

Professional Expat Wife Syndrome

By: Robin Pascoe

“Ladies, I am here today to advise you about the many adjustments you will make when you move overseas with your husbands and become professional expatriate wives. I have been hired by the Corporation because I have extensive experience in this area, so feel free to raise any topic of concern.”

“I have a question,” said one no-nonsense expat wife-to-be. “Why are you a man?”

The male relocation consultant mopped his brow before responding. He had told the Corporation that maybe this wasn’t such a great idea, that wives were not as gullible as they thought.

“Do you ask me that question in a metaphysical way? Or merely as a practical matter?” he finally said.

“I mean, why the h*ll has the Corporation hired YOU to tell US about the challenges which lie ahead for us as women. Why didn’t they ask one of the wives of a former expat employee to do that? At least she really knows what’s it’s all about.”

“The Corporation NEVER hires the wives of its employees. That would pose a conflict of interest.”

“And whose interest might that be?” the no-nonsense wife asked.

“When you become a professional expatriate wife, you assume many responsibilities. For instance, there is the shipping and handling of your household goods....”

“Wait a minute here,” piped up the loud-mouthed wife again. “I thought we were going to talk about being a professional expatriate wife.”

“That’s what we are talking about,” said the consultant.

“No, you have been talking about being a wife in general or should I say General Wife: taking care of the moving details, finding schools for the children, hiring help, giving dinner parties, etc etc. I thought we were here to talk about having a professional life overseas.”

“You mean working outside the home?” asked the consultant, incredulous at such a concept when applied to expat life.

The no-nonsense, loud-mouthed wife could barely control her irritation. “Professions. Careers. Intellectual Life. Jobs. Do these words hold any meaning whatsoever for you?”

“Well, yes, of course they do. But when you become an expatriate wife, I’m afraid you must put those words into storage for a few years. Didn’t anyone explain that to you?”

“I believe most of us were under the impression that we were here today to meet a career counsellor who could advise us on how to apply our skills in an overseas setting,” said the wife, looking around the room and getting the confirmation she sought from the other participants.

Noting the head nodding going on, the consultant began to sweat again. “What skills?”

“Well, Mrs. X over there has a law degree. Mrs. Y has her MBA. Mrs. Z has worked in the same capacity as her husband IN THIS VERY CORPORATION for longer than he has. Mrs. R has a master’s degree in engineering. Mrs. Q is a PhD in education and Mrs. S is a nuclear physicist.”

“And what do you do?” the advisor asked the no-nonsense wife in a whisper.

“Oh me? I make trouble.”

“I’m sorry if you have all come here today under false pretenses,” explained the consultant. “But this Corporation doesn’t encourage wives to work overseas.”

“So why does it have a policy that says it does?” asked the now clearly identified troublemaker.

“What policy?”

“The one I have right here,” she said, pulling out of her bag xeroxed copies of a document which clearly related to the issue of spouses working overseas.

“Oh. THAT policy,” said the advisor, relief clear in his voice. “I wouldn’t bother taking it very seriously.”

“And why is that?”

“Because it has never been followed. It was only put together to satisfy a wife a few years back who was threatening a law suit or something. I can’t remember now, the details are vague. You can put it away, ladies.”

All eyes in the room were focussed on the troublemaker to see what she would do next. The women were relying on her to continuing making a row because it was in their own best interest. They, of course, remained quiet. Their husbands would kill them if they learned they had made a fuss.

“So...” began the troublemaker, looking around at her silent sisters. “Let me see if I have everything straight. The spousal employment policy is worthless and you have no intention whatsoever of offering career counseling regardless of the caliber of qualifications in this room. Am I correct?”

“Yes.”

“And we will have little or no opportunity to find meaningful work overseas and especially not within this Corporation itself.”

“Oh no, that’s not entirely true. Certain jobs will become available in the Corporation which we won’t view as any conflict of interest.”

“And what jobs might those be?”

“Making coffee, filing, and if there’s an opening, word processing.”

“Perfect jobs for lawyers, bankers, engineers and nuclear physicists, right?”

“Look, you are the ones who want to work.”

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