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TITLE

Specific work-life issues of
single and childless female
expatriates:
An exploratory study in the
Swiss context

Research paper

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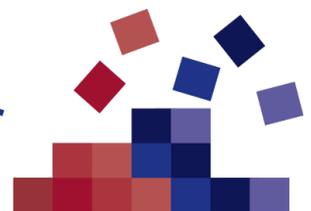
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Abstract

Work-life balance has been identified as a key challenge in expatriation, which impacts both private and professional spheres. Especially for women, work and private life issues have been found to be particularly exacerbated abroad. Up until today, research on work-life interface in the expatriation context has focused on expatriates relocating with a family. However, single expatriates represent a non-negligible proportion of the expatriate population and their work-life experiences remain largely unexplored. This is especially relevant for female expatriates, since reports and past research showed that they were more often single than their male counterparts and had less often children. In the domestic context, recent studies on work-life interface reveal significant issues that single and childless individuals face in balancing both life spheres. The aim of this qualitative exploratory study is to examine the specific work-life experiences of single and childless female expatriates that are working and living in the French speaking part of Switzerland.

Keywords

Female expatriates | Single | Work-life interface | Gender | Switzerland

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Introduction

Work-life balance issues have been identified as a key challenge in expatriation, which significantly impacts both private and professional spheres (Shortland and Cummins 2007). Since a majority of expatriates appear to have a family (partner and/or children), and since work and family issues – especially for women - appear to be exacerbated on international assignments (e.g. more responsibilities at work, challenges due to the relocation of the whole family, issues related to the male accompanying partner, etc. see Harris 2004a; Anderson 2001), the growing academic interest in examining the work-life interface of expatriates relocating with a family or a partner appears to be justified. However, single expatriates nevertheless represent about 30% of the total expatriate population according to recent relocation reports (Brookfield 2014; Cartus 2014), and their work-life experiences remain largely unexplored. This is especially relevant for female expatriates, since reports and past empirical research showed that they were more often single than their male counterparts and have less often children (e.g. Brookfield 2014; Salamin and Davoine 2015; Selmer and Leung 2003). While studies that dealt with the work-life interface of female expatriates emphasized various work-life issues faced by women abroad, their samples mainly include women in a partnership or with a family (e.g. Fischlmayr and Kollinger 2010; Mäkelä et al. 2011). Thus to date no studies comprehensively focused on the work-life experiences of single and childless female expatriates.

However, recent studies on work-life interface in the domestic context reveal significant challenges that single and childless individuals face in balancing both life spheres (Casper and Swanberg 2009; Hamilton et al. 2006). Research has initiated a shift from the examination of “work-family” to “work-life” interface in order to take various life spheres into account beyond work and immediate family (Keeney et al. 2013; Özbilgin et al. 2011). In social sciences, a field of “singleness studies” is developing (Byrne 2009), which emphasizes various aspects of the single status (e.g. its social meaning, the social acceptance of being single, etc.; DePaulo and Morris 2006; Reynolds 2008).

This qualitative exploratory study thus builds on different research streams (research on female expatriates, work-life research, singleness studies) in order to examine the specific work-life issues of single and childless female expatriates in the Swiss context. Our study advances research on work-life interface by focusing on the still under-researched single population (Özbilgin et al. 2011) and by investigating their experiences in an international context – where work-life issues might be more

pronounced. Work-life issues in the international context have been related to especially significant challenges for women, who may face additional obstacles in the work and non-work context (Insch et al. 2008; Schütter and Boerner 2013). It contributes at the same time to the field of research on female expatriates by complementing existing studies on work-life interface which focus on women relocating with a partner and/or family and by revealing work-life experiences of single and childless women abroad. Moreover, this study might help organizations to understand the experiences and needs of these non-traditional expatriates (McNulty 2014) and to design appropriate support measures. Research on female expatriates is briefly discussed in the first section, before addressing research on singleness (section 2). In the third section, we focus on research on work-life interface. The method is then described in section 4, results are presented and discussed in sections 5 and 6. Implications and limitations are emphasized in the conclusion.

1. Literature review on female expatriates

Our knowledge on women's experiences in the expatriation context considerably increased over time. Earlier studies emphasized discriminatory organizational context and biased assumptions of corporate managers, who were often perceiving women as unsuitable for international assignments (Dawson et al. 1987; Jelinek and Adler 1988). Empirical research, however, consistently contradicted such stereotypical assumptions, showing that women could be highly successful on international assignments (e.g. Tung 2004; Taylor and Napier 1996). As women might still today not be sufficiently considered as candidates for expatriation by their companies (Vance and Paik 2001; Connerley et al. 2008), they might initiate their international career move themselves in order to circumvent organizational barriers (Tharenou 2010). Studies have increasingly focused on women's self-initiated international mobility (e.g. Roos 2013; Berry and Bell 2012), showing that these foreign experiences enabled them to gain a significant amount of career capital (Myers and Pringle 2005; Stalker and Mavin 2011).

In most recent years, research on female expatriates is typically characterized by increasing individual-level examinations with a host-country focus, which includes for example the investigation of host-country national's perception of female expatriates, but also a growing interest in studying female expatriates' work-life interface (Salamin and Hanappi 2014). With the increasing emphasis on work-life issues as a key challenge in the expatriation context (Shortland and Cummins 2007), studies have begun to more comprehensively examine women's interface between work and private life abroad

(Mäkelä et al. 2011; Fischlmayr and Kollinger 2010, see discussion in section 3.3.). However, while single and childless women abroad may deal with their specific and significant work-life issues, no studies have comprehensively examined their experiences. Hence, with this paper, we contribute to address this research gap.

2. Research on singleness

Over the past decades, singlehood has increased in Western countries and it is expected to carry on in the future (Poortman and Liefbroer 2010). This trend has emerged in conjunction with other social and demographic developments such as shifting attitudes towards gender roles, women's increased educational attainments and engagement in professional opportunities, increasing acceptance of delayed marriages and high divorce rates (Koropeckyj-Cox 2005; Strong et al. 2011; Lesthaeghe 2010). Individualization has been emphasized as an important driver of change, which refers to the ways in which individuals, liberated from earlier conventions and constraints, aim at shaping their own trajectories and identities and reflecting on the sense of their relationships (Williams 2004).

While earlier research tended to present the single status as deviant, a field of study on singlehood has been developing over the past decades, investigating singlehood as a viable and acceptable social identity and as lifestyle option (Byrne 2009). Scholars in this research field, aiming at examining and challenging ready-made analytical categories, have first reflected on the complexity of defining "singleness". As stressed by Reynolds (2008) or Poortman and Liefbroer (2010), various definitions have been used in popular writings and research over time (e.g. referring to never-married and childless in some cases, or including widowed and divorced; or also referring to unmarried people with a partner, etc.). Researchers on singleness have emphasized legal/bureaucratic and social definitions (DePaulo and Morris 2005, 2006). In many countries including Switzerland, legally single individuals are adults who are not, and have never been, legally married (they refer to the official category "single" as opposed to other categories such as e.g. married, divorced, widowed, see OFS 2014)¹. On the other hand, the social definition refers to individuals who are not in a serious, committed partnership. Although there are no precise criteria to define seriousness, it can include elements such as the length of time a couple has been together, whether they live together or the exclusivity of relationship.

According to Byrne and Carr (2005), singles might be caught today in a “cultural lag”, meaning that cultural adjustments did not yet account for these rapid social changes described above. Indeed, in Western society, cultural norms valuing heterosexual committed and long-lasting relationships remain well anchored (Day et al. 2011; Zajicek and Koski 2003). Single individuals might thus be perceived as challenging this dominant couple culture (Maeda and Hecht 2012). Being single might be an even more problematic identity for women who might be subject to significant social pressure in a society that stresses importance of couplehood and motherhood (Jamieson and Simpson 2013; Gordon 2003). It might however be perceived as more or less acceptable at different life stages, and the extent of this social pressure might thus vary depending on age (Sharp and Ganong 2007). It has been shown that single and childless women in their mid-20s until mid-30s (related to the conventional timetable for marriage and child-bearing) are subject to intense pressure from friends, family, coworkers and more broadly society to marry and found a family (Sharp and Ganong 2011; Koeing et al. 2010; Byrne 2003).

On the positive side, studies show that singlehood might be associated with various benefits, such as high independence, freedom and self-fulfillment (DePaulo 2006; Koeing et al. 2010). Single individuals might not be attracted by what they could perceive as the “confines of married life” (Timonen and Doyle 2014, p.12); and particularly value their freedom to make choices regarding e.g. lifestyle, participation in social activities or professional engagement (e.g. Timonen and Doyle 2014; Baumbusch 2004; Trimmerger 2005). While feelings of isolation and loneliness have been reported to be main challenges for singles (Gordon 2003), interpersonal relationships might be a crucial factor in positive experiences of singlehood.

3. Interface between work and private life

In this section, we first present theoretical and conceptual elements on work-life interface, and then review past research on the work-life interface of singles (in the domestic context) and on work-life issues of female expatriates.

3.1. Work-life interface: theoretical elements

Most work-life research has focused more specifically on the relationship between work and family domains, where family is understood as the presence of a partner and/or dependent children (Casper and Swanberg 2009, p.95). As a result, not only have other relevant life domains been typically ignored

(Grawitch et al. 2011), but people who do not correspond to this definition, such as single individuals, have been largely excluded from work-life research (Özbilgin et al. 2011). Acknowledging this issue and the need to account for a diversity of non-work areas beyond family, researchers have more recently broadened their scope of investigation by including domains such as household management, friendships, leisure, religion, etc. (e.g. Keeney et al. 2013; Frone 2003; Sav et al. 2013). Moreover, their understanding of the family domain is also broader and includes e.g. time spent with parents or siblings.

Research has traditionally adopted a **conflict perspective** when examining work-life interface (Poelmans et al. 2005). It stresses that individuals have finite personal resources in terms of time, energy and attention, which are likely to be depleted when participating in multiple life roles. Managing the competing demands and expectations from multiple roles inevitably creates strain. Extending Greenhaus and Beutell's (1985) seminal definition of "work-family" conflict, Huffman et al. (2008) defined work non-work conflict as "a specific type of interrole conflict that occurs when work demands and pressures collide with the pressures and demands of one's personal life" (p.516-517). Moreover, research has widely acknowledged the bidirectionality of the conflict, i.e. work can interfere with non-work domains and the opposite (Schieman et al. 2009; Rotondo et al. 2003).

In contrast to the conflict approach described above, the **enrichment perspective** focuses on the potential benefits of combining multiple roles. While researchers have used different concepts to refer to these positive synergies (e.g. "facilitation, "enhancement"), it has been observed that "enrichment" appears to be the most inclusive one (McNall et al. 2010). Greenhaus and Powell (2006) define enrichment as "the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in another role" (p.73). Similar to work non-work conflict, enrichment has been found to be bidirectional (Peng et al. 2011). Moreover, enrichment has been recognized by past research as a distinct and independent construct from that of work non-work conflict (Demerouti et al. 2013; Rantanen et al. 2013). In this respect, both conflicts and enrichments can take place simultaneously.

Social support has been found to be essential in both buffering conflicts and enhancing enrichments. When individuals perceive high levels of social support, they are less likely to view their environment as stressful or threatening, which reduces subsequent conflict (Michel et al. 2010; Carlson and Perrewé 1999). Also, social support both in the work and non-work contexts generates feelings of care and value, i.e. positive affect that can be transferred across domains and enhance performance in other roles (Lu

2011; Siu et al. 2013; Wayne et al. 2006). Three broad types of social support are commonly referred to (Helgeson 2003): emotional (e.g. listening, caring sympathizing), instrumental (e.g. tangible and concrete assistance, external help with household chores) and informational (information and guidance).

3.2. Research on work-life interface and singles in the domestic context

In more recent years, some studies have started to investigate the work-life experiences of single workers in the domestic context. Casper and Swanberg (2009)'s noteworthy qualitative study on the work-life stress of single childfree adults identified a range of work-life issues encountered by this population. A major element, also emphasized by other studies (e.g. Young 1999; Innstrand et al. 2010), is the expectations in the workplace (e.g. from colleagues, supervisors) that singles might be able to work longer hours or to readily commit to additional work assignments. Another major issue underlined is singles' perception that their free-time was undervalued since they were not seen as having any family responsibilities outside work (Casper and DePaulo 2012). A further element underlined by Casper and Swanberg's study is related to the dominant norm at the workplace of being "married with children", which could lead to ostracism towards singles. These elements are in line with Casper et al. (2007)'s findings that singles might feel excluded from "family-friendly" organizational cultures that are shaped to support employees with (immediate) family. In addition, in a study on the work-life conflict of never-married women without children, Hamilton et al. (2006) observed that singles themselves might also tend to devote high energy and time in the work sphere, which could in turn lead to significant interferences with their private sphere.

3.3. Work-life interface of female expatriates

It has been widely acknowledged that international work experiences create additional work-life challenges for individuals, as the different life spheres are impacted by the relocation. In the private sphere, past research emphasized stress associated with the culture shock that might be felt as a result of living in a new country (e.g. loss of familiar signs and cues for interpreting daily life, see e.g. Caligiuri and Lazarova 2005). Studies have also widely emphasized challenges related to spouse and children during the relocation (e.g. see Harris 2004b; Davoine et al. 2013). In the professional sphere, the new position in the host-country might be more challenging (e.g. increased responsibilities, see e.g. Mäkelä and Suutari 2011) and be more demanding in terms of working hours (Shortland and Cummins 2007).

Research has constantly shown that work and life issues are exacerbated for women in international assignments (e.g. Harris 2004a, Linehan and Walsh 2000). Women can indeed face additional challenges in the workplace such as enduring gender stereotypes and an organizational context biased towards male career success. In addition, women typically remain predominantly responsible for domestic tasks and childcare activities. Overall, work-life conflict has been found to be intensified for female expatriates compared to their male counterparts (Schütter and Boerner 2013). While most research focused on women's work-life conflicts, recent studies highlighted enrichments as well for women between different life spheres. These enrichments refer for example to positive feelings, skills or energy that are transferred from one life domain to another (see e.g. Mäkelä et al. 2011, Schütter and Boerner 2013).

While no studies comprehensively focused on the work-life interface of single female expatriates (nor more broadly on single expatriates regardless of gender), some studies including a minority of single female expatriates in their samples do briefly mention a few work-life issues of this population. For instance, some situations of long working hours contributing to a lack of time for leisure and friends were underlined (Mäkelä et al. 2011). Similarly, Fischlmayr and Kollinger (2010) emphasize situations of loneliness and isolation for single women abroad that can lead to lower self-esteem and lower motivation at work. Moreover, Linehan and Walsh (2000) mention social pressures from colleagues on unmarried female expatriates, who perceived them as an “oddity”. On the other hand, in terms of enrichment, it has been reported that single female expatriates might perceive their personal life situation (and its high flexibility) as advancing their career development (Mäkelä et al. 2011; Linehan and Walsh 2000). Other studies, addressing more generally the experiences of single female expatriates (Ben-Ari and Yong 2000; Thang et al. 2002, both focusing on single Japanese women in Singapore) underlined some of these issues mentioned such as social pressures and exclusion, and emphasized for instance that they might perceive their international experience as a mean for self-fulfillment and self-development.

4. Context and method of the study

4.1. The host-country context: French speaking part of Switzerland

The Swiss environment is characterized by strong cultural specificities and values at several levels: national, regional (related to the 4 German, French, Italian and Romansh speaking regions) and cantonal

(26 cantonal states) (ChF 2014). At the same time, the Swiss economy reflects a high degree of internationalization. This international dimension is particularly strong in the French speaking Geneva Lake region, where many headquarters and subsidiaries of multinational companies are established (Naville et al. 2012). The population in this region is characterized by a high diversity (the proportion of foreigners in the resident population reached 35.1% in 2012, which is a much higher rate than the Swiss average of 23.3%) (VD-GE 2014). Among them, highly skilled professionals from various horizons are particularly attracted to this region by high standards of living and a job market concentrated in the tertiary sector (Höfert and Kalt 2012; Steiner and Wanner 2011; VD-GE 2014).

While the Swiss economic environment might be highly attractive, some inequalities between men and women remain significant, such as a wage gap of 17.9% in 2011, (slightly higher than the EU-28 average of 16.4%) or women's persistent difficulties to reach higher management positions (e.g. with 10% of board seats held by women) (Catalyst 2014; Eurostat 2014). These inequalities reflect that traditional stereotypes concerning women and men's place in the professional and family life remain particularly present (CEDAW 2009).

4.2. Method

This exploratory study adopts a qualitative, interpretative research approach, since it aimed at identifying and examining female expatriates' perceived work-life issues related to their single and childless status and the meaning they attributed to them (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch 2004). Since we wanted to take the diversity of such potential specific work-life experiences into account in the expatriation context, we allowed for the inclusion of different types of expatriates such as traditional corporate-assigned expatriates, as well as self-initiates expatriates (i.e. referred to as individuals who initiated their international work experiences themselves, with little or no corporate support, for duration that is not necessarily defined; Andresen et al. 2012; Cao et al. 2012). Several inclusion/exclusion criteria were considered in the constitution of the sample: 1) we included female expatriates who perceived themselves single according to the social definition (i.e. they were not in a partnership) and were childless; 2) these women had to be working and living in the French speaking part of Switzerland; 3) they had a time spent in Switzerland ranging from 5-6 months (in order to avoid additional initial stress due to relocation) until 8 years. While the duration of stay is usually limited for organization-assigned expatriates (e.g. 2 to 5 years), this is not necessarily the case for self-initiated expatriates. It has been suggested that scholars in expatriate research should designate the boundaries

between temporary and permanent stays in their studies (Cerdin and Selmer 2014), since self-initiated expatriation typically implies a stronger dimension of temporariness in the period of stay (in contrast to conceptualizations of migration who might stay on a longer term, see Al Ariss 2010). Based on reported periods of stay of up to 8 years for self-initiated expatriates in past empirical studies (Cerdin and Selmer 2014), we have adopted the maximum threshold of 8 years of stay in Switzerland as an inclusion criteria in our study.

In total, our final sample is composed of 20 interviewees all fitting the criteria mentioned above. Participants were found through expatriate organizations (e.g. blogs, etc.) and with the help of the Chamber of Commerce of the State of Vaud, which advertised our study on their website. Table I below summarizes some demographic characteristics of our sample.

Table 1: Sample characteristics (N=20)

Age	N	%	Level of education	N	%
21-25 years	1	5%	Bachelor	4	20%
26-30 years	2	10%	Master/graduate	12	60%
31-35 years	7	35%	PhD/ Post graduate	4	20%
36-40 years	5	25%			
41-45 years	2	10%			
46-50 years	3	15%			
Length in CH	N	%	Type of expatriates	N	%
½ -2 years	5	25%	Self-initiated	15	75%
3-4 years	6	30%	Organization-assigned	3	15%
5-6 years	8	40%	“Drawn”	2	10%
7-8 years	1	5%			

Regarding the type of expatriates, most of the study participants corresponded to the definition of self-initiated expatriates (75%), while 15% were assigned by their organizations. In addition, 2 interviewees could be classified in none of the above mentioned categories, since they had been contacted by the local organization to work for them. They thus corresponded to Andresen et al. (2014)’s additional category of “drawn expatriates” (employees who are approached and offered a contract by host-country organizations, and were not the initiator of their career moves). Regarding

nationalities, the sample was very varied, including 16 different nationalities (2 British, 2 Hungarians, 2 Italians, 2 US, and one participant of each of the following nationalities: Australian, Brazilian, Canadian, Croatian, French, German, Greek, Lebanese, Polish, Portuguese, South African and Swedish). They were working in a range of industries: pharmaceutical, legal, banking/finance/insurance, medical and health, education, government and diplomacy, non-profit organizations and aviation industry; and were holding mainly specialist/expert and managerial positions.

The data collection has been performed through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the 20 participants of the study, in English with 19 expatriates and in French with the French expatriate. Each interview has been performed by a team of 2 researchers: a male and a female interviewer, in order to have a balanced team in terms of gender. Consistent with Lim and Firkola (2000), we used the same interview guide with all interviewees. The main parts of the interview guide are the following: introduction and career path, work-life interface in their experience in Switzerland, perceived work-life issues for single female expatriates, future perspectives and conclusion. All interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, have been audio recorded and transcribed. In the data analysis phase, we used the computer assisted data analysis software MAXQDA 10 and performed a thematic analysis for qualitative data following King (2004)'s template analysis method. This method suggests starting the analysis with pre-identified categories (e.g. from previous research on a similar topic), but allows flexible changes through the course of the analysis (King 2004, p.256). Hence we started the thematic analysis with categories referring to main themes emphasized in the theoretical part, and subsequently adapted the categories during the analysis process to take specificities of our data into account (e.g. Swiss context, international dimension in work-life issues of singles, etc.). Results of this analysis are presented in the next section.

5. Results

5.1 Swiss social norms and habits and work-life interface

In this section we address some particularities of the Swiss context regarding work-life balance that were observed by the participants, and how it impacted their work-life interface. Many participants perceived that the Swiss culture and context particularly valued a good work-life balance:

“Swiss citizens, I mean people who have grown up here, they really appreciate the work-life balance, their time off, the holidays.” (P.7)

A feature of the Swiss environment (related to the above mentioned one) that has been constantly mentioned by the interviewees were the closing times of stores, which appeared to close earlier than what they were used to in their previous experiences. While this might appear to be a minor element, many single female expatriates explained the considerable repercussions that it had on their work-life interface, since they had nobody else, as singles, who could help them dealing with practical issues such as shopping:

“You create a routine because you have to find things that stay open on the weekends. [...] For instance it destroys my weekends, because I can never finish my working day on time to go to the supermarket, so on Saturday it comes to me a very routine because I have to do the groceries for the week, and I don’t like this.” (P.15)

While this feature of the Swiss environment was negatively perceived by some interviewees, some others viewed it positively, as an opportunity to reach a good work-life balance:

“I think I have been forced with a few of the rules of Switzerland. So in the US everything is open all the time, you can do your grocery shopping at midnight, it doesn’t matter, you can do your laundry at 2 in the morning, no one’s going to care, whereas here there are certain times where you’re not allowed to do things, so I think it kind of forced me to be much better about coming home early in order to get my laundry done, or going to the market before I go to work. I feel like I have much better balance here. And because I’m single, I don’t have somebody else to do the shopping.” (P.11)

Moreover, some interviewees noted that some other aspects of the practical organization of life in Switzerland might reflect a family (or couple) culture. They viewed this element as particularly obvious when appointments had to be made for practical issues related to their housing, where it was typically expected that one of the two partners, and especially the (stay-at-home) “wife”, would be available during the working day. Hence, in addition to couple and family culture, an orientation towards traditional family and gender role repartition has also been underlined. Several single female expatriates have thus been confronted to this expectation that they were the “stay-at-home” wife:

“You get these letters from various organizations about, “We’re coming on this day at eight o’clock in the morning to do your heating, or your balcony cleaning, or replacement of your stores, or doing your windows, or doing whatever”, and you have to be there. And the letter is always addressed to Mr. and Mrs. .XY, which I think, “Okay, wait a minute”. A few times I’ve listed a response in my broken French, “I’m sorry. I can’t be here today because you gave me a one day notice. I have to work. Could you please come back. And by the way, there is no mister.” (laugh). I hate to reinforce that, but it’s a very interesting stereotype that my expat friends and I have noticed is that; a lot of our experiences here, especially as single women are that, it’s assumed that you’re the stay at home wife. [...] So I think that’s stressful for me, because now I have to figure out how to; either I work from home that day or I take a vacation day or something, depending on what’s happening.” (P.8)

Beyond the gendered expectation underlined by this interviewee, this illustration shows how such demands of availability in their private life directly interfere with their work life (need to take a day off, work from home) and the crucial importance of having enough flexibility granted by the organization.

5.2 Single status and workload: ambivalent relationships

Organizational perspective: work expectations and the value of private time

The feeling that a low value was associated by the organization to their private time emerged as an important and sensitive issue for several interviewees. Being single, and in addition an expatriate, could be interpreted as a signal within the work environment that they do not have the same responsibilities and commitments outside work than people with immediate families or even local single employees with extended families:

*“The moment that you’re single and expat, and that people perceive that you don’t have the same responsibilities as they do, automatically this has repercussions on expectations at work. So I’m expected to be fine travelling over the week-end, I’m expected to be fine with working over the week-end. [...] You know because I don’t have elderly parents to take care of, there’s the perception that I don’t necessarily have any family commitments, so it’s as if there is a **hierarchy of commitments** in your private life that is given importance or preponderance at work. So first it’s your immediate family if you have a spouse and children, these take priority. Then second in the hierarchy of importance, is if you have any family commitments. Third if you have some social commitments like friends, whatever.*

And I feel that if I was not an expat, if I had my own family here, as my parents, my sisters, or whoever like cousins that have marriages, that this would take prevalence over my social commitments that are non-family related.” (P.19)

As single expatriates would often stand at the last place on the “*hierarchy of commitments*”, some perceive that they are those who are considered within their organizations as being the most flexible and e.g. able to travel (sometimes also during the weekend-end) or to take unexpected work assignments:

“If there are additional things that come up, no one will ever ask them because they know, so and so has to go pick up their kid at 5:30. So I can't ask him to stay back and do this piece of work because I know he can't, so I'll ask this person who I know has no life. It upsets me quite a lot because I've often said this in a team situation that, "Why is your life more important than mine?". And there is a perception that having children means that your freedom is more important than my freedom. But then I also sometimes feel like, "Well, how can I ask my colleague who has a child he needs to go pick up to do the work, so that I can go and have dinner with my friend?".” (P.12)

This last quote emphasizes not only the potential high work expectations towards single expatriates, but also the dilemma that might underlie this situation, since they were all aware of the requirements and the strong needs for flexibility of people with families. At the same time, one interviewee underlined that, at her age (i.e. 35), founding a family was a project that required time and flexibility, which she did not perceive would be recognized as such by her organization:

“I know that I should think a bit more of creating opportunities to meet some potential man, [...] Now, it's really a project that if I want to have children until the age of 40, which is not so far then I really have to accelerate. And it's hard because I can't tell my boss, "Listen, I'm looking for someone, so I want to go earlier because I want to go for a date or something." But if I would have a child I could say, "Yeah, I have to go because I have a child.". So it's a bit challenging.” (P.17)

This example shows how her single status might influence work and flexibility expectations in the organization, which in turn, might have negative repercussions on her project to find a partner and found a family, thus reinforcing her single status. The fact that, despite strong flexibility requirements (see also last section), their own needs are not recognized enough by the organization can create frustrations:

“That's something that I've been trying to deal with myself, because that's the prejudice that I have myself. I think there should be... Not that they're wrong towards the people that have kids, but there should be enough flexibility for people who don't have kid.” (P.13)

In the next section, we examine the relationship between workload and single status this time from the individual perspective.

5.3 Individual perspective: extent of investment in the work sphere

From the individual perspective, our analysis highlighted a potential tendency to have a strong investment in the work sphere. Several participants underlined that this was stimulated by the fact that, as single and childless women, no immediate family members expected them to come home at a certain time:

“When you're single, there is nobody who's waiting for you at home, so then it's easier to stay at work, even 11, 12 or 13 hours, because there is no baby that is crying, or other dependents, so then you just continue.” (P.9)

The fact of staying longer at work would thus only affect their own lives. The following interviewee also relates her longer working times to feelings of loneliness (addressed in a section below), emphasizing that being in the office with colleagues represented an opportunity to exchange and have social interactions that she would not have at home:

“Sometimes being at work is even better than being at home. So if I have to spend more time at work because maybe I'm finishing and doing extra hours, at the end, I'm doing them for my job, for my work. And I'm the only one that is making a sacrifice, but you know that there is nobody that is waiting for you. So if you come at home at five or if you come at seven or at eight, it's only your own choice. And sometimes you say, "Okay, if I'm in the office at the end, I'm with colleagues and maybe I will go for a coffee and maybe...". Yeah, I have a bit more of a social life than being at home at five and then watching TV.” (P.1)

Hence, the high investment in the work sphere might also be exacerbated for expatriates due to weaker social ties in the host-country. Thinking back to her time in her home country, where she was

socialized and had deep social networks and activities, the following participant confirms that these ties would prevent such high investment in the work sphere, and that she would give more value to her free time:

“I guess that if I had everything I used to have before coming to Europe, maybe I would fight for my time. Because I would have other things to do, things that I was used to and my family to visit. Kind of giving more importance to that than what I have here.” (P.14)

Hence, while we mentioned earlier that a low value might be associated to their private time by the organization, in some cases, some interviewees themselves might devalue their private time in the host-country, contributing to a higher investment in the work sphere.

5.4 The positive side: enabler of great (international) career development

These elements from the organizational and individual perspective were, at the same time, emphasized as positive by some interviewees. In this view, the fact that organizations might assume that there are not constrained by family demands, and the fact that they might actually dedicate more time to some work assignments can contribute positively to their careers:

“I can actually get a deadline done because I can sacrifice my evenings and weekends, which actually if I do a good job, I get a promotion, or I get more money, or I get recognition, or all three.” (P.18)

Another interviewee emphasized that as a single female expatriate, she was open to travel and be assigned by her company in various a locations, which she believed was an asset in her global career development:

“I guess the other thing would be that being so independent obviously helps and you can travel and if they want... If they say, “Oh, maybe at some point we'll be sending you to a different headquarter”, you can say, “Yeah, of course”. I think it helps to be flexible.” (P.10)

This section thus addressed the relationship between single status and workload from the organizational and individual perspectives. Our analysis shows that this relationship might be

ambivalent, that it is not necessarily assessed as negative by the participants and should thus be understood with nuance. In the next section we address the topic of individual and social pressures perceived towards the single status.

5.5 Individual and social pressures regarding the single status

Several interviewees especially between 30 and 40 years old, who wished to found a family, mentioned feeling stressed or under pressure because of their single status. This pressure was also reminded – or intensified – in the workplace, when seeing other female colleagues getting pregnant and going on maternity leave:

“And to be single, it's okay when you are 20 whatever, but sometimes it comes to a point when all your colleagues in the open space are getting pregnant in a row and staying home and then you ask yourself, “What did I do wrong? Why I'm not there?” [...] So it's not easy.” (P.17)

Hence, these situations, where colleagues are getting pregnant, may bring these women to think about their own personal situations. While these examples reflect individual pressure regarding the single status, i.e. stress coming from the interviewees themselves, external social pressure coming from the broader environment (in the work and non-work contexts) has been widely emphasized. This pressure appears to depend very much on the host-country cultural norms (e.g. it was perceived as much stronger in e.g. Arab or Latin American countries):

“I've always worked in Arab countries and also in Africa, in Latin America, families have strong....you know there's a very strong role for families. [...] So in comparison with other places Switzerland is I would say, kind of mild.” (P.19)

It has also been underlined that this pressure related to the single status might be highly gendered, i.e. applies differentially to single professional women than to single professional men, as illustrated by the following quote:

“Maybe if you are looking at a professional man in his 30s and compared with a professional woman in her 30s, you think, “Oh wow! That's great for him, he's an older bachelor, great, he must be doing

really well at his job and focused on that," and if you look at a woman, maybe you think, "Why oh why? Why is she single?" More so than you do for men." (P.10)

In the next section, we address the issue of exclusion and loneliness in the experiences of single female expatriates abroad.

5.6 Feelings of exclusion and loneliness

Although feelings of exclusion were not dominant in the experiences of the interviewees, they have nevertheless been highlighted by several single female expatriates. As a consequence of the social pressure towards singles that we addressed above, some interviewees felt (indirectly or directly) excluded from some social networks (e.g. colleagues, friends), in which most people were married. The following quote illustrates how not conforming to the dominant couple culture and associated social pressure might lead to exclusion from informal events at work:

"All my female friends here in the office they are all married, and I am a bit scared because I am not in couple. So it seems also for them that I have to find a solution. I feel a bit this pressure say, "Okay, have you planned to meet somebody?". I say, "Okay, I'm not planning anything.". But I feel a bit that they have this kind of pressure, also because they are all younger than me and they're all married. Yeah, I think it's part of the culture. And if you are not in couple you are a bit excluded from all these activities, because sometimes they organize things only between couples. So it's not so easy... This I'm not the only one that is realizing it." (P.1)

It should however be noted that other interviewees did not feel this social exclusion at work at all, since they were e.g. working in team with other single people. However, as couple culture is rather the norm, it provides a relevant illustration of how such exclusion might occur. While the previous quotes focus on informal events, a few interviewees felt excluded from – or uncomfortable in - more formal organizational events that were targeted towards people with families:

"Last year, the company where I work now, they had an outing for the families, it was a circus. It was for the kids, I don't have kids! I'm not interested in going to circus. So I didn't go. Because I mean, what am I going to do watching clowns?" (P.16)

Besides these situations of exclusion, some interesting gender specificities in the building of relationships have been suggested, with men who might tend to bond easier and faster in small groups among them than women. The following interviewee perceives this rather slow development of relationships as isolating in her experience as single female expatriate:

“I've been really proactive in trying to meet people outside of work. But like I said, it's tough, I think, and it takes quite a long time, and I don't know... Females more than males, tend to take longer to form friendships. Guys, you meet them, you have fun, they say, "Oh come to the pub with my friends, next Friday." Women tend to do things on a one-to-one basis, until you've sort of assimilated a little bit, then maybe they invite you into their group. But, that process could take three months, it could take six months. So it's not an instant thing. And when you only see someone once a week, or once every two weeks, it takes quite a long time to build up that level of relationship with them, where they are someone you can depend on. So, it's quite isolating,“ (P.12).

Hence, feelings of loneliness and isolation might be part of their experience as single female expatriate in Switzerland. A further element contributing to these feelings and that was perceived by most interviewees as challenging in Switzerland was the difficulty to really socialize and develop ties with local Swiss people. Indeed, in addition to language barriers (for those who could not interact in French), interviewees underlined that interacting with local Swiss was difficult and that trust had to be built over a long time in Switzerland:

“The Swiss they do not socialize that much, especially with people from outside Switzerland. That is my experience, you have to build the trust, for a long time.” (P.7)

It should however be noted here that, while our interviewees faced several challenges related to issues of loneliness and exclusion, they typically reported a very proactive attitude in developing and maintaining their social network.

5.7 Safety issues

For most interviewees, safety was not an issue during their international assignments, mentioning that they felt very safe in Switzerland:

“No there is no problem. It’s hyper safe, I don’t feel in insecurity at all here, really.” (P.20)

Some other single female expatriates mentioned that they knew what places to avoid and thus never faced any issues related to safety. Nevertheless, one interviewee underlined that, while she felt secure, safety was a topic of interest for single female expatriates within the expatriate community, and thus paid particular attention to it:

“I think the only other thing that’s probably stressful really, is in the expat community there is the sense of, you have to be very careful, especially as a single woman walking home at night, or whatever. And it is not unsafe here, at all, it’s not.[...] my single group of girlfriends, when we get together and we all go home at the end of the night; we have a thing where we all text each other to say we got home. Just for checking in. [...] it’s kind of odd I think, because again if you look around it’s not unsafe here. It’s definitely something that the girls in our group, the women in our group talk about more.” (P.8)

Moreover, one interviewee spontaneously mentioned harassment and safety issues as an important work-life issue for international single women:

“I think in terms of interaction with work-life as well, as a single woman, you can easily be harassed at work, particularly if you travel a lot, by the assumption that you’re an...easier person I would say. So that’s one of the possible influences of the social status in the work-life.” (P.19)

Finally, another interviewee underlined that relocating to a new place appears to be “terrifying” and considered the issue of safety very seriously:

“And as a woman, I think, going to a new place, it is a bit terrifying as far as safety goes. Here, I’ve had a few, little bit scary experiences, at night or on the streets. I don’t know. So you do, you do get scared sometimes, but I think you get over that as time goes on.” (P.10)

While safety issues were not a concern for most interviewees, our analysis nevertheless reveals that it might represent an important topic of preoccupation in the experiences of some single female expatriates and should thus not be neglected.

5.8 Independence and freedom

In order to overcome potential challenges and to nevertheless appreciate this experience as single female expatriate, interviewees underlined the necessity to be independent:

“In fact I am quite independent, so yes I appreciate to be close to my family, but I am not far at all, so it is not a problem.” (P.20)

It has nevertheless been emphasized that independent should not be confounded with solitary (as it shown below with the issue of social networks). Moreover, for many expatriates, being single was perceived as a positive factor in their decision to relocate in Switzerland and in their international career development:

“The fact that I was single was probably the only way I could have done it. Because to move one person is quite quick, you know things were very quick and I was motivated to go but if I... So I suspected I couldn't have done that if I have not been single.” (P.2)

The freedom provided by the single lifestyle was typically highly valued by the participants, who would give up this freedom only for a very good relationship, a relationship that is worth it:

“You know it would be nice to be in a relationship, but I need to have a really good partner, otherwise I don't want to compromise my freedom, my lifestyle for a partner that is not worth it. So I don't see being single as a burden, because I want a good quality of my lifestyle, and I don't want to compromise that.” (P.9)

Moreover, the youngest interviewee mentioned that relocating as a single female expatriate was a mean to challenge herself and develop her autonomy and to go beyond the comfort of her lifestyle that she had in her home-country:

“Well, it's definitely challenging, going somewhere completely by yourself. But that's another one of the reasons why I came here, it was to challenge myself, and it's really terrifying at first, I think, going from living with either your significant other, which I did in the States or with girlfriends in a flat, and knowing everybody around you to knowing nobody.” (P.10)

Hence, the single status might enable a range of positive and enriching experiences in the work and non-work contexts, particularly related to high independence and freedom.

5.9 Perceived support network

Social support is crucial in order to both reduce work-life conflicts and enhance enrichments. While we have underlined feelings of isolation and loneliness above, which have been found to be also part of interviewees' experiences, they also referred to a broad range of actors and types of support perceived by them (see Table II). While these social support networks might be developed to a stronger or lesser extent according to each interviewee, it should be noted that a high proactivity in developing their social networks was rather recurrent. **Emotional support** could be often found from close friends and family members in the home country, with here a crucial role emphasized of technology to keep contact. Beyond family and friends in the home country, a variety of actors could also be relied upon for emotional support (encouragements, etc.), such as colleagues, friends (and family) in the host-country, members of the expatriate community (especially other single female expatriates, but not only), members of the religious community, roommates or external helpers (e.g. coach). A diversity of actors were also source of **instrumental** and **informational** support. Particularly, interviewees emphasized the flexibility provided by organizational practices (e.g. flextime) or by the understanding of the supervisor who allowed flexible schedules as a very important element. The contribution of external helpers (e.g. cleaning lady), enabling to free up time also appeared as a crucial instrumental support. In addition, informational (e.g. tips on local specificities) and instrumental support (e.g. do the shopping when injured or sick, help with paperwork in local language) provided by friends and colleagues in the host-country appeared to be very important, as well as the support provided by the network of peers in the expatriate community (e.g. ready-made briefings from other expatriates about specificities of the country). One interviewee even found a new job through contacts in the expatriate community. Some support was also perceived from state or non-profit organizations which provide information on the local environment and organize networking activities, e.g. in neighborhoods of the cities where they live. Other actors, such as doctors (e.g. information on the host-location) or roommates (this time related to the instrumental financial part) were also referred to as supportive.

Table 2: Actors and type of support provided as perceived by the interviewees

What actor?	Description of the perceived support
Family and friends in the home-country	- Advices, encouragements, listening, etc. (importance of technology to maintain contact).
Friends and family in the host-country	- Support with practical and administrative tasks (e.g. help with paperwork in the local language, accurate information on host-country specificities); - Talking about problems, advices, balancing each other; - Support the expatriate when she is sick or injured (e.g. do the shopping for the expatriate, etc.) .
Colleagues / Supervisor	- Support with practical and administrative tasks (e.g. tips on local housing market, taxes) - Flexibility and trust provided by the supervisor; - Support in the work environment (e.g. explain the functioning of the organization, culture, etc.); - Closer relationships with some colleagues that enable to talk about non-work and personal concerns.
Organization (incl. relocation agency)	- Relocation package (financial support, help with the moving, administrative support); Company took care of tasks related to the relocation; - Flexibility given by the organization to manage time (practices and policies); - Formal and informal mentors at work, discuss personal issues as well; - Gym facilities (health).
Expat community	- Advices and emotional support (expats in the same situation (especially single female expatriates) and can understand each other; people who were already part of their global network and meet again in Switzerland; friends part of their global network that provide support from everywhere in the world); - Ready-made briefings about Switzerland by and for expats in the community, peer-support network; - Found a job through the expat network.
Cleaning lady	- Enables to free up time that is crucial to invest in other life domains; - Can eventually be there when there are deliveries, or repairs in the house.
Roommate	- Exchange together, advices, presence; - Financial dimension (sharing of costs).
State or non-profit organizations	- Help foreigners to understand and know the local environment (administrative support; sightseeing); - Networking activities organized.
External coach	- Advices, personal vision building, refocus.
Doctor	- Helps to improve the local language; - Information about Switzerland (practical, cultural, etc.).
Religious community	- Talk openly, encouragements.

6. Discussion

Results show that single and childless female expatriates might face considerable work-life issues, which imply both conflicts and enrichments. One of the major findings of our research is the high workload that might be faced by single and childless female expatriates, which can interfere with their private spheres. This high workload can be stimulated by expectations within the organizational environment that they do not have many responsibilities outside work (the perceived “*hierarchy of commitments*”) and are thus able to take additional work. On the other hand, they might themselves engage more strongly in the work sphere (e.g. having no partner or children waiting for them at home). In turn, the possibility to develop social ties – and romantic relationships – appeared to be reduced in such situations, potentially leading to “vicious circle” reinforcing interferences between both spheres (see e.g. Xiao and Cooke 2012). While these findings are consistent with those of studies in the domestic context (Casper and Swanberg 2009; Hamilton et al. 2006), these work-life issues might be exacerbated in the expatriation context, due to less ties in the host environment and distance from extended family. Our study thus identified flexibility as a key requirement in the experiences of single female expatriates (and especially in the Swiss context, e.g. due to early closing hours of shops), who cannot rely on the support of a partner for practical tasks (e.g. shopping, repairs). Ten Brummelhuis and Van der Lippe (2010) also emphasized the particular relevance of flexibility at work for singles. According to the authors, this is consistent with the idea derived from enrichment theory that those who have fewer resources in the private sphere (such as a partner who could help with some tasks) benefit most from expanded support at work. However, our findings also highlight a paradox related to this flexibility: while it appears to be central for single female expatriates, organizations might, in some cases, particularly grant them low flexibility (perceiving them as being highly available), leading to strong conflicts between both spheres.

Individual and social pressures regarding the single status were also identified as an influence on single and childless female expatriates’ work-life interface. First, some women who wished to found a family reassessed their personal situation when seeing colleagues on maternity leave. They were thus preoccupied with their personal life while physically present in their work life, experiencing psychological conflict between both spheres (Van Steenbergen et al. 2007). In addition to individual pressure, single and childless female expatriates might feel social pressure. The extent to which this pressure is perceived by individuals might depend on various factors such as age and life stage,

socialization, personality, etc. (e.g. Koeing et al. 2010; Sharp and Ganong 2011; Timonen and Doyle 2013). Nevertheless, in the workplace, this can lead to situations of exclusion both from formal and informal events. While this finding is again consistent with previous research in the domestic context (e.g. Casper et al. 2007, Casper and Swanberg 2009), such situations of exclusion and isolation might be even more problematic in the international context (distance from family, etc.) and might contribute to feelings of loneliness in the host-country (Fischlmayr and Kollinger 2010; Ben-Ari and Young 2000). Beyond language barriers faced by some participants, developing ties with locals in the Swiss context was furthermore perceived as challenging. This element appears to be consistent with Yanaprasart (2006) who underlines the “ambiguity of Swiss hospitality” (p.53), between the tradition of being a country of immigration and the rigidity of its social structures towards foreigners, leading to potential challenges in daily interactions between the latter and Swiss. Also, some gender dimension in the development of relationships has been stressed, suggesting that women might more strongly focus on close dyadic friendships and might be less inclined to bond in small groups than men. This observation is also in line with findings of some past research (Flood 2008; De Goede et al. 2009; Bank and Hansford 2000). Hence, these factors do not favor quick developments of social ties for single female expatriates in Switzerland.

At the same time, while situations of loneliness were part of experiences of single female expatriates, it would be wrong to portray them as overly lonely and isolated in their expatriation. Our analysis revealed that they were typically highly proactive in developing social ties with a broad range of actors in the host-country and were able to rely on a diversified network for emotional, instrumental and informational support (Helgeson 2003). Previous research underlined the importance of social support in the expatriation context (e.g. Shaffer et al. 2005; Kraimer et al. 2001) - which appeared to be particularly crucial for female expatriates (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002) – commonly referring to family, friends, organization, colleagues, supervisors, host-nationals, and other expatriates as sources of support. It has been stressed that singles might be more active than people in partnership in seeking support in their network, and might have more sources of advice and affect (Ten Brummelhuis and Van der Lippe 2010). Our study highlights the need to consider the diversity of sources of social support that might be mobilized in the (single) expatriate experience, in line with recent works on work-life interface in the domestic context (e.g. Selvarajan et al. 2013; Griggs et al. 2013; Korabic and Warner 2013).

In addition, significant positive influences between work and life spheres have been identified, such as the possibility to invest strongly in their work, which was associated with additional reward in terms of recognition and career development. Single female expatriates typically strongly valued their independence and freedom, which appeared to be core elements in their experiences both with respect to their everyday lifestyle (e.g. leisure, social activities, etc.) and to broader life and career choices. Regarding the latter, it has been for example underlined that being single and childless was a crucial factor enabling the expatriate experience, which might be perceived as much more difficult to realize for women with families (e.g. Tharenou 2008). Hence, this freedom related to the single status was perceived as an opportunity for international career development (Mäkelä et al. 2011). For some single female expatriates, this international work experience was also an occasion to challenge themselves in a new culture, far from family and friends. This experience was then thus perceived as an opportunity for self-development and self-fulfillment (DePaulo 2006; Thang et al. 2002; Ben-Ari and Yong 2000). While Switzerland was overall perceived to be a safe country (consistent with findings of recent global reports, see e.g. OECD-BLI 2013), leaving alone in a foreign country has been associated with safety issues, which might be a concern in the experiences of single female expatriates and should be considered seriously. At the same time, the peer-support network composed of other single female expatriates appeared to be potentially influential in order to deal with safety issues during their experience.

7. Conclusion and implications of the study

Some limitations are acknowledged in our exploratory study. First, the limited sample size should be underlined, which limits the generalizability of our findings. At the same time, the specific population under investigation and the strong inclusion criteria that have been applied in order to have a greater extent of homogeneity in our sample have made it more difficult to find potential participants. Another limitation might be related to the different types of expatriates included in our sample, as previous studies for instance emphasized specificities in the work-life interface of self-initiated expatriates (e.g. Mäkelä and Suutari 2013). Further research could investigate the work-life issues of single expatriates in different contexts and locations. Moreover, larger-scale quantitative or qualitative studies could be performed, and could include male samples to further identify gender specific work-life issues. In addition, the examination of their coping strategies to address their work-life challenges appears as a promising area for future research.

Theoretical and practical implications could be formulated. First, regarding the theoretical implications, our study contributes to research on women in international assignments by exploring specific work-life issues of single and childless female expatriates. Our findings reveal significant negative and positive interferences between private and work spheres for single women in the international context. While work-life research in expatriation has predominantly focused on the interactions between work and (immediate) family, our study emphasizes the necessity to consider more strongly the particular work-life experiences of singles in the international context. The more systematic consideration of various life domains appears as strongly necessary (Özbilgin et al. 2011), an element that has been for instance illustrated in our examination of single female expatriates' support network, where a high diversity of actors from the home and host-countries have been identified. In addition, our study shows that work-life issues are exacerbated also for single and childless women in the international context. Our results suggest that traditional norms concerning women and men's place in the professional and family life, still anchored in many societies (e.g. EC 2012), might considerably affect single female expatriates' work-life interface as well. More generally, our findings emphasize the significant influence of the host-country cultural and institutional context on work-life experiences of single female expatriates.

Regarding the practical implications, our findings highlight the importance for multinational companies to design inclusive and supportive working cultures for all. This is reflected in the extent to which practices and policies are suited to various types of global employees, including non-traditional talent pools such as single and childless female expatriates (McNulty 2014; Casper and DePaulo 2012). Moreover, while formal and informal networking activities have been found to be a relevant support in female expatriate experiences (e.g. Shortland 2011), they might be strongly beneficial for single and childless female expatriates in contributing to the development of social ties in the host-country. A further element that appears to be crucial is the recognition within the international corporate environment of the value of single (female) expatriates' non-work time to the same extent as others, i.e. independently of where they stand on the perceived "hierarchy of commitments". Finally, the need to grant this population enough flexibility, especially regarding working times and working arrangements must be acknowledged, as they do need sufficient flexibility to reach a balance between work and non-work spheres (e.g. Ten Brummelhuis and Van der Lippe 2010). While this study represents a first attempt to uncover work-life issues of single and childless women in the expatriate context, both women

and singles have often been overlooked in expatriate research, and much more remains to be known about various aspects of their experiences.

Notes

¹ Nuances in legal/bureaucratic definitions can be observed in different countries, depending on the official taxonomy of marital status that is applied (see for example the discussion in DePaulo and Morris (2006) regarding the USA).

² Women who were in a long-distance relationship or women having an immediate family (e.g. children and/or spouse) in their home-country, and relocated alone, were not included in the study.

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