**Volunteer Self-Initiated Expatriation: alternative career development pathways for older women?**

Barbara Myers

*Department of Management, School of Business, AUT University, Auckland New Zealand*

Email: [barbara.myers@aut.ac.nz](mailto:barbara.myers@aut.ac.nz)

**Abstract**

Rapid changes in Information technology and the impact on radio, television and social media provide a ‘real time’ experience of international news and events. The 2005 Tsunami affecting numerous countries bordering the Indian ocean, the 2009 Samoa tsunami and the 2010 and 2011 Christchurch earthquakes were beamed into our lounges on a daily basis creating a heightened awareness of the disasters and the consequent need for disaster relief. As individuals in developed nations become increasingly aware of global disadvantage, oppression and inequality and the widening gap between rich and poor, many are moved to volunteer their services to help at a local, national or international level.

International volunteering, a “period of engagement and contribution by individuals who volunteer across an international border,” (Moore McBride, Lough and Sherraden, 2012, p 970), appears to be on the increase on a global scale. Generally the volunteer is from a developed country, moving to a third world country. In the United State, the increased stipend support for international service as a result of the 2009 Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, has resulted in the increase of international volunteers (Lough, 2010). In New Zealand the rate of increase is not known as New Zealand citizens volunteer through a range of international organisations and agencies. In a recent study of international volunteers recruited by Australian Volunteers International (AVI), a number of New Zealanders were included in the volunteer numbers (Fee and Gray, 2010). However NZ Volunteer Service Abroad celebrated 50 years of international service in 2012 and has supported 3500 volunteers overseas during that time (Mark, 2012).

Research suggests that international volunteer work may serve as an ‘accidental skills factory’ (Fee and Gray, 2010) that develops valuable professional knowledge and skills (Hudson and Inkson, 2006; Thomas 2001). However much of the literature on international volunteerism focusses on international project evaluation and the individuals who do the actual work remain invisible and silent (Andresen and Gustschin, 2012).

This paper focusses on the career outcomes of five New Zealand international volunteers. The volunteers are older women (50 plus) who have resigned from jobs or wound up businesses and become an international volunteer at a time of life when women (and men) are expected to continue in paid work. They are part of a larger study of 21 older women who undertake Self-Initiated Expatriation (SIE), a period of travel and work in another country. These women appear to simultaneously challenge traditional expectations of older women and the male norm of a continuous career (Myers, 2011).

Preliminary findings suggests that while significant personal and professional development accrue from the international volunteer experience the post volunteer employment experience is often challenging for these older women. In a time of significant demographic change, there are lessons to be learned for individuals contemplating retirement or a career break and undertaking international volunteer service and for employers who are recruiting and managing talented older workers.

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