

Examining Sri Lankan professional women's perceptions of their opportunities to undertake international careers: Implications for diversity among cross-cultural managers

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Abstract

Extant research has examined women's under-representation (relative to men) in international careers in respect to prejudice towards women in host countries, organizational resistance to selecting women, women's own disinterest in taking international work and host country societal expectations of women. Although research has suggested the benefits for global organizations of having management diversity, the literature has given limited consideration to barriers and opportunities for international careers for women from developing countries. This study addresses this gap in examining the perceptions of 243 professional women in Sri Lanka about factors they perceive affect opportunities for international careers. The findings suggest the women perceive that positive female role models and family/husband support may facilitate opportunities, whereas prejudice in host countries, organizational gender discrimination and home country societal values emphasizing a primary responsibility of women as wives, mothers and

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daughters may hinder opportunities. The research has business implications in that, given a global ageing population and increasing numbers of nontraditional families, organizations seeking to achieve gender and ethnic diversity among their international cross-cultural managers need to be cognizant of supporting employees with extended family responsibilities.

Keywords

Careers, cultural values, international management, Sri Lanka, societal values, women

Introduction

It has been argued that an increasingly globalized environment means managing widely dissimilar employee populations, markets, cultures and modes of work (Beechler and Woodward, 2009). Since the late 1980s, cross-cultural management researchers have identified that cultural diversity should be used as an advantage in global organizations (see Adler et al., 1986). Soderberg and Holden (2002) proffered that human resource management emerges as the main developer of cross-cultural management competencies across a whole range of international management – functions that plainly call for cross-cultural awareness. Moreover, companies with a higher representation of women in senior management positions are said to outperform companies with fewer women at the top (Catalyst, 2007; cited in Beechler and Woodward, 2009) and Tung (2004) pointed out that female expatriates may be model global managers. Despite such assertions, Adler (2002) asked how prepared are organizations to recognize their success depends on the most talented people in the world among their international managers and suggested the answer would appear to be not very. In the context of a war for talent (see Beechler and Woodward, 2009), women remain under-represented internationally relative to men. In 2015, women still only comprise 19 per cent of international assignees (BGRS, 2015) and women from developing countries are in fewer numbers. Addressing this under-representation of women (and women from developing countries particularly), which limits diversity of the international management cohort, necessitates understanding the factors that prevent women from developing countries participating in international careers.

This article focuses on a developing country, Sri Lanka, and reports the results of 243 responses to a survey of Sri Lankan professional women, which addressed the research question: *What factors do Sri Lankan professional women perceive as hindering or assisting their international career opportunities?*

In exploring Sri Lankan women's perceptions of factors that may limit or facilitate their international career opportunities, our study contributes to cross-cultural management research in providing insight into how both perceived host country context and home country contextual factors affect participation in international careers. The research is positioned within the women in international management literature which has explored individual, organizational and national drivers and barriers to women's international careers.

The organizational analysis has considered whether there is corporate resistance to selecting women for international assignments, individual analysis has examined the extent of personal (dis) interest in undertaking international work, and host country analysis has explored whether organizations or individuals perceive women will not be well received as managers in certain locations and experience foreigner prejudice. Our research also explores how societal expectations of women's roles may interact with foreigner prejudice, corporate resistance and their own (dis)interest limiting their international careers.