

My life looking for me

You packed your identity in your shipment, but now you can't find it.

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When people ask me, “What’s it like living in the Philippines?” I always respond positively, citing the friendliness of our hosts, the high levels of English, reasonable cost of living, access to good healthcare, a lovely house and the convenience of maids, yayas, drivers and other helpers. Yet, on my face, there’s a stiff little plastic smile because in my heart there’s a feeling that something just might be missing. And that something could easily be me! This is swiftly followed by feelings of guilt: how can I possibly moan about living a life of luxury when there are children living on the streets?

In almost eleven years of living in “someone else’s country”, and, by and large, profiting by the experience and adventures this nomadic life brings, I’ve had plenty of opportunities to discuss this topic with other expatriate women. Here are some comments that seem to sum up that feeling of loss of identity: I’ve given up my job, my home, my dog, even abandoned my aging parents...and my kids are grown up. Sometimes I feel like I’ve given up my whole identity.

I never even had a career. We got married just a year after I graduated and now we’ve been sent overseas.

I feel so stupid. At home I managed a whole department. Here I can hardly manage to get the swimming pool cleaned properly.

Enlightened corporations provide relocation assistance, sometimes going

beyond the immediate house-schools-transport-health concerns and venturing into rudimentary cross-cultural and adjustment topics. However, in those very early days, it’s hard to focus on anything more than urgent practical issues. It’s when you’ve mastered the initial settling in that the self-questioning begins.

Purpose

Those of us who have children with us on our postings appreciate the time we are able to spend with our kids, a luxury we might not have in our home countries where we would struggle for balance between work and family. Childrearing is a valid (yet often undervalued) role. It is most often those of us whose children are grown, or who do not have kids who question our purpose.

The Global Relocation Trends Survey Report* continues to reveal that almost 80 per cent of employer-sponsored expatriates are men, so of course, the majority of so-called “trailing spouses” (or as I once heard a man – one of the slowly increasing number of male accompanying spouses - self deprecatingly call himself, corporate handbags) are women. Interestingly, the 2006 report also identifies spouse/partner careers as one of the chief reasons for turning down an assignment.

Thus we women who do choose to come and want to work face the very daunting task of navigating restrictive

work permit regulations and tedious application processes (usually without corporate assistance) and finding a job in a Catch-22 situation where you can't be employed without a work permit and you can't get a work permit without an employer. However, it is possible and many of us push our way through the regulatory maze, driven by the need to identify ourselves through the work we do. It usually requires enormous flexibility (the work you seek and find may be related to rather than in the mainstream of your primary career path) and persistence, plus networking, networking and more networking. In the past ten years, I've worked (legally) in so many different disciplines I call myself a "portfolio person". All that really means is I'm prepared to skin fish on the boardroom table if opens the door to a work permit!

Self employment

Another option is self-employment which often involves fewer restrictions. Many expatriate women set up their own businesses, for example, exporting local products or selling them within their communities, consulting in their areas of expertise or offering services such as fitness training or art classes. Volunteering is a valuable work opportunity. We seem to devalue volunteer work because it's not paid, in financial terms at least. It's something of a cliché, but the rewards do go beyond cash, creating a role that converts consuming into contributing, offering unique insight into the host country and its people. Volunteering doesn't always

mean committee work or fund raising: in the Philippines there are plenty of opportunities for hands-on efforts. A good starting point is ALIG's charities list in this magazine. As well, if your skills are not directly applicable to the organizations' requirements, you can offer services such as baking birthday cakes or giving language lessons to "customers" and ask them to make a direct cash donation to your favourite charity, instead of paying you.

With many classes conducted in English in the Philippines, along with the burgeoning range of online or distance studies, it is possible to boost your existing qualifications or learn something completely new. An internet search will reveal a multitude of international universities, or those with international affiliations, offering an almost unimaginable diversity of courses. But check them out carefully; such a growth industry does attract some dubious practitioners.

Structure

And finally, if you are not ready to work or volunteer, haven't yet found something that awakens your passion, or indeed have chosen to take some time out while you have the chance, know that it's OK to nurture yourself. Go for a massage, wander through a bazaar, explore new parts of Manila, meet friends (vital to helping you through your "down" days) for lunch or coffee, read a book or watch a movie that takes you to another place in your mind. But try not to drift aimlessly. Even if your day or week seems filled with non-essential, make-work activities

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- an email session, wandering through websites, having a manicure, and grooming the dog - try to give it some structure. Establish a task schedule as you would at work and check off the items as you accomplish them. Decide how long you'll spend with Google: select a booklist of authors outside your usual favorites and work through them the way you did in college; consider taking up painting, photography or a craft you've never previously had time for. This framework will help make you feel productive and provide a visual aid to acknowledging achievement.

Some days may still appear to be filled with meaningless "busyness" when it will be hard to answer the question, "So, what did you do all day?" and not feel guilty. After all, women seem to be hard wired for guilt unless we have something tangible to show for our daily doings. That's normal and it may be one of the things we muse about over our coffee meetings and lunches, each proffering different ideas and

solutions, or simply bonding over the effort it all takes. Whatever way you choose to create your new identity, it is likely that there will be a degree of reinvention of the "missing me". The way you find that identity could lead you to new discoveries and ways of learning about yourself, strengthening you in the process. Nevertheless, the next fellow who jokes, "When I go to heaven I want to be an expat wife", won't feature on my party guest list again!

Further resources:

* www.gmacglobalrelocation.com/our_difference/press/2006/0313_2006.asp
www.expatswomen.com
www.livinginthephilippines.com
www.myph.com.ph
www.passport2manila.com

Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the writer and not necessarily those of ALIG.

