

# **Women Working Across Borders: When Gender is More Challenging Than Geography**

Sue Freedman, Ph.D. and Lothar Katz

In the mid eighties, Sue was hosting a work session for executives in a major defense firm. A corporate lawyer was delivering a formal presentation, the lights were off, and people continued to arrive. When Sue noticed that they were running out of chairs, she stood to give her chair to a late arriving participant. Almost immediately, in the dark, every man in the all-male audience came to his feet.

These businessmen acted automatically, based on culture-specific rules that demanded that they behave as they did. It would never have crossed their mind to stand had Sue been male, and if they had thought about it, they wouldn't have stood up for her in this case. Their doing so was an indication of the novelty of the situation. They were still trying to figure out how to behave when working with women in roles that in these men's experience had only been held by other men.

As you move into other cultures, your foreign male counterparts may experience the same confusion as Sue's colleagues did in the dark conference room. Working with a woman will be an unusual experience for many of them. Both you and your male counterparts will be traveling in new territory and you may well encounter men who are unable or unwilling to make the needed adjustments. You will also find many businessmen around the world with whom, through patience, respect, and perhaps a little humor on both sides, you will be able build productive, profitable, and rewarding cross-gender business relationships.

The first step for anyone attempting to build business relationships is to learn about the culture and the individual personalities and preferences of the people with whom you'll be working. The issue of gender simply adds another source of complexity. Because of this, it is even more important for women to gain a sophisticated understanding of the cultures in which they're engaged.

Following are suggestions for working as a woman in different regions of the world. These suggestions refer to what one is most likely to encounter in the countries described. Remember, however, that there are progressive people who are willing to work with you in most, if not all, countries. Watch for these people and try very hard to learn how to work with them. At the same time, recognize that there will be situations, just as there are in your home country, where despite your best efforts, building a productive relationship is just not in the cards.

## Country-Specific Advice

### **A. Countries where conducting business is often extremely difficult and may even be impossible for women:**

Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan

#### **Advice:**

- Consider using a male spokesperson and act “behind the scenes.”

### **B. Countries where conducting business is often very difficult for women, since most local businessmen have no concept for relationship building with foreign women:**

other Arabic countries, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan

#### **Advice:**

- Travel with male colleagues. Emphasize the importance of your company and your role in it.
- Display confidence and assertiveness ONLY in ways that are mirrored in the culture in which you find yourself. This is likely to feel meek by Western standards, so be very careful to tread lightly until you get a feel for what is appropriate behavior in the particular culture.
- Try to take advantage of what may be a less threatening presence than that of your male colleagues. You may find that your foreign counterparts are willing to share important information with you or to give valuable concessions. Try asking very direct questions or making unusual requests. However, back off and apologize immediately if you sense that your counterpart is offended.
- Attend business entertainment and dinners only if you are confident that you are welcome. In these countries, these may commonly be men-only events. You will want to cross these barriers very cautiously, starting with the ones where you will cause the least discomfort. Use native allies to determine when you should go and how long you should stay in. You do not want to force yourself into settings where you are not welcome.
- When you have attended a social/business function, make up an excuse to leave at the end of the meal, usually after coffee or tea has been served and/or if the men are starting to consume strong liquors. Again, a native ally is valuable for understanding how best to behave.
- Avoid being alone with a male counterpart unless you are very knowledgeable about the culture you are in. Being alone may embarrass your foreign colleague, or worse, indicate that you are interested in a very different kind of relationship.

**C. Countries where conducting business is often difficult for women since many local businessmen may prefer to build relationships with males only:**

Mexico, Latin America, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Russia, Ukraine, other former Soviet republics, Philippines, China, South Korea, Taiwan, North Africa, Central Africa (with exceptions)

**Advice:**

- Emphasize the importance of your company and your role in it. A letter of introduction from a senior executive will often help.
- Display confidence and assertiveness ONLY in ways that are mirrored in the culture in which you find yourself. This is likely to feel meek by Western standards, so be very careful to tread lightly until you get a feel for what is appropriate behavior in the particular culture.
- Join your male counterparts for business meals and celebrations only if you are confident that you are welcome. Even then, you may want to make up an excuse to leave at the end of the meal, usually after coffee or tea has been served and/or if the men are starting to consume strong liquors.
- In some countries (especially Russia), be prepared to hear remarks you consider highly offensive and that may include strong sexual connotations. These remarks are usually best ignored. Even though it's uncomfortable, it is normally best to try to focus on the real message and work through it. If you can't deal with it at all, you may have to accept that you can't work in the particular culture.
- Avoid being alone with a male counterpart unless you are very knowledgeable about the culture you are in. Being alone may embarrass your foreign colleague, or worse, indicate that you are interested in a very different kind of relationship.

**D. Countries where conducting business can be somewhat difficult for women because traditional expectations of female roles may still prevail:**

Argentina, Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, India, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Caribbean, Nigeria, South Africa

**Advice:**

- Emphasize the importance of your company and your role in it.
- Display confidence and assertiveness in ways that are mirrored in the culture in which you find yourself. This may still feel somewhat meek by Western standards, so tread lightly until you get a feel for what is appropriate behavior in the particular culture.
- Join your male counterparts for social events unless you would be uncomfortable or you fear you would make your counterparts uncomfortable. Even then, you may want to join only for part of the time. It is generally best to leave when, or before, any heavy drinking begins. (This may be true even you can drink the best of them under the table.)

- Accept any chivalric gestures you may receive, but be sure to maintain a professional manner. Too much appreciation of certain gestures may suggest that you are interested in a different kind of relationship.
- Try to ignore humorous remarks and other comments that would be considered inappropriate in your own culture. If you are highly uncomfortable, consider asking a native colleague or a male colleague from your home country to suggest to your foreign counterpart that his remarks could be considered inappropriate.

**F. Countries where conducting business usually does not present any special problems to women:**

United States, Canada, Northern Europe, Western Europe, Central Europe, Israel, Australia, New Zealand

**Advice:**

- You will run into people who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable working with women in these countries as well. It is just less common. American women have to be especially careful, because what is considered assertive in the US may be considered aggressive in several European countries. As a rule of thumb, tone it down and pay attention to the consequences of your behavior. If you find that you are not being taken seriously because you are too passive, then you can move gradually to a more assertive stance.



**Sue Freedman, Ph.D. and Lothar Katz** are the creators and primary instructors of Managing Projects Across Borders™, a series of three workshops on Leading International Projects and International Project Organizations. *Managing International Projects* and *Negotiating and Working with International Customers, Suppliers and Other Partners* are offered as public workshops through the University of Texas at Dallas' Project Management Program. *Leading International Project Organizations* is currently taught only as an in-house offering. For information on these workshops, visit [ManagingProjectsAcrossBorders.com](http://ManagingProjectsAcrossBorders.com). Sue and Lothar also teach in the Executive Education Project Management MBA Program at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Sue specializes in the people and organizational aspects of projects and project based organizations. She spent 12 years with Texas Instruments, serving as Manager of Organizational Effectiveness at the Division and Corporate level and 2 years as Vice-President of Organizational Development and Human Resources in a large real estate investment trust. She is a co-author of *Beyond Teams: Building the Collaboration Organization* (Jossey-Bass, 2003) and author of "Managing Virtual Teams that Cross Borders" in *The Handbook on Virtual Teams* (Jossey Bass, 2008). Sue is a frequent presenter/trainer at professional conferences, and through Webinars and in house training programs.

Lothar specializes in several aspects of international business. He is a former Vice President and General Manager with Texas Instruments. During his 18-year corporate career, Lothar managed large distributed product development organizations across the U.S., Germany, India, China, Japan, and Australia. His extensive interactions with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world included many parts of Asia. Originally from Germany, he has lived and worked both in the United States and in Europe. Lothar also serves as a Business Leadership Center instructor at Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business and is the author of *Negotiating International Business – The Negotiator's Reference Guide to 50 Countries around the World* (BookSurge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2007).

Contact Sue and Lothar at [sue\\_and\\_lothar@managingprojectsacrossborders.com](mailto:sue_and_lothar@managingprojectsacrossborders.com)