

PREPARING WOMEN FOR INTERNATIONAL CAREERS

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Educators, engineers, business people, and politicians are more and more aware of the increasingly international or global environment in which we live. In engineering, as in almost every other field of business, there is a need to learn to function effectively in this environment. In the field of international education, we attempt to prepare students to deal with the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural relations. These include:

- 1) How to survive in a different environment
- 2) How to communicate effectively across cultures
- 3) How to function effectively and productively in a different culture

We try to equip our students with a standard set of tools:

- 1) Basic survival information
- 2) Language skills
- 3) Sensitivity to and respect for different cultures
- 4) Knowledge of and acceptance of the rules which govern other cultures
(and under which business is conducted)

Of these four sets of tools, basic survival skills are the easiest to acquire, and can often be acquired with only the help of some good basic guide books. Language skills are the second easiest to acquire. Sensitivity to other cultures is something women usually do well at, perhaps another indication that women are better tuned into the feelings and preferences of others. Knowledge of the rules which govern other cultures is also fairly easily obtained. The area that women have the most difficulty with is respect for, and acceptance of, the values of other societies when the other society is perceived as being more oppressive or restrictive for women.

Basic survival information that pertains uniquely to women's issues is often overlooked in the travel guides. In the area of women's health it is essential that women become aware of the state of women's health in the countries they will visit and be protective of their own health. We should know that:

Different cultures have different attitudes towards women's health issues.

Communication barriers will compound a medical problem and add to the stress level.

Women should protect their own health. If they are prone to any recurrent problems they should take a supply of medications they may need.

Attitudes toward, and availability of, contraceptives and feminine hygiene products will vary from culture to culture. It is a good idea to take along a supply of these items as well.

Sexually transmitted diseases are the second most common medical problem among travelers. (Digestive upsets are the most common.) In fact, most student insurance policies for study abroad have an exclusion clause for the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.

A related set of issues revolves around personal safety; in particular, sexual harassment and violence against women. Violence is actually quite rare in most countries. Harassment, however, is very common in many countries. It is important to know the environment into which you are going with relation to personal safety. Err on the side of caution. Often crime statistics are unreliable, or even nonexistent. As is sometimes the case in the U.S., when an incident of sexual violence or harassment occurs abroad the legal system may be very unsympathetic. Exercise common sense and the same care you would use at home, even if the society seems safer. In cases of public harassment, loud public protest is appropriate and usually effective. When harassment cannot be avoided entirely, it helps to counteract it by cultivating some personal relationships with families and professional colleagues, male and female. However, do not expect those women to immediately identify and offer advice. It is not uncommon for a foreign woman to be subjected to treatment that would never be directed at local women. Students should know that dating norms may be different and that their behavior abroad can be interpreted very differently than the same behavior at home. Date rape may be much more common in some cultures.

One of the major obstacles in effective cross-cultural communication is the problem of "cultural baggage". We all have a certain level of expectation about the way things should be, usually based on the way things work in our own families and societies. Very strongly held expectations and values can create barriers to objective perception of other cultures. In fact, this is a commonly used predictor of how well individuals will adapt to other cultures. Americans, often much to their surprise, may have some very strongly held expectations about how others will behave; and some very strongly held values about how things should be.

Stereotypes - ours and theirs - do exist and are very important in shaping our

expectations, attitudes and behavior. Some common stereotypes of Americans in general (and here we are most concerned with the negative stereotypes) are:

- 1) Loud and aggressive (even pushy, and obnoxious)
- 2) Naive and unsophisticated
- 3) Lazy, rich and spoiled

For stereotypes of American women in particular, add to this list loose and domineering. On the other hand, stereotypes Americans hold of foreign men are often that of the predatory male and stereotypes we hold of foreign women are often that of the submissive and oppressed female. Where do these stereotypes come from? The media is one major source. Movies and television reinforce the stereotype of lazy, rich Americans by depicting everyone at leisure rather than working, driving expensive cars, living in nice apartments and homes, and generally living a lifestyle that only vaguely resembles real life. The images of American pop culture and youth, idolized and exaggerated by movies and MTV, are particularly widespread. But stereotypes are also formed in the context in which Americans interact with the locals. Is most interaction with businessmen, tourists, or students? American business style is very aggressive and impersonal, which can be very offensive (pushy, obnoxious). Tourists are primarily concerned with pleasure and comfort (lazy, rich). Students and tourists may be enjoying a period of great personal freedom. Many of these tourists and students may engage in behavior that is interpreted as sexually permissive by local standards (loose).

In dealing with stereotypes, it helps to:

- 1) Understand where the stereotype comes from
- 2) Know the lifestyle of the local culture
- 3) Blend in as much as reasonably possible
- 4) Avoid reinforcing the stereotypes
- 5) Attempt to push past the stereotypes (your own and theirs)
to develop deeper relationships

American women have tremendous difficulty in dealing with cultural differences effecting the status of women. We sometimes feel that life in the work place or public arena is the only life worth living. We sometimes have a tendency to denigrate the role of wife and mother, which may be the most typical role for women in most parts of the world. We also assume that this role is imposed upon women from the outside and we get very impatient with women's acceptance of what we may perceive as restriction of their choices, individuality, power or freedom. In reality, a culture's traditional values may be most strongly held by the women themselves. We must develop friendships with women to get beneath the stereotypes and see the larger picture that makes up a society's culture. Sometimes we will see that women in more traditional societies actually have more power than is evident to our eye since we tend to measure status and power by our own culture's symbols. Power,

and its source, is something that is relative to each culture and may not be obvious to the casual observer.

We also have to realize that tradition itself may be a primary driving force within a culture. On the contrary, American culture values change and the future. To us the past is unimportant and the future is what counts. Things that are new are usually considered better - improved - progress. We also believe strongly in individualism and personal freedom. Like all cultures we instill our values in our children. We allow our children choices, encourage them to have opinions, give them their own space, and expect them to become fairly independent around 18 to 20 years of age. We expect them to make their own decisions and we worry about people who appear to be too dependent on or controlled by their families. We might even think they need "help". In many other societies family needs may be sacred and individual needs unimportant. In the East, conformity and harmony are desirable behaviors for which everyone strives. Independence and individualism are discouraged. Some societies think that Americans are self-centered and have very sad, meaningless lives. A conformist, fatalistic or submissive society will be very attached to tradition and very resistant to change. Even when it is contrary to our own values, we must accept that other value systems provide the rules that govern other societies.

In more traditional societies gender roles are fairly rigid and predetermined. Everyone in the society knows how to behave and what is expected of them - how to be a good wife, a good mother, or a good husband. It is important to admit that in American society we don't even know what is appropriate behavior. We have not finished evaluating definitively the effect of all the changes our society has undergone in the area of women's rights and women's roles. This can be a very emotional and highly stressful subject for American women - at home as well as abroad. American women have worked hard for women's rights and thought long, hard, and consciously about the issues, even those who do not consider themselves feminists. We are usually not aware of how strongly we hold our values until we see them questioned or threatened. Many women can survive in a culture that they consider oppressive but not be happy or productive. It is important to find ways to gain insight and understanding if we are to be truly successful in cross-cultural relations.

These issues will continue to be important as more American women enter the fields of business and engineering and as we increasingly interact and collide with other cultures. The most important thing we can do to prepare ourselves is to accept that we must understand and adjust to, if not conform to, the norms of the other society if we are to live and work within it. We cannot simply attempt to import our own value system wherever we go. The best thing we can do to prepare ourselves to live and work in another culture is to raise our own consciousness to better understand what governs that society and to lighten our own load of cultural baggage.

