

# Gender Specific Effects of International Mobility on Family Formation: Evidence from the German Diplomatic Service

Stine Waibel, Julika Hillmann, Heiko Rüger, and Norbert F. Schneider

Federal Institute for Population Research, Wiesbaden, Germany

## **Background**

The existence of the notion of the “typical migrant”, moving from one place to another with a clear resettlement perspective, is contestable: in reality, mobility flows are diverse depending on the types of people and the motivations involved (Modood/Salt 2011; Favell et al. 2007). While mass immigration experienced by Western countries in the post-war period has been dominated by low skilled industrial workers driven by time specific economic imperatives, today’s migration flows depend much more (albeit not only) on technology and skill transfer, i.e. human-capital mobility (Straubhaar 2000). These flows are considered much less “problematic” in terms of social integration, but rather an essential part of successful and competitive knowledge societies. However, they question established citizenship regimes that regulate the legal inclusion or exclusion of migrants and often disregard the specific challenges posed by a highly mobile reality and increasing transnational practices (cf. Schmidtke 2001).

There is no indication that the magnitude of global mobility will stall or the “international movement of expertise” will decline in the near future (Salt 2009); rather the opposite is the case when looking at international student and academic mobility (e.g. Trembley 2005), international relocations in terms of short- or long-term assignments or business travels (e.g. Tani 2008; Brookfield 2012), and international mobility of “human talent” in more general terms (e.g. Salimano 2008; Castles/Miller 2003). At the same time, workforce demographics have been changing: in many developed nations populations are shrinking and aging, while women increasingly enter male-dominated sections of the labor market so that global staffing issues become more complex and demanding (Collings et al. 2007). These issues will confront globally operating industries and consultancies, national governments, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations alike. So far, there is little knowledge on how employers consider and manage the international transfer of expertise alongside changing demographics (Schuler/Tarique 2012).

## **Research question and hypotheses**

In light of this constant demand for global mobility, we focus on gender specific effects of international mobility on family and partnership formation using the example of German diplomats. Social aspects of family life have been identified as most important obstacle to international mobility

and effective global talent sourcing respectively (Tung 1988; Shaffer/Harrison 1998; Brookfield 2012). Expatriate research has pointed towards the strains and stresses connected with reconciling the two life domains family and career, especially for women (cf. Tharenou 2008; McNulty 2012). However, the genuine effects of mobility on family formation are very poorly understood especially with respect to women as “leaders” or “lead migrants”. So far, literature has addressed mobility mainly as a *result* of socio-demographic variables (Shauman/Xie 1997; Tharenou 2008), such as the marital status or the presence of children.

Against this background, diplomats are a particularly interesting group to study. Constant upheavals are routine activities in the entire occupational career of Foreign Service employees: on a rotational basis they are assigned to new postings every three or four years (“rotational principle”) where they are usually confronted with different task specifications (“generalist principle”). Moreover, diplomats are heterogeneous in terms of civil service positions held (ranging from the lower service officials to ambassadors), gender, age groups, tenure, and mobility experience allowing considering those socio-demographic variables for analyses. In particular, the share of women in the diplomatic service is high making out 40 per cent of the diplomatic workforce under the age of 39 in the highest civil service grade. Most importantly, individuals enter the diplomatic career in most cases *before* family formation becomes a pressing issue for them. As the recruitment process is hard and since attrition rates are low (diplomats use to stay within the Foreign Service for their entire career) it is very unlikely that they will leave because of family issues. This provides an optimal situation for studying the singular effect of frequent international mobility on family and partnership formation.

Consistent with gender role theories we expect gender specific effects on partnership formation and child bearing. Specifically, we hypothesise that women are more likely to have experienced partnership break ups *because of* international rotation. Due to still prevalent gender role expectations male partners are supposedly less easily persuaded to travel along, put back or put on hold their own career progression and take on the female-connoted role as “trailing spouse” (Punnett 1997; Selmer/Leung 2003). As employment possibilities are often restricted for partners, in reality, there is often no “dual-career-option”. We additionally expect that women will not only experience more partnership dissolutions, but will also have problems to form and uphold new partnerships anticipating conflicts. Accordingly, we hypothesise that women remain single and childless more often than men because of mobility requirements.

## **Data**

The data used for this study originate from a cross-sectional fully standardized online-survey among employees of the German Federal Foreign Office in rotation (N = 2.433). The German Foreign Office carries out the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany and has roughly 230 diplomatic missions around the world including missions to international and supranational organizations. At the end of 2011 the Foreign Office employed roughly 7.300 diplomats excluding local staff. All of them

were invited to participate in the study corresponding to a response rate for the employees of 35.5 percent.

The participants were asked a broad range of questions with a specific focus on the management of international rotation and the effects it had on partnership dissolution or child bearing. Information was also collected on health status, work and cultural adjustment, perceptions of different life domains, family and partnership status, personality traits, coping strategies and received social support.

### **First findings and broader implications**

Patterns of childlessness and living without partner are prevalent among employees of the diplomatic service. More than 20 per cent of employees older than 45 do not have children and every fifth person does not live in a relationship. Women fall strikingly more often into these categories: one-third of female employees older than 45 are single (men: 7 per cent from), 40 per cent are childless (men: 16 per cent). Women make frequent mobility more often responsible for not having children (40 versus 20 per cent). They also more often experienced partnership dissolution due to international rotation (40 per cent versus 28 percent). The majority of singles is convinced that they are single because of international rotation (63% of male and 71% of female employees). The gender specific effects of mobility on family and partnership formation are confirmed in logistic regressions and do not change if controlling for educational background, age, tenure, and mobility history. However, there are indications, that young men increasingly face the same problems as women concerning the partner's own career plans and unwillingness to accept constant relocations. This will probably also have consequences for their child bearing behaviour later on in their careers.

These findings confirm our hypotheses, although there are indications that women and men are increasingly converging in terms of international mobility reaching into their private lives. The willingness of women to move alongside their partners to places where they cannot take up employment is apparently decreasing, while men continue to show little willingness in this respect. This not only has implications for human resource management but also for governments who want to attract and retain "global talents". Looking beyond the special case of German diplomats, we can conclude that family formation and partnering issues (and not just the reconciliation of *existing* families with international mobility) need to be more appropriately accounted for in mobility contexts. Canada may serve as an example of a country that has reacted upon these challenges: the country changed the focus of migration regulations away from only looking at individuals and their likely integration into the labour market towards the inclusion of the respective opportunities of their partners. But also global firms and organizations will have to rethink their personal strategies which still tend to be ad-hoc (Forster 2011) and not sufficiently include life course issues that need more long-term planning.

## References

- Brookfield Global Relocation Services (2012): Global Relocation Trends. 2012 Survey Report. USA.
- Castles, S., Miller, M. J., (2003): *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Collings, D., Scullion, H., Morley, M. J. (2007): Changing patterns of global staffing in the multinational enterprise: Challenges to the conventional expatriate assignment and emerging alternatives. *Journal of World Business*, 42, 198–213.
- Favell, A., Feldblum, M., Smith, M. P. (2007): The Human Face of Global Mobility: A Research Agenda. *Society*, 44, 15-25.
- Forster, N. (1997): ‘The persistent myth of high expatriate failure rates’: a reappraisal, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 8, 414-433.
- Harvey, M., Napier N., Moeller, M. (2009): Interpreting Dual Career Couples’ Family Life-Cycles: Identifying Strategic Windows of Global Career Opportunity. *Research and Practice in Human Resource Management*, 17, 14-35.
- McNulty, Y. (2012): ‘Being dumped in to sink or swim’: an empirical study of organizational support for the trailing spouse, *Human Resource Development International*, 15, 417-434.
- Modood, T., Salt, J. (2011): *Global Migration, Ethnicity and Britishness*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Punnett, B. J. (1997): Towards Effective Management of Expatriate Spouses. *Journal of World Business*, 32, 243-257.
- Salt, J., (2009): New forms of mobility in Europe: global corporate labour markets and the international movement of expertise. In M. Duszczynka, M. Lesinskiez (Eds.), *Wspolczesne Migracje: Dylematy Europy I Polski*, 15-25, Warsaw, University of Warsaw Press.
- Schmidte, O. (2001): Transnational Migration: A Challenge to European Citizenship Regimes. *World Affairs*, 164, 3-16. Selmer, J., Leung, A.S.M (2003): Personal Characteristics of Female vs Male Business Expatriates. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 3, 195-212.
- Schuler, R. S., Tarique, I. (2012): Global talent management: theoretical perspectives, systems, and challenges. In G.K. Stahl, I. Björkman, Morris, S. (Eds.), *Handbook of Research in International Human Resource Management*, 205-219, Cheltenham, UK, Northampton, USA: Edward Elgar.
- Shaffer, M.A., Harrison, D. A. (1998). Expatriates' psychological withdrawal from international assignments: work, nonwork, and family influences. *Personnel Psychology*, 51, 87-118.
- Shauman, K. A., Xie, Y. (1997): Geographic mobility of scientists: Sex differences and family constraints. *Demography*, 33, 455-468.
- Solimano, A. (Ed.) (2008). *The International Mobility of Talent: Types, Causes, and Development Impact*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Straubhaar, T. (2000). International mobility of the highly skilled: Brain gain, brain drain or brain exchange. *HWWA Discussion Paper*, 88.
- Tani, M. (2008): Short-Term Skilled Labour Movement and Economic Growth. *International Migration*, 46, 161-187. Tharenou, Phyllis (2008). Disruptive decisions to leave home: Gender and family differences in expatriation choices. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 105, 183-200.
- Tremblay, K. (2005): Academic Mobility and Immigration. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 9, 196-228.
- Tung, R. L. (1998): American expatriates abroad: From neophytes to cosmopolitans. *Journal of World Business*, 33, 125-144.