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Understanding a new phenomenon: The male trailing spouse

When couples relocate internationally, the accompanying spouse is traditionally female. Yet, in recent years, more and more couples are switching roles. Professional coach and interculturalist, Val Boyko, and PhD researcher, Yvonne McNulty, report on what happens when the roles are reversed, and a male trailing spouse takes up the challenge.



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What the research says

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Not surprisingly, there is an abundance of academic and practitioner research about the challenges and issues facing female trailing spouses (see, for example, Prudential's "Many women many voices" study for an in-depth look at accompanying spouse adjustment). Yet, to the authors' knowledge, there is little or no research about the male trailing spouse.

One of the assumptions many of us make is that the issues facing male and female trailing spouses are similar. Yet, upon closer examination, we found that whilst there are some similarities, there are also significant differences in how males and females manage and adjust to the trailing spouse life.

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To more fully understand the male perspective, we analyzed the survey data from 21 male spouses from *The trailing spouse: Barrier to mobility or international asset?* study, and conducted personal interviews with nine male trailing spouses around the world. The comparative findings of differences and similarities between male and female trailing spouses are reported below.

Similarities

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Overall, the promise of work is the number one reason given by career male spouses for agreeing to relocate. This



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is a finding consistent with spouses in general, as our study found that the dual career issue was of concern to spouses, regardless of gender. Further compounding the issue would seem to be the high level of education reported in the study; with 75 percent of male spouses indicating they had a Bachelor's or Masters degree.

We therefore concluded that career spouses of both genders with a high level of education are less likely to want to give up their career and will therefore place a greater emphasis on the promise to work when they relocate. As Alex in Latin America said, "I knew I couldn't spend 2-3 years without a job. Plan B was for me to go back to school via the internet, but that was more a plan Z in my head."

In terms of practical support, male spouses indicated a greater need to focus on resume development, job networking, and DSL/cable connections at home. Having Internet access at home was deemed critical not only for Internet job-searching but also for having the tools to do consultant type work if necessary.

"Having a reliable broadband Internet (connection) should be considered a necessity and part of the basic living package," said Dan in Asia, "because it allows spouses to work in the global world and liberates them from the 'locational' disadvantages of following their spouse."

However, if the male trailing spouse is already a 'house-husband' prior to the relocation, or sees it as his partner's turn to focus on their career, our interviews found evidence to suggest that a reversal of roles can work over time.

> "It is a mutual decision, and should be fair," said Thomas in the USA. "It was my wife's turn and I wanted the opportunity for her to reach a little higher." We therefore concluded that male spouses who were already comfortable with non-conformity (that is, they were open minded, flexible and adaptable prior to the move) were more likely to be in agreement about the move.

This non traditional spouse was also likely to have higher levels of adjustment after the move compared to a male who transitions from having a career to being a 'house-husband' as a result of the move. Overall, this finding is consistent with trailing spouses in general, where traditional house-wives face less dual-career challenges than wives who are forced to give up their careers as a result of relocation.

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adjustment, we found that male and female trailing spouses without children found it equally difficult to rebuild a meaningful support network during relocation. We also found that having a supportive spouse was ranked as one of the most important success criteria for males and females alike.

In terms of the information provided about a move, a new location, and cultural differences, our interviews suggested that male spouses placed a heavy emphasis on having accurate and up-to-date information prior to the move. This finding is consistent with trailing spouses in general, where both males and females stated that it is only during the adjustment to living in the new location that they realized what they didn't know and what would have been helpful in hindsight.

Roger in Belgium described it this way: "You don't know what you don't know, and that's the hardest part. Who would have thought getting the phone set up and finding a Philips screwdriver would be an issue."

With regard to adjustment whilst on assignment, our interviews found that trailing spouses, regardless of gender, tended to suffer from feelings of loneliness and isolation.

"Almost everything you value has been taken away," said Ethan in Germany.

"A key factor in any relocation is having the opportunity to meet other people and connect with people" said another trailing male spouse.

These comments are consistent with the general research on trailing spouse adjustment. It is therefore no surprise that spouse communities can be a huge source of support for both males and females.

"Men felt just as frustrated as women in the way they were treated by their spouse's company during an international move."

One of the consistent themes in trailing spouse research is that most relocation policies fail to address the needs of the spouse. Another complaint is that companies rarely involve the spouse in the formal relocation process.

As Ethan in Germany commented, "The spousal aspect doesn't play a part in (relocation) policies really – particularly in male dominated fields where housewives have been the norm."

During our interviews we subsequently found that men felt just as frustrated as women in the way they were treated by their spouse's company during an international move.

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So what are the differences between male and female trailing spouses?

One of the most interesting findings from our interviews was the difference in attitude between genders. Generally speaking, we have found over the years through our intercultural training, coaching and research that female trailing spouses tend to 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.

Yet our interviews revealed that male spouses tend to 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. Yet, our study revealed that whilst female trailing spouses resented their husband's employer for this approach, most male spouses seemed to be OK with it.

"I don't have an ownership interest in my wife's job," said Dan in Asia. "As the relationship is between employee and employer and I have nothing to do with it."

Consequently, 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. "Both of us regularly discuss and confer on the possibilities of future moves," said Gus in Asia. "And no decision to accept one, regardless of how necessary it might be for her career advancement, is taken without my final approval."

When resentment did arise towards their wife's employer, we found that it had more to do with misinformation, or what interviewees perceived as lies about housing and career options, rather than a lack of employer-initiated involvement in the decision to relocate.

As Ethan in Germany said, "In these situations men are more likely to demand assistance when they think the employer is not doing enough or not fulfilling obligations," instead of building up resentment.

Another major difficulty faced by male trailing spouses is that established support groups are mainly house-wife/mother oriented which tends to exacerbate their isolation more than it would for female trailing spouses. Indeed, some male spouses reported during our interviews that spousal support groups often excluded males from attending, which only added to their sense of isolation. "It can be painful not to be a part of a group," explained Thomas in the USA. "It looks as if I am part of the group

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and belong, but I am not. But it's not only because I am a man. I think anyone who is different can feel excluded."

We also found that being a man doesn't necessarily mean there is an automatic connection to other men in the same situation, as often there are other factors involved, just as there would be between women. As Alan in Switzerland explained, "It wasn't that they were women that made it hard, it was just that they were at a different stage in their lives and had other interests."

Yet, overall our interviews revealed that the major challenge facing men is the non-traditional nature of a male trailing spouse role. Thomas in the USA put it this way, "It's a little strange here to be a man at home with the kids, and people are confused by it. They just don't get it."

In terms of other challenges, we found that the decision to have children is also more difficult when the female is the transferring/working spouse and the male is trailing.

"Overseas assignments will come up about the time that you reach the age where you want to start a family," explained Ethan in Germany. "It's okay for male employees since it usually makes no difference where the wife leaves the workforce – overseas or back home."

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

Where to now?

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In light of the above findings, we concluded a fundamental fact that most organisations probably miss. Our research and interviews revealed that 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.

As such, non-traditional spouses, including the male trailing spouse, would benefit from being recognized by the sponsoring organization. This includes being given accurate information at the decision making stage with realistic expectations regarding work in the new location, and being given practical support for pursuing their career. It also means tailoring policies to support their other unique needs.

Another innovative solution is to support non-traditional spouses through personal coaching. For example, the S.A.K.S. 100 Steps Program © takes an individual from the preparation phase through the adjustment to living abroad, and focuses on four key areas: Strengths and

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skills of each individual, their Attitude and awareness of themselves and the new culture, the Knowledge and resources they need to be successful, and their personal Support and community. Coaching programs are specifically designed to address problem areas as soon as possible, and to improve the likelihood of assignment success.

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For more information about expat coaching, contact Val Boyko. For more information about trailing spouse research, contact Yvonne McNulty

Yvonne McNulty is an Australian trailing spouse, PhD candidate, researcher, lecturer, writer, and founder of www.thetrailingspouse.com. Yvonne will be presenting the findings from her research on the issues facing all trailing spouses, along with Val Boyko, at this year's Families in Global Transition Conference in Dallas. (See Information on upcoming expatriate management conferences, seminars & expos)

Val Boyko is a Scot and an American, trailing spouse, intercultural trainer, and coach. Val is a graduate from the internationally recognized Coach University coach training program, and is a member of the International Coach Federation, as well as the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research. You can find her on the web at www.MyGlobalCoach.com

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