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DIVERSITY | IN ACTION

Look Deep

Ask and answer the right questions on **marriage** and **relocation** to **Asia**.

BY KATHERINE FRINK-HAMLETT

I am a seventh-year capital markets associate at a prominent New York City-based law firm. Due to the economic downturn, the firm recently announced several layoffs but luckily I was spared. However, my hours are down considerably and it may be just a matter of time before my luck runs out. I am extremely anxious about my future as I am the primary breadwinner in the family. My husband is a musician but we mostly rely on my income to pay the bills while he takes care of our 3-year-old twin boys.

Even though I've been looking for a new position, it's been difficult since most firms are either not hiring or reducing lawyers. Just recently, I was approached by one of the partners to move to the firm's Hong Kong office to help build the practice there. I am excited about the opportunity but hesitant as well, since it would require uprooting my entire family. Our sons are at a great pre-school that they love. The school is very competitive and it was quite a process for us

to get in. Should I stay and continue to seek opportunities here in New York or make the jump overseas?

Go East young woman! At the risk of stating the obvious, the New York financial market is seriously challenged, resulting in diminished opportunities for skilled transactional attorneys. Headline after headline confirms the devastation: offers rescinded, attorneys dismissed, practices decimated and venerable law firms dissolved.

So, you can wait for the market to make a comeback but it will not happen overnight. Or, you can hope that the writing on the wall does not include your name with a pink slip attached. Or, you can do what all lawyers have to do at some point in their legal careers and embrace change.

As a mother and the primary financial support of your family, you don't have the luxury of betting on a long shot when a viable opportunity is readily available. Of course you should be apprehensive about uprooting your family and moving to a new country. It's a tremendous step and not a decision to be entered into lightly. It requires comprehensive and ongoing discussions with your husband



PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK KOPSTEIN

and methodical planning. But, I think in the long run it is a wise career move with the potential for awesome professional and personal payoff.

Not surprisingly, our male counterparts tend to be less hesitant about relocating their careers to other regions of the world, and the attorneys who move from the United States to Asia are typically male. On the other hand, women, particularly and understandably, mothers, express greater concern, and those who make such a move are generally either single or without children. Even so, the transition can be more difficult. For example, one fourth-year female associate originally based in New York, who recently joined her firm's Asia practice, is the only female attorney in the office.

We've been living in a global economy for quite some time now and many Americans have enjoyed participating in the emerging markets

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without having to leave our borders. But things are different now and attorneys, including women, can no longer expect to develop careers solely within the United States. Take notice: Even those law firms that have closed offices and reduced associate ranks in the United States are simultaneously expanding activities abroad, most notably in Asia and the Middle East. John Bringardner, in a New York Times article, cited the National Law Journal's NLJ 250 and determined that in Hong Kong, there was a whopping 48 percent increase in the number of lawyers from the 250 largest American law firms from 2007 to 2008. "U.S. Law Firms Expanding Abroad," Nov. 23, 2008.

Spurred by the collapse of the financial markets, increasing numbers of American attorneys who would ordinarily seek opportunities in New York are now turning their sights to offices located abroad, including Hong Kong. Indeed, given the uncertainty of summer associate programs, some savvy law students are wisely seeking summer clerkships abroad as well.

There's a significant upside to making the transition abroad. First and foremost, there is a greater sense of employment stability. You may be able to survive at your firm in New York but you will be extremely anxious day in and day out, and probably not working on many deals. Even though the global economy has sagged overall, the emerging markets are still in business and getting deals done. Your salary should remain the same (and, in some cases may be increased) and typically a housing allowance is provided along with relocation assistance. Of course, you will need to consult with your accountant to ascertain the tax implications of your status as an expatriate. You'll have a greater shot at law firm management roles simply because the numbers in Hong Kong are smaller, so there's less competition. Ditto for partnership opportunities.

On the personal side, your children are young enough to make the

adjustment without disrupting their social circle. There are reputable schools for the children of expatriates in Hong Kong and I personally think that it will be an incredibly enriching experience. Plus, you'll have your husband who is already the primary caretaker so there's a support system available. You also can retain the services of a nanny to assist during the initial transition.

The downside: You may not like living abroad, in which case you can return home. If you can bear staying away from your babies, you might even wish to spend some time in the Hong Kong office before making your final decision.

Sometimes wonderful opportunities emerge from difficult situations. You are one lucky gal to have the option to continue your career in an exciting and promising world. Bon voyage!

I am a black woman and a fifth-year patent associate with a mid-sized boutique law firm. I attended a well-known college and a Top 25 law school. My life is going great: My job is secure (I think) and I met a wonderful black man; we are in love and plan to get married. Here's the problem: He dropped out of college and is a blue-collar worker for the government. I just don't know if my career as an attorney will overshadow his and whether our marriage could really work. Help!

Sometimes blue and white don't mix, and sometimes they do. Black female attorneys who are seeking professional black male partners have slim, slim pickings. The statistics are ubiquitous and getting worse by the minute: Ridiculously high drop-out rates in high school compounded by abysmally low college graduation rates yield far too few viable candidates. In many instances, black female college students outnumber black males by a ratio of two to one. Sisters are on the hunt for an "Obama" but might encounter a few "Obumas" along the way.

Seriously, marriage is a hugely

complex and intricate union. Disparate educational backgrounds can fuel tensions especially when a black woman earns more than her black spouse or has a more prestigious career. Egos get wounded, resentment can simmer beneath the surface, and before you know it, here comes bitter brotha'. (I'm in trouble now.)

But guess what? It's really not about the color of his collar but more about the chip on your shoulder. Blue-collar positions are both viable and respectable careers. Several are extremely competitive and pay quite well, especially when you add in generous pension and health benefits.

If you genuinely admire, love and respect your "wonderful" man, then the union should flourish. But, if you view him as deficient simply because he missed a few boxes on your checklist, then pass him along; I have a few professional gals who will gladly take your place. •