less like this is something happening to me and more like something I am controlling ... ”

(#24)

## Major Issue #4 – Time off for employee spouse

Trailing spouses were exceedingly frustrated by the expatriate employee's increase in work-related commitments at critical times during the relocation process.

There is a strong need for transferring spouses to be allocated sufficient time to assist with the relocation process in the home country, and to have sufficient time to adjust *with their families* in the host-country prior to being inundated with work commitments and business trips soon after their arrival.

One respondent commented that the “whole hidden labour market” behind international relocations was an area of great concern to the trailing spouse who felt taken for granted in terms of their unpaid contribution in getting the relocation done.



“ . . . HR could realise that it’s the person who is the reason for the relocation who should be given time off and assistance to take care of all the move stuff, instead of their spouse. HR could officially hire me for three or four months as a relocation organiser and then I would get paid and have something to show for it when I look for a job. It’s the whole hidden labour market on it that I don’t like, like it will all be taken care of by itself somehow . . .”

(#80)

“... don't emphasise a need to overwork at the beginning to prove oneself ... pressures at work requiring my husband to stay at work late at night – especially at the beginning – contribute to my feelings of isolation ...”

(#78)

“... the pre-removal stage is the biggest cause of stress –  
how do you close up your life, close the house,  
decide what to take, and ensure everything is left in order  
when I don't get much notice about the move  
and he isn't given any time off to help out? ...”

(#32)

“ ... I really resent that I am left alone with planning the practical stuff, like packing what to bring and what not to bring, preparing for the new culture, informing our friends and telling them the new address and keeping in touch with everyone. My husband is supposed to keep working his hours and relocate at the same time. Most companies base this on the fact that there should be a housewife at home dealing with it ...”

(#80)

## Major Issue #5 – Recognise intrinsic needs

Whilst many expatriate policies adequately address the external issues associated with international mobility (housing, health-care, and so on), more fiscal flexibility in addressing *intrinsic* needs was identified as an important and ongoing issue.

It is these intrinsic factors that seem to indicate a much deeper level of adjustment and satisfaction is being sought by the trailing spouse when an international relocation presents itself.

From a psychological perspective it would seem that the trailing spouse requires *intrinsic fulfillment* in their role just as much as they require practical support from their external environment.

It would appear that in spite of a trailing spouse's external environment and the importance of the level of support provided within it, the quality of their inner life, both personally and professionally for themselves and their spouse, has *also* been shown in the study to influence their level of adjustment and success during expatriation.

“ ... HR could just treat me a like a human being with a brain instead of assuming that my opinions don't count and that the only person who is important in the relocation is my spouse ...”

(#56)

" ... HR could support the trailing spouse in allowing them to further their career. I do not live for my husband, nor do I live for his work, and they just couldn't understand that my work/career was, and is, as important as his. He did not marry a housewife and I will never be one ... "

(#62)

“ . . .once the house and children and even the cat are going along nicely, I always (5 moves and counting) hit the wall at once. I wake up one morning around 9 months into the move and see clearly that I HAVE NO LIFE. I gave up my career. I’ll never amount to much. He keeps building on experience and I’ve made a career out of fresh starts. I feel like a concubine. My job description is passive availability! Then I hear myself, and recognise the moment . . .”

(#31)

“... When we relocate I am more concerned with how my family is adjusting and how my marriage is surviving. If we are a cohesive, assertive force for our own survival as a family, as opposed to being defined as a vehicle for corporate, community or host-country's economic support, then our identity as a family is strong, our stress levels are manageable, and the choices we make are for our own good, rather than the good of others . . .”

(#38)

# Overall Theme: Balancing gains and losses

An understanding is required from sponsoring organisations that expatriation is a gains and losses event for the trailing spouse.

Overall assignment success is often dependent upon striking a balance between missed opportunities in the home-country and new opportunities arising from the relocation to the host-country.

The trailing spouse indicated their awareness that expatriation is a gains and losses event, in which personal and professional compromises are often made on their part in return for the perceived increase in benefits elsewhere within the family.

For example, the perceived increase in spouse's career advancement was important to the trailing spouse. Sponsoring organisations should consider the impact of a relocation on the transferring spouse's career and ensure that any proposed career gains are honoured and met.

“... what is most important is my husband's satisfaction with the new job – if he is not happy on the job I feel as if we have sacrificed a lot for nothing ...”

(#66)

“... the relocation HAS to be a good career development move for my husband – quite frankly if it wasn't, we wouldn't do it...”

(#42)

“ . . . talk to me; involve me at front, before an assignment is offered. Tell me how to prepare myself. Offer me counselling (parenting, cross-cultural, career, life!). Respect me as an individual who is not an appendage of her husband. He does not speak for me; he is not me. I am a critical partner in the success of the assignment and I deserve a seat at the table and a voice that is heard, respected and acted upon . . . ”

(#1)

“ ... companies need a greater appreciation of what is left behind (missed opportunities) and what is hoped for as a result of the relocation in the future (potential for new opportunities). This obviously requires that the staff assisting with the relocation at home and abroad are well-versed in such issues and of a mature enough age to understand the 'bigger picture' expectations associated with moving ... ”

(#71)

# Male vs Female Differences: Resentment

Female trailing spouses feel a greater sense of ownership towards their husband's careers, and express greater levels of resentment towards their husbands as a result of career-related decisions to relocate

Male spouses feel the opposite and have a greater sense of ownership towards the marital partnership than their wife's career

For example, we found that there was no difference between genders in the level of consultation made by the employer to the trailing spouse about the decision to relocate (consultation was generally poor overall)



## Male vs Female Differences: Resentment cont'd

Yet, the study revealed that whilst female trailing spouses resented their husband's employer for this approach, most male spouses seemed to be OK with it and viewed the employer/employee relationship as none of their business

We found little evidence that male spouses were resentful towards their wives as a result of the decision to relocate. Indeed, most males expressed a team attitude between them and their wives throughout most stages of the relocation, because their female spouses involved them wholly in the decision



# Male vs Female Differences: Support groups

Support groups are mainly house-wife/mother oriented which tends to exacerbate the male's isolation more than it would for female trailing spouses

Some males reported that spousal support groups often exclude males from attending, which only adds to their sense of isolation



# Male vs Female Differences: Non-traditional role

The major challenge facing male trailing spouse's is the non-traditional nature of their role

Spousal support and policies are geared mainly towards women with children – therefore, career women without children, **men with and without children**, and gay couples, all fall into the category of “non-traditional” trailing spouses

The unique needs of non-traditional spouses, including the male trailing spouse, are not addressed or acknowledged by most organisations



# Male vs Female Differences: Decision to have children

The decision to have children is more difficult when the female is the transferring/working spouse and the male is trailing

Consider this: Overseas assignments often come up about the time that couples reach the age when they want to start a family; when the trailing spouse is female it usually makes no difference where the wife leaves the workforce – on assignment or back home

But when the non-working spouse is a male, and if the female working spouse is the only means to have a child, maternity leave and a source of income become major issues



**thank you**

