

Embracing My Role as Trailing Spouse

By Kate Farr

A what??

Trailing spouse is a term that's thrown around a lot over here in expat land. The first time I heard it, I was pretty horrified. The term conjured up a regressive, 1950s-style image of a woman devotedly trudging around the globe after her darling husband, clutching her belongings under one arm while waving goodbye to her identity with the other.

I consider myself a strong, independent woman with an equal stake in our lifestyle and decision-making. OK, so my husband earned more than I did, but that never really factored into our life in the UK. I'm happy to say that he's a fully reconstructed new man and one that has always encouraged me to do whatever I want. He's certainly not a man who has ever wanted a Stepford wife waiting at home. So how did I end up as his dependent, both legally and literally?

Full disclosure

The initial idea of working overseas was entirely driven by me, which I appreciate is a bit unusual. I convinced my husband that it would be a good thing for his career and, as I was working in HR at the time, I had a lot of persuasive arguments. The tax benefits, opportunities for professional advancement, and lifestyle and cultural advantages all featured heavily in my reasoning.

The real fact of the matter was that I had always wanted to live overseas, but he was the one with the career to make it happen. Luckily for me, he also wanted to relocate, although he readily admits that he might not have followed through on that desire had I not been so adamant. He applied for the job, got it, and then all of a sudden this fantasy plan of mine became real. And then I had to wake up.

Schoolgirl error

In all the excitement of planning our big move, I had completely overlooked the need for me to find a job. I made a few half-hearted attempts to network within my industry, but this proved difficult from

outside the country. I assumed I'd find something when I got there and cheerfully relegated the search to the back of the list for action once I arrived.

I pored over the various expat websites and realised that many wives seemed not to work at all, which seemed strange to me. Not for a moment did I consider that I'd be one of them, and anyway, I didn't want to be. It was a matter of pride that I'd find work and contribute to our income, even if it was in a small way. What else would I be doing with my day if not going to the office?

What was I thinking?

As it turned out, what I'd mainly be doing was searching for a job. After the initial excitement of the move, we settled into our serviced apartment and my husband started work, leaving me alone throughout the day. Initially, I relished this solitude and enjoyed my solo wanderings around the city.

The novelty very quickly wore off. I spent the next three months doing little except emailing my CV (or, *résumé*) to countless agencies and employers, usually hearing nothing in return. It was soul-destroying and totally knocked any confidence that I'd had in my ability to adapt to my new home.

So why do you want to work for us? Honestly? I don't!

The interviews that I was offered at that time were few and rarely went as I'd planned. One chat with a consultancy firm went promisingly, right up until they offered me a salary equivalent to one I'd earned part-time as a teenager in high school. An interviewer at an insurance firm spent nearly an hour telling me why it would be impossible to get the HR job for which I was applying. She then suggested I join them selling life insurance to all my friends. I politely declined, explaining that I wasn't interested. And besides, I had no friends yet.

People advised me to try teaching English on the strength of being a native speaker. I was unconvinced, believing there is much more to teaching than simply speaking a language. I finally caved when nothing else had presented itself for weeks and went to what I thought would be an interview. I was offered the job on the spot and left alone in a room of 30 expectant-looking 5-year-olds. After five rounds of "If You're Happy and You Know It," I ran out of material and hurriedly left before I accidentally taught them any inappropriate English words. Never again will I heckle a stand-up comedian.

What do you DO all day?

When I wasn't going for disastrous interviews, I was trying to figure out how to undertake simple tasks such as grocery shopping or picking up dry cleaning. I spoke to virtually nobody in this time except my poor husband, who returned home exhausted from his stressful new job only to be faced with a barrage of questions and conversation from an increasingly deranged wife. He coped admirably, taking me out in the evening when all he wanted was to sit in and watch TV. But it wasn't easy for either of us, and we both wondered if we'd made a dreadful mistake in moving at all.

Turning the corner? Or just a chicane?

Finally, consumed with homesickness, I booked a visit back to the UK. At that point I was desperate to get back to family, friends, and old colleagues, and to recall my life as it had been only a few months earlier. My husband now tells me that he was sure I wouldn't come back. I did come back, but with little enthusiasm. Finally, after all those months, I was offered a job! It wasn't a particularly good job, and I didn't really want it, but it was a job nonetheless! Overnight, my feelings of helplessness and depression vanished, and I started to really appreciate our new lives. Now that I wasn't moping around the apartment all day long feeling

sorry for myself, I had the motivation to develop a small circle of friends. Things were looking up!

Of course, the problem with taking any old job is that you have to do it, day in, day out. Again, I'm not quite sure how that *hadn't* occurred to me, but I would have accepted anything offered in my desperation. Unsurprisingly, the job was pretty terrible, and I started to feel the now-familiar sense of despair and of having thrown away my old life without a backwards glance.

Revelation

Luckily, by this time I had friends and was surprised to hear just how many of them felt the same way. Attending women's groups and drinks events, I met countless amazing women from all over the world who had given up stellar careers to follow their partners. Or should I say, accompany their partners, because not a single one of those women, working or not, conformed to the submissive 1950s-housewife stereotype that I'd built in my head.

I took a great deal of comfort from being able to complain about my crummy life, crummy job, and even my crummy hair with women who could match me story for story. Every emotion I had experienced in my expat life to date had also been experienced by someone else. I realized that I wasn't alone, that being my husband's dependent did not make me less of a person, and that it was normal to go through this transition. Buoyed by this realization, I quit my job and felt a huge sense of relief.

Onward and upwards. Or maybe slightly sideways?

So many women that I've met have described a move abroad as an opportunity to reinvent yourself, something that I'd disregarded until that point. I assumed this was great if you've got oodles of cash and qualifications, but not practical for someone like me. I had no obvious talent, no money to invest in a new venture, and anyway, what would I do?

I decided to stop feeling sorry for myself and started really thinking about what it was that I wanted to do with my life. I now realised that the responsibility for this was entirely on my shoulders,

not on my husband's, who had enough stress of his own to deal with. I decided to take control of my life and to stop basing decisions on what I *should* be doing, and more on what I actually *wanted* to do.

And so I took another crummy job. But wait! This time, it was a crummy job that was totally undemanding, stress-free, and left me plenty of time to plan my next move.

Why not do something fun instead?

I'd always envied those who could make a living from home, working the hours they wanted. That sort of lifestyle became my goal. But how to achieve it? A local lifestyle website asked me to contribute a short article to their blog, and this received quite positive feedback. A couple more articles were published, and I began to realize that people were actually interested in reading what I had to say.

I joined some freelance websites and was fortunate enough to sell an article very quickly—for a modest US\$25, mind, but this was enough encouragement

to spur me on. This lifestyle that I had disliked so much now offered the chance to pursue a dream career. The irony wasn't lost on me.

And?

I've now been an expat for 15 months and am starting to love my life. Yes, I'm still doing the crummy job, but I now have a plan and am working on it slowly but surely. I've developed a close network of friends and have a great social life. I miss my family and friends from back home, but Skype makes things easier. I also still miss my old career, but I now hope to achieve something much more exciting than even that had been.

My relationship with my husband is so much better for us both not only having mutual friends, but also large circles of friends we meet independently. He is still endlessly supportive and continues to encourage me in whatever I want to do. Best of all, he *still* doesn't want to be married to a Stepford wife.

Which is really just as well, as I'm far too busy.

