

Women On Top

Not all expat wives languish in the shadows of their husbands, writes Nicola Supka.

IN COLONIAL TIMES, WIVES CAME TO Singapore primarily as a civilising influence. Back then, they adopted few of the local customs, insisting on retaining their dignity and culture by dressing in the same long dresses, hats and shawls they had worn at home (this in the days before air-con). They played bridge, threw lavish parties and raised families. Expat wives were a highly privileged few, their husbands either diplomats or employed by banks and other big companies.

Today the image persists that expat wives are a pampered bunch. In 1999 Audrey Currie's popular theatre production, *The Expat Wife*, was first performed in Singapore and reprised the following year. It inspired plenty of laughs but did little to change long-ingrained perceptions. The comic scenes portrayed had a basis in reality – husbands had affairs, expat children acted like spoiled brats, and 'ma'ams' took their maids for granted. But the image of the wife in this play is of an alcoholic who spends the majority of her time in the beauty salon, the gym and the club, and the rest attending an endless round of coffee mornings. There's not even the slightest suggestion of her being able to hold down a job.

In the last 50 years, not only have women's attitudes changed substantially, the economic realities of expat life have changed along with them. Few expats today command the lavish packages of those halcyon days, when Singapore was considered a hardship posting and renting a black and white colonial house and

employing two maids, a gardener and a driver was the norm. Today expats are generally younger, postings shorter, and many – particularly those from Australia – come here to work for local salaries. The truth is many women now come to Singapore under their own expatriate packages, and those who expatriate



Juanita, vice president at an international bank, explodes the myth of the trailing spouse.

their husbands here are much more likely to work, whether it is to supplement the household income or simply to retain a semblance of independence.

Working expat women in Singapore are still in the minority, but they have grown rapidly in numbers over the last 10 years. Membership figures for PrimeTime, Singapore's networking organisa-

tion for expatriate working women, indicate that they continue to do so. From a total of 25 members in 1992, it now has a membership of over 300, representing over 20 countries.

Few women succeed in juggling a career and family while remaining completely sane, but Christine proves it can be done. She arrived in Singapore 11 years ago with no university degree but several years' experience in computer sales and installation, having started her working life as a teenaged office junior. Christine had just had her first child. At the time it was illegal for expat wives to work here. Even later, when the law changed and she decided to set up her own company offering computer training, her husband's company was less than enthusiastic – "the wives of our company men don't usually work", was an off-repeated response. Undeterred, Christine was eventually sponsored by the company's European office.

"I started with my friends and taught a couple of nights a week," she says today. "I took time off during pregnancy. When I started, I said it was 'something to keep me busy'. I pretended it didn't matter, because having not worked for four years, I didn't want to set myself up for failure." Now with three boys aged five, 10 and 12, Christine continues to juggle her time effectively between school commitments and her training business. Flexibility is important, which is why, despite tempting job offers, she remains self-employed. "I can take three months off a year and make more in seven hours

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than many make in 40," she said. She enjoys helping and inspiring people, and says that 90 per cent of her clients are also expat wives, many of whom come to her more for a boost to their flagging self-esteem than to learn any specific technical skill. "Anything is possible here," says Christine, with a confident smile. "You can do things you never even dreamed of in your home country."

Although a devoted wife and mother, Christine loves to work and admits this has prolonged their stay: "We wouldn't have been here for 10 years if I hadn't." She has no fears about leaving Singapore and moving on. She feels that with the experience she has, setting up her own business in another country would be straightforward. "I'd be advertising in the relevant magazines before I even arrived."

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Susie is 29, single and works full time for a government organisation. She came here five years ago immediately after graduation and clearly thrives on being one of only three expat women in an office dominated by male engineers. When dealing with directors of multinationals, she admits they are often a little uncomfortable because of her age but, she says, qualifications count for a lot. Susie is gung-ho about career opportunities for women here:

"You can create opportunities, you don't have to wait for them to come along."

Susie readily admits that Singapore is not the easiest place to be a single expat woman. "A girl can't go into a bar alone. It can be hard as a single to get out and about. Guys that we would have walked over at home are snapped up by local women. Most of the career guys are workaholics, very career oriented, but then so am I!" Generally though, Susie is very positive about living here and takes a tough view on moaners and groaners: "Newcomers often have an old colonial, arrogant attitude. They think they're coming to help Singapore. My advice is to be flexible. If it's too tough, go home."

In an article entitled 'Have Husband, Will Travel', *The Wall Street Journal* reported recently that more and more husbands are joining the ranks of 'trailing spouses'. In 2000, it reported, 13 per cent of expatriate employees were women, according to a study of 154 companies, mostly American, by GMAC Global Relocation Services. This trend is occurring in Singapore as well. Cindy now runs an IT consulting firm, offering business development and marketing



American citizen Carolyn took advantage of an MBA programme.

services for IT companies entering or expanding in the region. Cindy first came here from Silicon Valley as the leading spouse on an expat contract in 1991 and lived and worked in Hong Kong prior to the handover. "When I came here there were so few serious career women that we needed a support network. But that has changed dramatically."

She offers this advice to those who want to get top salaries: "If you have enough lead time, your negotiating power is higher in your home country. Once you're already here it's hard to get anything other than a local package." She is bullish about career opportunities in the IT industry. "IT is among the top

two or three industries here and enjoys government support."

Although she came to Singapore as a trailing spouse, Juanita was determined to return to work. She was unfazed by her husband's negative comment after a business function ("none of the other wives are even entertaining the idea of working") or the fact that at that time there were only a handful of expat women working here. "There were so few of us in 1991," she remembers, "but in many cases being the only expat woman played to my advantage."

Still, Juanita admits to the downsides of choosing work over traditional women's roles. "Long hours and regional travel mean that I miss out on many leisurely and cultural activities, but I get a different perspective – an interesting one – through my business travel." With VP status and marketing communications responsibility at a regional and global level for an international bank, Juanita's position is pivotal. She works 12-hour days, dealing daily with the head office expectation that Asia can 'speak as one voice' while being aware of the reality of many diverse countries and cultures. Though she is modest about her achievements, Juanita stresses that there are many opportunities. "I truly believe that if you want to work here you can. Identify the skills you have – there are no

obstacles if you are willing to be flexible. There is a strong need for people who have writing and editing skills at an international level of English. Ad hoc assignments and part time work in events management are just two opportunities for women who have children and don't want to work full-time."

Singapore is rapidly becoming an education and training hub too. When the University of Chicago, one of the world's top business schools, set up its third international campus in Singapore, Carolyn, a top executive with an American multinational, decided it was an opportunity too good to pass up. She signed up for the Executive MBA ("a

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rigorous course but one of the best – terrific, challenging coursework") and got her company to sponsor her studies, which involved a commitment of one week per month. She started the course only three weeks after giving birth to her first child and found the school very supportive.

According to Carolyn there are a number of good high-level business courses on offer here. They include INSEAD, the NUS Asia Pacific Executive Programme as well as UCLA and Stanford's joint programmes. Not all participants are sponsored by companies. Cindy agrees: "There are lots of opportunities, both on campus and distance learning, if you can't find the right job opportunity. Some courses are very condensed and intense, others are part-time."

There are two sides to every story, of course. Lorna arrived as a trailing spouse last November, but (like an increasing number of women) on the understanding that she would continue her successful career in marketing. She was told by her husband's company that it would be easy because there are a lot of foreign companies in Singapore. With an MBA and three years experience in brand management, she understandably expected to find a job quickly. The reality, however, has been more challenging. Having suffered an initial blow to her self-esteem, Lorna has adjusted to expatriate life and says she will probably hold out for a senior position with a multinational company. In addition, having met a number of successful women entrepreneurs, she is also considering the option of starting her own company.

Lorna started her job search with the Recruitment pages of *The Straits Times*, obtaining two interviews after sending out 15 applications. She now believes that networking is the best strategy. As a member of the Singapore Business and Professional Women's Association, PrimeTime and the Career Resource Centre for Expatriates, she takes a highly proactive approach. "You have to take the initiative. I think I am always the one to make the initial call – it takes a lot of guts sometimes."

Hailing from California, Lorna was

taken aback by questions about her age, and the fact that it is standard procedure to include a photo with a resumé. Her husband has been extremely supportive. "He wants me to be challenged. With that support I can be more picky about the job I take."

Attitudes are changing, even among the big companies, the ones who were so dismissive 10 years ago when Christine and Juanita elected to work here. According to RightD&A, career strategy consultants, large multi-nationals are realising the need to tackle dual career issues that affect employee mobility. As a result, RightD&A has developed a programme for companies to offer trailing spouses support in finding work. Both workshops and one-on-one counselling are planned, giving individuals an in-depth introduction to the career market in Singapore as well as self-assessment tools to assist them in career targeting.

Whether you lack a degree or wield a can't-miss CV, opportunities for expat women who prefer to work are clearly available in Singapore. As the counsellors at the Career Resource Centre for Expatriates point out, many local employers are keen to employ expat wives. They realise flexible working hours must be offered, although it helps in return if you are prepared to work for a more modest salary than you might have commanded in your home country.

ORGANISATIONS TO CONTACT

- PrimeTime Business and Professional Women's Association (Tel: 234-0973, Website: primetime.org.sg, Email: info@primetime.org.sg). This association is very friendly as well as being professionally and efficiently run, and is open to non-working women and job seekers too. PrimeTime is dedicated to fostering relationships among the international and professional women's community in Singapore and assisting members in adapting to the multicultural aspects of life here. Although the majority of the 300 members are expats, it is also affiliated with a number of Singapore women's organisations. Annual membership costs \$85, and members meet monthly for buffet dinners with a guest speaker, as well as through various sub-

groups with specialist interests, including HR, Legal, Marketing, Small Business and Wine Lovers.

- Career Resource Centre for Expatriates (CRCE) (Tel: 738-0371, Website: aasingapore.com, Email: crce@apacific.net.sg). Although based in the American Club, this centre is open to all nationalities. Its aim is to support expat 'trailing spouses', whether male or female, in their search for further study or employment in Singapore. The centre was established in 1997 and has excellent and well-established contacts with employers. According to the staff, there are job opportunities in many areas, but particularly in teaching English, marketing, sales and accounting. Employers who advertise jobs through the CRCE know that they must offer flexible working hours, and therefore a good proportion of positions available are part-time. Coffee mornings are run once a month giving an opportunity to meet new people and learn about a career related topic such as business etiquette or training opportunities. Elizabeth and Crystal, who run the centre as a job share, offer resumé writing advice and plan to offer interviewing skills workshops too. Annual membership is open to all nationalities and costs \$90.

- Singapore Business and Professional Women's Association (SBPWA) (Tel: 338-9395, Website: sbpwa.org.sg, Email: sbpwa@hotmail.com). A networking group that promotes the interests of business and professional women in Singapore, its membership is primarily Singaporean but is open to all nationalities. Established in 1972, it is a platform for members to exchange ideas, network and expand their contacts not only locally but on an international basis. SBPWA is affiliated with the International Federation of Business and Professional Women (IFBPW), which has associate clubs in more than 100 countries worldwide. Locally, SBPWA is an active member of the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO). Several sub-groups also exist including Singapore Women in Technology (SWIT), established four years ago, and the more recent SWIF (Finance) and SWIM (Mentoring). ❏

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