

The 'trailing spouse' – life, meaning and career

AustCham member Jillian Bromley, Lecturer in Psychology, Counsellor and Director, Fernhill Consultancy

It's a term that's been in use since the 1980s, but 'trailing spouse' really doesn't describe the life of those who accompany their partners abroad. It implies the partner is 'lagging behind', 'dawdling' and only coming along for the ride because they have no choice.

When counselling expats in Singapore over the past eight years, I've found that few characterise their partnership in this negative way. Most describe having planned together and embarked on their expat adventure with clear goals in mind. They talk about good career moves, better salary and benefits for the person taking up the employment offer, a chance to save money to pay off their house, an opportunity to travel and being able to start a family whilst having extra help in the house. It's an excellent plan, and for many it works out just like that.

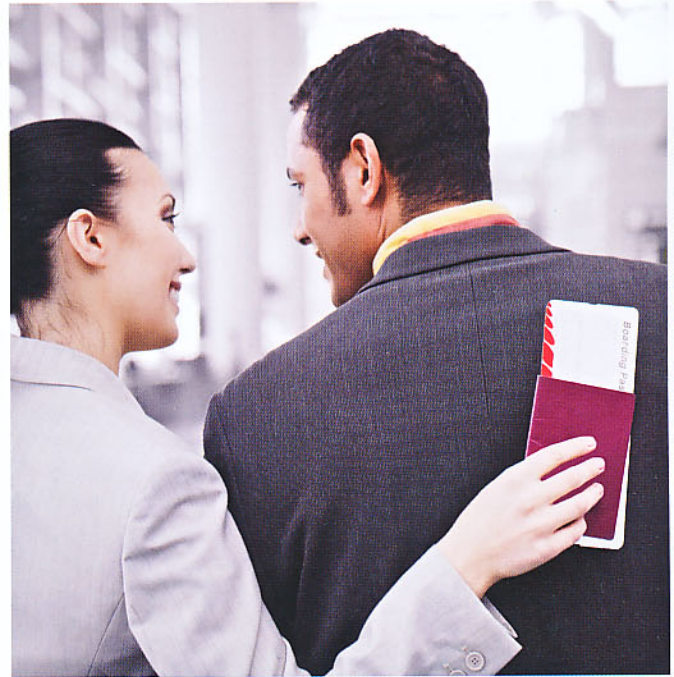
Usually in the first few weeks after arrival, the 'lead' partner is consumed with their new job so the accompanying spouse tackles the essential tasks. After the busy euphoria of setting up a new home, there's often a down period of frustration and doubt about the decision to leave home and family. Hopefully, this is followed, at 4-6 months, by a more positive period of adapting to the culture and the community and sorting out future plans.

For the 'essential spouse', the next stage is a period of re-examining their life in this new environment. Will they go back to work? Will they start a family or have another child? Can they find work in their previous career or will they have to find something new to do?

Some have difficulty finding work in their chosen field, or securing part-time work; others have difficulties getting their excellent overseas qualifications recognised in professions such as medicine, nursing and occupational therapy. Many give up and try to find something different to do.

Dr Yvonne McNulty has researched 'trailing spouses' in Singapore and found that 79% work before coming here yet only 36% find work here. The cost of living in Singapore has risen and expat packages haven't kept pace, so there's more need for spouses to supplement the income especially for extra education, medical expenses and family holidays.

Interestingly, Yvonne also found that the 14% of men who come as the expat spouse have fewer adaption problems than women. This has not been our experience in counselling. We have found that although expat men are happy with their decision to be stay-



at-home dads and house husbands, they find it hard to front up to social events and talk about what they do. Instead, they find themselves talking about what they used to do and expect to do in future. They also find, like many women at home, that role differences become entrenched over time. The working spouse loses contact with the home and children; the home spouse loses contact with the working world and gradually they have less and less in common.

In her blog 'Where's my ruby slippers', author Jeanne Heinzer asks the question: 'What happens when you are still a trailing spouse five, 10, 15 years on?'. She suggests the spouse should take responsibility for their freedom and their happiness early in their expat experience and map out a new and potentially portable career. Think about doing a higher degree or getting a different qualification that is more portable. Think about starting a small business.

My advice for expat couples: talk, talk, talk, talk to each other. Discuss your shared values and goals. Discuss future plans regularly and make joint decisions about staying or going well ahead of time. Recognise that the accompanying spouse may want to work or do further study, to have some money they don't have to ask for, or continue their career without a significant gap and loss of skills. The accompanying spouse's career should be part of the plan to live abroad, not just an afterthought.

www.fernhill.com.sg ■