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# The Voice of Trailing Women in the Decision to Relocate: Is it Really a Choice?

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## Abstract

The reasons for migration among highly skilled couples are economic as well as noneconomic. However, our understanding of the motivations of trailing wives remains somewhat limited, especially given their loss of personal, professional, and social resources during the relocation. This chapter explores the motivations of women to relocate for their husband's work. It examines how gender ideologies weave with the decision to relocate, and how women's considerations and preferences are taken into account during this process. This study included depth interviews with 12 trailing mothers in the Netherlands and in the United States during 2015–2016. Interviews were performed face-to-face or by video chat. The study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Narratives analyses revealed that most trailing wives exerted very limited agency during the decision process and felt that they do not have any realistic alternatives to relocation. This powerlessness was imposed by gender-role ideologies that portray women as the primary care provider and men as the primary breadwinner. Thus, women's motivations to go overseas were primarily centered on family benefits, such as improving the family's financial status or supporting their husband's career. These findings suggest that societal factors, mainly gender, significantly diminish the actual choice options available to trailing wives.

**Keywords:** choice, decision, gender, relocation, trailing-spouse

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## 1. Introduction

Job-related relocations become increasingly common among highly skilled families [1]. About 90% of all expatriates, employees accepting an international assignment, are accompanied by their relationship partner, or the "trailing spouse" [2], resulting in a simultaneous impact in residential, work, and family domains for all the family members [3]. It should be mentioned

that the term “trailing spouse” is often criticized for overlooking spouse’s human agency [4] and is sometimes replaced by “tied mover” or “relocated partner”. Nevertheless, for some scholars, the term genuinely reflects the inherent sense of powerlessness, or as expressed by Swanson [5], a feeling of being “second -class”.

For dual-career couples, the decision to relocate entails new tasks and responsibilities which in turn give rise to feelings of imbalance and injustice [6]. Studies consistently suggest that the trailing spouse plays a key role during expatriation in terms of willingness to go, assignment completion, expatriate adjustment, and expatriate performance [7–9]. Mainly, the spouse’s dissatisfaction is usually the reason for premature termination of relocation contracts [10, 11].

Family migration is predominantly husband-centered for married couples, suggesting that gender roles and gender identities form the basis of relocation decisions. Relocation takes place much more frequently for the benefit of men’s careers, while women are less likely than men to migrate for their own careers [12, 13] and are more likely to turn down a job offer in another country [14]. Zvonkovic et al. [15] found that women, even in couples who consider themselves as having similar values and openly expressed opinions, take the secondary position in work-related family decisions. According to the human capital framework, the family’s decision to move is based on estimation of how to maximize its joint utility or income [16]. Interests of the higher producing member (assumed to be the one with the most human capital) will be weighted more highly in the accounting. However, studies suggest that the decision to relocate is based on traditionally accepted gender roles, in which men’s careers are prioritized in family migration decisions, regardless of the net change in household income [17–19].

Alternatively, gender-role theories argue that while women are expected to place family ahead of personal goals and to have ultimate responsibility for reproductive activities, men are expected to assume the position of primary breadwinner [20]. Therefore, women defer to their spouse’s interests on questions of his job-related decisions but they place family considerations first on questions of their own job-related decisions [21, 22]. Support for this theory can be found in Whitaker’s work [23], which studied move decisions among husband-centered and wife-centered relocation. The study showed that the relocation decisions and experiences were based on primary gender identities of man, woman, father, and mother. Regardless of which gender served as move center, the husbands’ primary frame centered on the topic of breadwinning, even if they were not the sole or primary breadwinner, while women’s frames always incorporated implications for family happiness and well-being, even if they were the sole or co-breadwinner. Another study, which explored women’s willingness to expatriate, revealed that although women are generally willing to relocate for their own careers, family factors lead to married women being less able to transform their motivation into an international job search than men or single women [13]. An alternative explanation for the tendency of households to relocate for husbands’ careers is that women are segregated into geographically dispersed occupations. In contrast to men who choose careers in fields that are geographically constrained, women enter professions that make it easy to work anywhere [24].

Although the trailing spouse role in the decision process is significant for adaptation and satisfaction, there is relative lack of research providing more in-depth understanding of the psychological aspect of the decision to relocate. One such study, which explored psychological

adjustment among expatriate couples, revealed that shared agreement on relocation has no real influence on conflict and psychological adjustment. Rather, it is the quality of interpersonal communication that affected the couple's well-being, namely, the politeness, dignity, and respect in which they treated each other [25]. Whitaker's [26] early investigation, which focused on the decision to relocate from the trailing spouse's perspective, pointed to an underlying power imbalance between husbands and wives. Derived from traditionally gender-role ideologies, women had a sense of powerlessness and/or internalized the belief that their husband's endeavors are more important than their own. Such findings raise serious questions regarding the actual choice of trailing women, during what is usually considered a shared agreement process. It is not clear how much power and agency women have in this decision, how freely it can be negotiated, and which societal forces limit or diminish the actual choice options available to them [27].

This chapter reconsiders the issue of "choice" in the decision to relocate through the eyes of trailing spouse. This research is grounded in theoretical perspectives on gender roles, which assume that gender roles, ideologies, and identities form family decision to relocate. With the aim of giving voice to expatriate women, this study was focused on identifying the process and influences that lead to decisions to relocate.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) provides a deep insight into the quality and texture of individuals' experiences. It is interested in the nature and essence of people's personal and social worlds and in the meaning they give to a particular phenomenon. IPA is considered the qualitative methodology of choice when the focus is on individuals' lived experience, and thus is applied in sociological, psychological, anthropological, and healthcare research [28, 29]. Typically, IPA involves detailed analysis of verbatim accounts of a small number of participants, usually through semi-structured interviews [30, 31]. Purposive sampling techniques ensure a homogeneous sample of participants with common characteristics and experiences [32]. Twelve women participated in this study and strove for a degree of uniformity across cases, whereby all women were between 27 and 42 years of age, had children, and held a job prior the relocation. Interviewed women had an academic education, ranging between 15 and 21 years of schooling. All of them were at least 6 months into their relocation period at the time of the interview. Two women experienced multiple relocations (with maximal number of 3 locations).

Given the different importance of resources and proximity for families with children and without children, only women who moved with one or more dependent children under age 18 were included.

### 2.2. Procedure

Recruitment was conducted using snowball sampling, in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential subjects. In addition, an invitation to participate was published in a Facebook group for expatriate mothers.

Interviews were performed using two strategies: face-to-face or by video chat. Face-to-face interviews were held at the participant's home or in a natural place, according to the interviewee's preference. There was high interest in participation. To ensure the maintenance of confidentiality, names were changed, and specific stories were not used if this allowed individuals to be identified. The interviews were audio-taped, lasting 90–120 min. Interviewer notes were taken following the interview.

### 2.3. Data analysis

The analysis began with a detailed reading of the transcript to acquire a feeling for the essence of the phenomena. Significant statements and phrases that directly pertained to the phenomena were extracted. Then, meanings from the significant statements and phrases from the interview were formulated and organized into themes. Further, the emergent themes common to all of the participants' descriptions were organized, by comparing each individual's transcript with the transcript of other individual women. Themes, which emerged after analyzing each new transcript, were added to the categories of themes which had already occurred. Finally, the results of the data analysis were integrated into an exhaustive description of trailing women's experiences [33].

## 3. Results

Participants in this study listed multiple themes within their decision to relocate, including economic considerations, supporting husband's career, improving children's well-being, and solving a problem in their workplace.

Most women placed their husband's career as the primary reason to relocate. For some families, limited professional opportunities in their homeland led men to seek employment abroad. For others, such as academic scholars, moving to another country was a necessary step in men's (husbands) careers. However, a close look at women's (wives) narratives revealed that the relocation was often experienced as the only possible route, preventing an open discourse on the relocation decision.

Rita, a wife of a postdoctoral fellow, exemplified how limited their options were.

"Since the day we met, I knew that he must conduct his post-doc abroad. It is a dream that I could not take away from him. It is an essential part of his career. It was: take it or leave it. It was a package deal".

Her words illustrate that reconsidering the move was not an option; not only for her husband but also for herself.

Likewise, Sara described the relocation as an inevitable part of her husband's professional development and therefore as a fundamental part of their relationship.

"When we started dating, in our third date, he said that we will eventually have to move for his fellowship and if there is a problem I should say it right away. I said that I would be happy to move and then he decided to marry me. After eight years of marriage, it was clear that his professional development necessarily involves a fellowship abroad".



The experience of “take it or leave it” reflects the constrained way of thinking, which leaves very little room to consider alternatives to relocation. It was common among interviewees to feel that supporting their partner in the relocation process is a part of the relationship contract, and by not moving they might explicitly or implicitly threaten their marriage. As clearly expressed by Julia:

“My husband searched a job for a long time and could not find any suitable one. When the offer to relocate arrived, I knew that it was either to relocate or to separate. That he could not give it up. I remember the moment of decision; to separate or to relocate. I did not think what it means for my career or for me as a woman. I did not consider those things. It was either to take the job and move or the end of our marriage.”

Related to professional considerations, enhancing the family’s financial status was also mentioned as a central motivation to relocate. For many expatriate families, moving abroad implied not only a temporary improvement in their quality of life, but an essential course that will ensure the family’s financial future. Some of them, like Tessa, felt that because their husband was the main breadwinner, they could not reject a potential improvement in their financial status.

“We were waiting for an opportunity to relocate for a long time. We were O.K with money but it was never enough for what we needed and wanted. The children were about to begin college and we needed the extra money to support them. I was working only part time as a teacher and my income was secondary, so we decided that I will give it up and we will move abroad.”

Another motivation to relocate was the women’s desire to improve children’s well-being, either by providing them a chance of living abroad or by reducing husband’s travels. Shelly, who decided to relocate in order to join her husband abroad, was willing to move in order to keep the family together.

“For a certain period, around 6 months, my husband was away every week from Monday to Thursday. It affected my son badly...he cried all the time. I did perfectly well by myself, but my son had a hard time without his father around. As a mother, you have to think about everybody. I was the one who initiated the move; we have to live together as a family”.

When women were directly asked about their own motivation to travel, they often indicated that the relocation was an opportunity to change an undesirable situation, usually in their workplace. Some of them were looking for a better work-family balance and could not achieve it financially or professionally. As described by Helena, who used to be a busy lawyer:

“My work was very intensive and required long hours. I wanted to leave my job for many years since I became a mother. The relocation was a good opportunity to leave it once and for all...to rest, to be a mother, a perfect opportunity for a change”.

Two women pointed out that the relocation allowed them to leave an undesired workplace that otherwise would make their leaving very difficult.

Even when women’s career was considered during the decision making process, it was usually given a second priority. Tanya, a mother of three little children, indicated that her professional future was an important consideration in the decision process. She and her husband looked for a place where she could accomplish her PhD. while he worked for an international

company. However, she emphasized that her professional aspirations could have never been the primary reason to relocate, as her potential income would not permit it.

*"We would have never dreamt of relocating only for my doctoral fellowship...we could not afford that. In theory, we are leading an equal household. In practice, I am the only one who picks up the kids at 3 PM. An adventure for my career always pays less than an adventure for his career."*

An important finding of this study was that many women were not truly involved in the decision process. Instead, they described an emotional detachment and withdrawal during the decision to relocate, which sometimes lasted months after the move. These women somehow "found themselves" participating in a crucial step without being aware of its consequences. Daphna, a mother of two boys illustrated this type of detachment.

*"My husband and I were always discussing the idea of relocation, but I have never thought that we will actually do it...and then things started moving forward. We got a visa, we found a house, we registered in school, but somehow during the whole process I was absolutely sure that it would not happen. I am a person who resents changes. It was very difficult for me to move from one neighborhood to another even in the same city. I am very close and dependent on my mother. Nobody believed that I could take such a step".*

Similarly, Julia described how her flawless functioning during the pre-relocation period existed in parallel to extreme emotional disconnectedness.

*"I packed the house, arranged farewell parties for the kids, finished my work issues perfectly, but still was unaware for the step we are taking...Probably, if I would fully consider it, I would not have done it. There are moments in life when it is better not to understand too much...and to make mistakes. It was the only way I could leave the safe world I was living in. It was a sort of denial."*

These texts suggest that by excluding themselves emotionally and cognitively from the process, women are able to make important decisions and undertake crucial steps that would, if aware of the full consequences, be too difficult for them to undertake [34, 35]. However, it is clear that in addition to depowering women, this "unconsciousness" limits their ability to process the pros and cons of moving abroad. Nina, a clinical psychologist, who followed her husband abroad for his fellowship in cardiology, exemplified how her emotional withdrawal hindered a true understanding and preparation for relocation.

*"For a long time, my husband looked for a fellowship in cardiology abroad. I knew how critical it is for him, so I said immediately yes, we are moving. Somehow, I was not able to consider what it means for my career. I thought that I could work everywhere, as I speak fluent English and there are many expats where I live. I was very busy before the move...taking care of the children, worrying about their adjustment... I did not have the time or energy to think about the consequences. Only months after moving here I realized that I don't have a professional work permit here and it could take years until I get one. It was totally unexpected and frustrating".*

## 4. Discussion

The decision to relocate is the initial step in the relocation process and obviously a crucial one. The way through which the decision is made, the voice of each partner in the process, and

their motivations to move abroad, play important roles in adjusting to the new culture [36]. This phenomenological study, which was undertaken during 2015–2016, focused on the trailing spouses' points of view during the decision-making process and on their explanations in order to understand how much agency and power they experienced.

Despite the apparent heterogeneity in reasons to relocate (e.g., supporting their husband's career, improving economic status, solving a problem in the workplace, or improving children's well-being), close analyses of the women's narratives suggest that for many women, relocation is not a real choice. Rather, societal factors, mainly gender, significantly lower the actual choice options available to them [26, 27]. In fact, in a way that resembles other family arrangements, such as commuter partnership [37], substantial sacrifices are demanded of women in order for their partner to pursue a real choice.

Previous research on the decision to immigrate consistently showed women's powerlessness in the decision to relocate [38]. Women are less involved in the decision process and are less likely than men to claim ownership of the idea to immigrate [39, 40]. This powerlessness is imposed by gender-role ideologies that portray women as the primary care provider and men as the primary breadwinner. In line with previous research [41, 42], trailing women in this study made the choice to go overseas based on the viewpoint that their role in the family, in the reproductive realm, is subordinate to their husband's role in the working world, in the productive realm. Their motivations were centered on the family benefits having to do with nurturing, not just economics; but to ensure the husband's satisfaction, to provide better educational opportunities for the children, or to decrease work-family tension by becoming stay-at-home mothers. Braseby [4] argued that although trailing women may exert some degree of agency in their choices to move overseas, very often they do not have agency in the gendered social norms that view working and motherhood as antithetical. Interestingly, the professional women in this study were attracted to the idea of relocation as a mean of improving family-work balance. These women felt that the burden of family and career duties involved heavy personal and family costs and they looked for an "objective" force that would allow them to quit their jobs. They were looking for an opportunity to liberate themselves from some of the gendered societal expectations to be a perfect mother and employee and from the heavy guilt associated with the constant failure to achieve such impossible goals [43].

Considering the issue of choice in professional women who became stay-at-home mothers in some more detail, several academics dispute that there is a disjuncture between the rhetoric of choice and the reality of structural constraints when women decide to leave their career for their children [44, 45]. Stone and Lovejoy [46] suggested that the rhetoric of "choice" for women has been oversimplified into a dichotomy of staying at home or working. Their study revealed that in most cases, women did not feel that they were free to follow their personal preferences, but rather felt that it was impossible to perform well in both spheres if carried out at the same time, mainly due to inflexible workplace situation [47]. In her book, *"Total madness"*, Warner [48] debates, that what seems like a free choice between working or staying at home could be considered as real choice only for upper class women, who own enough resources to afford high-quality child care or to give up work. Most women, however, are obliged to work in order to support their families. Those who are forced to quit the labor force do it because their partners are working many hours, or because of too rigid job demands. International relocation may be considered as



another manifestation of work-family conflict, as it hinders women's professionalism, often irreversibly [49, 50]. Trailing women are pushed out of the labor market by a combination of social and cultural factors: Immigration rules that limit trailing spouses' job opportunities, difficulty in getting professional working permits, enhanced family needs during the relocation, reduced involvement of their partner in the household, and lack of a supporting network [51]. As a result, women felt that they do not have the time, energy, or availability to reestablish their professionalism in the new country. Instead, they achieved a sense of self-esteem and efficacy through emotional and practical intensification in gender-based roles, such as extensive involvement in children's academic, social, and psychological lives and increased activity in the household [4].

Central to the decision making process of trailing wives was an emotional and cognitive detachment, a temporary "unconsciousness" that probably distanced feelings of anxiety, loss, or resentment towards relocation. Data analyses of this study showed that this sometimes adaptive mechanism was clearly associated with power imbalance between the trailing women and their male partners. Whitaker's research [23] similarly suggested that women were caught in a tide of something that was happening with the unspoken understanding that if they wanted to stop the course they were on, they would have to step forward with a refusal. Although couples discussed the move with each other, it was usually working through of issues and concerns and less a real open question whether to take the job or refuse it. Not surprisingly, this power imbalance increased with the years abroad and with the number of relocations. Being out of the workforce for extended periods of time in addition to constant moves did not permit women to reestablish themselves professionally, so that eventually they had no power to say no to the next move. Such massive withdrawal among professional and successful women seriously questions their sense of agency. According to my interviewees' perspectives, detachment was aimed not only at allowing effective function, but was the only way they could agree to relocate. This mechanism suggests that trailing spouses are facing high degrees of ambivalence and anxiety regarding the move, which could only be perceived as personal flaws [23]. Emotional detachment was heavily associated with the conscious or unconscious sense that refusal to relocate may threaten the stability of the situation or even the existence of their marriage. Notably, trailing men in Braseby's study [4] never experienced such conflict between marriage and relocation.

## 5. Limitations

This research serves as an exploratory step in identifying processes and influences that lead to decisions to relocate. As such, several limitations must be considered. First, the sample is composed of women who agreed to relocate. Therefore, certain ideologies and practices observed here might not be generalized to families who decided not to relocate. There is evidence to suggest that when the labor incomes from husbands and wives are more equal, the probability of migration falls dramatically [52]. Moreover, partners in egalitarian partnerships are more inclined to consider other arrangements to relocation (e.g., commuter partnership), which fit their approach of reinforcing each other's interests and commitments [37]. Another limitation is related to the snowball sampling strategy. This method tends to generate a sample that is

unbalanced in selected demographic characteristics. For example, this study included women of high socioeconomic status (including advanced education levels) who are likely to be responsive to invitations to participate. While snowball sampling has the advantage of helping researchers to identify potential study participants, it tends to be biased towards favoring more cooperative individuals and those that are part of a specific personal network. Thus, it is not possible to determine whether this sample also represents eligible participants that were not located [53]. Finally, as a cross-sectional study, it did not consider long-term consequences of relocation on women's agency or on the effect of relocating back to their country of origin. Future research should explore how gender-role ideologies are further modified during the relocation period and following repatriation. It would be important to investigate the agency of trailing women in the decision to repatriate and to what degree this decision is gendered.

## 6. Conclusion

This phenomenological sociological research project was conducted in 2015–2016 and considered 12 trailing women (wives and mothers) in the Netherlands and in the United States. The aim was to establish the degree of agency or power these women had when their husbands and fathers of their children needed to relocate into a different country in order to further their professional career. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to explain the answers provided during interviews. The study found that the decision to relocate reflects a range of interconnected forces which for many couples are not part of a conscious migration strategy. Similar to previous studies with trailing women [4, 23, 26], traditional gender-role ideologies that view males as breadwinners and females as nurturers framed the families' decisions to move abroad. As much as those ideologies influenced the careers women pursue, the wages they negotiated, their professional aspirations, and the division of labor in the home, they also affected the women's decisions to become trailing spouses. Limitations of this study include the use of snow-ball sampling method, which interferes with generalization, and applying a cross-sectional design, which does not allow the exploration of long-term consequences of relocation.

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