Women Living & Working Abroad
Stay alert & informed to have a great international experience

With fewer barriers in place, women are now rightly receiving recognition globally as decision-makers, policy-makers, leaders and top-tier workers. But while considerable inroads have been made, women still face unique challenges when it comes to the workplace and general safety abroad. When traveling, your approach should be one of open-mindedness and a willingness to adapt. When it comes to safety, always stay alert, but in terms of social and professional challenges, be prepared to find workarounds on issues where your home and host cultures differ.

Below, we'll cover some of the main personal and professional topics related to females living and working abroad, including all-important safety issues.

Women Interning Abroad

The best advice for young female interns abroad is to expect some bumps along the road. The gender gap varies from region to region, and if you're heading to a non-Western country, it's likely you'll be immersed in a culture where male and female roles (in both society and the workplace) are defined differently than in North America. You may find that your views don't seem as important, or that you have to work doubly hard to get recognition. In cultures with high levels of gender segregation and repression you may even come across local women who are confused or threatened by your independence and professionalism. Take such challenges in stride. Stand up for yourself when necessary, but recognize that you are the process of cultural immersion and exploration. Adapting to local norms is your key to success.

In some cases, expat women in segregated countries may find that they're afforded more leeway than local women when it comes to gender rules. In this case, enjoy your unique freedom, but remain respectful. Gaining such insight into another culture is a privilege and an opportunity to build your global understanding.

Female Managers

In some cultures, a female manager receives immediate respect because it's thought that she must be "the best". In other cultures, locals may not be used to dealing with a woman in a managerial position and compromise may be necessary. Female managers may be required to renounce some of their authority to appear less threatening and ease tensions. For example, one female international development officer working in male-dominated Bangladesh realized that to be effective, she'd have to relinquish much of her command in meetings and negotiations, since local male officials refused to do business with a woman. Instead of challenging ingrained values, she simply instructed male subordinates to carry out necessary meetings and tasks. This allowed her to achieve her aims while respecting the status quo.

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In some cases, expat women in segregated countries may be treated like any other visiting businessperson, while also showing respect and adhering to local customs when possible. For example, at an evening reception in India, she noticed that women were congregating in one area, while the men were elsewhere talking business. In response, she spent a short while networking with the men before moving over to join the women. In this way she showed respect, while demonstrating her aims.

Being a female manager in a non-Western country can also be an advantage. If you work in sales, marketing or business, or if you're simply trying to get your foot in the door in an international industry, a female manager is often highly visible, and often better remembered.

Whatever the situation in your host culture, be prepared to adjust to it. Cultures move at different speeds when it comes to gender equality and feminism. These can feel like peculiar challenges to navigate, especially when equality is such a hot button topic at home in North America. But with some forethought and support from your home organization, you'll be able to navigate any cross-cultural situation with confidence.

Practical Considerations

Women still have to navigate a unique array of issues in many international workplaces. Two most commonly discussed issues are:

- Networking: Networking is an important means of making professional progress. Informal networking most commonly takes place after work or during business socializing. Formal networking takes place in business seminars or conferences. The traditional "old boys' club" can feel unavailable to women, especially abroad. If this is the case, reach out to professional organizations, women's groups, or participate in local activities to build connections. Studies show that women must network (with men as well as women) to advance their careers. Mentoring is another option when trying to forge connections.

- Clothing: Many countries put great emphasis on appearance, especially for women. No matter how polite you are, if your dress offends, chances are you will be ignored or mistreated. It's therefore very important to dress according to host culture norms. If you're working in the Middle East, avoid revealing or tight clothes. Some Muslim countries have such strict dress codes that failure to comply can result in deportation. It's often in your best interest to dress conservatively.

The Personal Side

Although you may be going abroad to focus on your career, inevitably questions will come up about the personal and social side of your experience.

- Social life: A posting abroad is a great opportunity to meet a wide variety of people. Chances are you'll be embraced and will have many social opportunities. But be mindful of the local social etiquette. In some countries, protocol calls for the segregation of women and men, and in others it is forbidden to consume alcohol in public or to eat with your left hand. Depending on the country and your host, rules can sometimes be bent, but often they are unavoidable. If you are in such a situation, respect the local customs. Avoid sharing too much personal information. Details you might consider normal to share (relationship status, financial independence, etc.) can be shocking to some other cultures.

- Independence: North American women are sometimes viewed as being overly independent. For North Americans, this is a positive quality. But it is not universally accepted. Be prepared for the possibility of being ostracized or resented for your independence.

- Being single: Traveling solo is exciting and rewarding. However in the diplomatic circle, there tends to be a focus on couples and families, and being a single woman can feel socially awkward and at times isolating. Special effort to socialize within this circle is required as it is much harder for single women to socialize alone without any stigma placed upon them. Some local cultures will look upon you with pity if you are unmarried. They will perceive you as a woman who is working because you cannot attract a partner. Some single women on assignments abroad even invent husbands or fiancés to avoid commenting on their single status.

- Unwanted interactions: In some countries it's not uncommon for men to whistle, wink or even shout at women in the streets. Depending on your post location, you may find that you get a lot of attention as you go about your business. Experienced female travelers state that it is important not to be paralyzed by this attention, instead ignore it or make a joke out of it to diffuse the situation.

- Family matters: Although more and more single young women are traveling abroad on assignments, family concerns still enter into the discussion for some international workers. If you're married, a post abroad may put strain on your relationship since some postings abroad offer little by way of spousal support, especially if you are the non-working spouse. Make sure to look into your organization's career support services for your spouse and children when you decide to go; there are many ways to ensure a more satisfied and better-adjusted family. [EDITOR'S NOTE: See the Spousal Employment and Freelancing Abroad section].

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Women’s Safety Abroad

Every year, thousands of women go abroad alone, having fulfilling and career-boosting experiences in exciting and exotic locations. Women who succeed abroad are excellent observers and highly adaptable. They endorse North American feminism and female independence; while abroad they face all gender-specific challenges with an open mind, compassion and confidence. The tips below offer you a variety of ideas for staying safe, healthy and happy, no matter where you choose to travel.

Research, Research, Research!

Pre-departure research is one of the key components to being successful and safe abroad. Before you go, take the time to investigate the role of women and any gender-related issues in your destination country. The Western ideal of gender equality isn’t upheld worldwide, and getting informed is a great way of preparing and empowering yourself. Remember: the ideal travel destination is one that pushes your limits and challenges you to adapt!

Adapting to a New Attitude

When you travel to a far-off region, consider that you’re exploring all the unique elements of your host culture — including prevailing gender norms. If you travel to a region where the female experience differs greatly from the North American one, aim to observe the local women and integrate yourself into their world. Watch how they dress, speak and behave. Make friends with them and learn as much as you can about their experiences and perspectives.

As we mentioned above, be prepared to accept the things you can’t change, and understand that you’re on a journey of cross-cultural discovery. You’re not there to change the system — you’re there to experience it.

Avoiding Unwanted Encounters

Every journey abroad is a life-changing and hugely enriching experience. By keeping the following safety tips in the back of your mind, you’ll avoid any unnecessary incidents and be able to focus completely on your cross-cultural adventure:

- Drink in moderation and avoid doing drugs abroad: You’re sure to do a bit of partying abroad, but always stay clear-headed and alert.
- Stick with people you know: When you meet someone new, give the relationship some time before you go out alone with that person. If you’re alone with a stranger, stick to well-lit, public places.
- Dress appropriately: If you’re unsure of how to dress, modesty is the best option.
- Don’t leave drinks or food unattended: Don’t accept drinks, cigarettes, gum or food from strangers. It’s an unfortunate truth that date-rape drugs are common worldwide, and can come in a variety of forms.
- Try not to flaunt single status: Single women often find that wearing a wedding ring abroad cuts down on harassment.
- Watch local women: Wherever you are, keep an eye on the local women. How are they behaving? What is their style of dress? What is their body language? Follow their lead!

Avoiding Other Criminal Activity

There’s no need to be afraid when traveling to a new region! Having a safe and positive experience abroad is simply a matter of internalizing a few commonsense rules and developing personal coping mechanisms. Avoiding criminal activity is largely about staying alert and using good judgment.

- Avoid speaking loudly in English: In many areas, speaking English is associated with having money or valuables.
- Avoid walking alone: If you must walk alone, use well-traveled streets or choose to walk in the middle of the road rather than on the sidewalk when feasible. Avoid walking in isolated areas, and walking after dark.

Transportation

When you’re abroad, you’ll be making the most of your host country, seeing the sights and engaging with the local population. In short: You’ll probably be hopping around town a lot! Getting from one place to another will require you to use transportation. Here are some tips for doing so safely:

- Taxis: In many of the world’s metropolises, taxis are the best and most affordable way to get around. But they may not always be the safest choice. When possible, avoid hailing a cab in the street. Many countries use online apps to ensure the safety of both the driver and the passenger. Don’t be afraid to turn down a taxi driver if you don’t feel comfortable, and always make sure the meter is running.
- Cars: Keep your car doors locked and your windows up. In some countries, thieves will reach into an open car window and grab your purse, or necklace. Stay alert when driving anywhere abroad.
- Public transport: Crowded buses and trains can be prime spaces for harassment or theft. Sit next to a woman if possible. In some major cities you will even find women-only areas in public transport vehicles.

Women’s Health Issues

In all likelihood, you won’t be in need of any medical treatment while you’re abroad. Nonetheless, it’s good to know what women’s health facilities and treatment options are available in your host country, just in case. In the areas of reproductive technology, treatment of recurrent vaginal infections, alternative birth control methods and pregnancy treatment, there may be limited resources. Here are a few tips to keep in mind:

- Seek out country-specific information before leaving: If available, contact organizations and travel clinics that specialize in women’s health and request current material on the status of health care in the countries where you will be traveling.
- Take care of yourself: If you need medical treatment abroad, be selective. Talk in detail with a doctor before traveling. If possible, avoid self-diagnosing or self-treating ailments while abroad.
- Take contraceptives with you: Many countries now manufacture their own condoms and birth control pills, but the quality can be below standard. Bring a supply with you when you go.
- Be smart: Developing countries tend to have higher incidences of HIV. Protect yourself by ensuring that new needles are used if you get an injection, and that you practice safe sex, including using condoms.

Currently, there are North American solo female travelers based in every region of the world. These strong, independent women are expanding their cross-cultural knowledge, developing invaluable skills and building life-long friendships. If you’re a young woman considering heading abroad, we highly recommend that you take the plunge, while remaining prudent throughout your travels. Good luck!
EDITOR'S NOTE: We advise women of all ages who are heading abroad to look at Health & Safety Abroad for additional tips and info. We also strongly advise that you consult with your college or university go abroad advisors for more specific and detailed info on health and safety abroad. Finally, you should check out government travel advisories about safety considerations for each country you plan to visit (Canadian Government, and US Government).

TOP RESOURCE for Americans and Canadians: Her Own Way: A Woman’s Safe-Travel Guide: The Canadian Government has put together this excellent guide for women traveling overseas. The guide is full of well-written, practical and straightforward advice, and it covers topics such as intercultural issues, medical matters and overseas relationships. It offers a preventive, female-friendly approach to dealing with the security, cultural, health and social concerns for female travelers. This is a highly recommended read for US and Canadian women preparing for travel or work abroad.