

RESEARCH REPORT

Gender and Identity in a Turbulent Space and Time: An Interview Study of Dual-Career Diplomatic Couples

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Abstract

Purpose

This study investigates how dual-career diplomatic couples navigate the challenges to dual-career development during frequent relocations. It aims to provide an understanding of how gender roles and career identities are enacted, challenged, and negotiated within the institutional framework of diplomacy, which demands compliance with strict rules of conduct.

Methodology

This report presents preliminary findings from interviews with 27 couples where at least one partner worked as a British diplomat while the other pursued an independent career. The study is ongoing, and the issues and themes addressed in this report will be analysed further in late spring 2022. It is also a longitudinal study; the same respondents will be contacted for a follow-up interview in 3 to 5 years.

Findings

This study finds that equality is an important value and goal sought by our respondents in their relationships. Both partners in the couples considered the ability to pursue a career and engage in activities they found meaningful and fulfilling an entitlement. They sought this for themselves and for their partners. Furthermore, all respondents were highly skilled and educated; professional identity is a salient part of their self-perception and sense of well-being. Hence for both partners, the ability to maintain a professional identity was essential to a balanced relationship. Seven models of dual-career paths are identified. These models can be combined and change over time as the career goals of the couple evolve. In maintaining the dual-career models, the respondents applied a variety of strategies to accommodate the needs of both careers such as giving careful consideration to the posting location and timing, opting for career breaks, trying to arrange remote work and embracing career transformation or job sequencing.

Value

This study is the first to examine the dynamics of both work and relationships experienced by diplomatic dual-career couples. It highlights the need to acknowledge the importance of careers for both partners and to provide dual-career couples with institutional support through flexible work and other supporting structures.

Research Context

This is a qualitative interview study. It began with depth interviews of **27 couples** (54 individuals) in which at least one partner worked as a British diplomat while the other pursued (or aspired to pursue) a career. Each partner was interviewed separately. Interviews were conducted on-line (via Teams or Zoom) and lasted approximately 1.5 hours. All interviews were conducted by two researchers and took place between August and November 2021. The call for respondents was disseminated via the DSFA (Diplomatic Service Families Association) in July/August 2021. All interviewees were **self-selected** and there was no pre-selection by the researchers.

At the time of the interview, the respondents were based in **18 different countries across 4 continents**. There were **12 citizenships** (including British) represented in the group of 54 respondents (including dual citizenship). **21 couples were married**; 6 were not. Most couples had **2 children** (12 couples), 2 couples had 3 or more children, 5 couples had one child and 8 couples had no children. The number of postings embarked on by the couples together ranged from 1 to more than 6. **Figure 1** shows the distribution of respondents by age: the age groups represented most often were 30-34 years old and 50-54 years old. **Figure 2** shows the length of the relationship; most couples have been together between **6 and 15 years**. We can therefore conclude that most of them were in a well-established relationship.

Figure 1 Respondents by age group

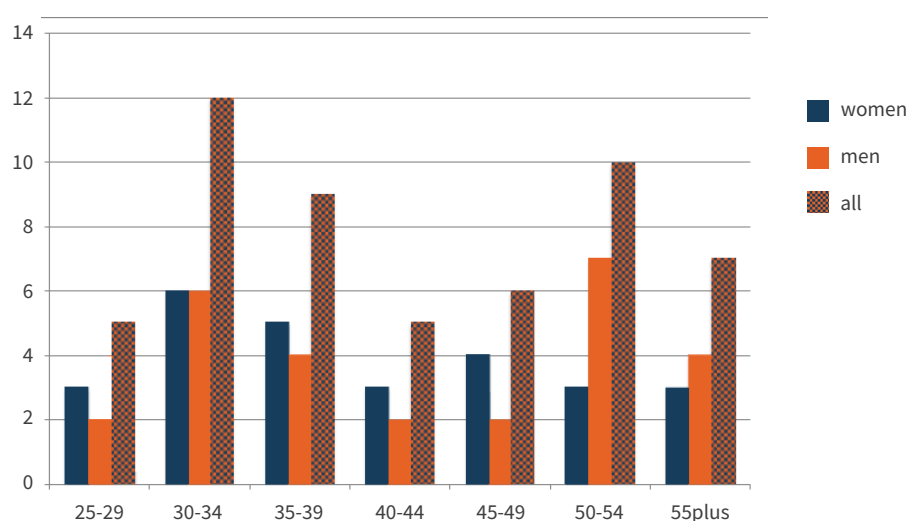
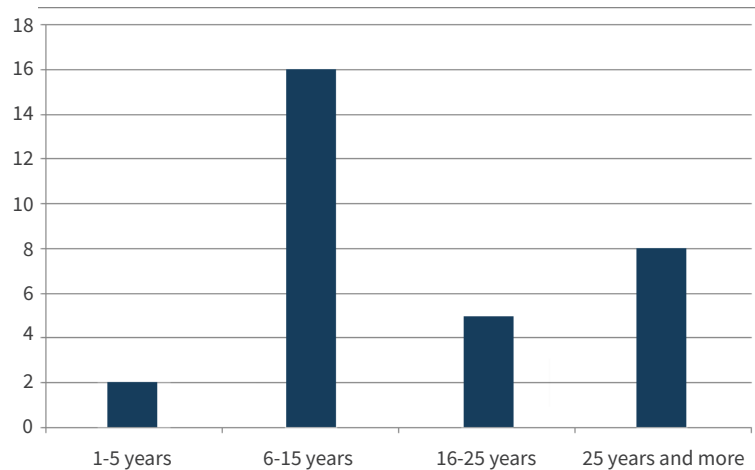


Figure 2 Length of relationship



Equality in relationships, professional identity, and career goals

Equality is an **important value** and a goal sought by our respondents in their relationships. This is a principal determinant of the researched group. Both partners in the couples felt they were entitled to pursue a career and engage in activities they found meaningful and fulfilling. Moreover, both partners sought this for themselves and their partners. All respondents are highly skilled and educated; professional identity is a salient element of their self-perception and sense of well-being. Hence both partners consider the ability of both partners to maintain a professional identity a key element in a balanced relationship. Striving for equality extends to other parts of life as well. For example, many of our respondents share household chores and childcare by design; several also shared parental leave. Sharing was the result of negotiations within the relationship and conscious or subconscious efforts to avoid a stereotypical division of gender roles where paid work and (unpaid) care were divided unequally. Although the respondents could not always avoid such a division of roles in their lives, they generally considered it an undesirable and unfair imbalance that should be rectified. It could be rationalised and accepted as a temporary diversion but not as a permanent set-up that would define the identity of partners and their roles in the relationship.

Paid work or professional identity stand in opposition to the **domestic role of homemaker** often associated with the “diplomatic” or “trailing spouse”. The initial research findings suggest that the participants (in both FCDO and other careers) relate negatively to this role because it symbolises a somewhat caricatured social status that partners want to avoid over the long term. Hence, it is probably connected to the general global devaluation of domestic work and care, which are mainly done by women. Unpaid domestic work and care are not reflected in national GDPs and thus become invisible; their social status is low. Because they are highly skilled and highly educated individuals, it is very likely that our respondents aim to maintain this high social status.

Their **career goals** vary greatly and change over time. There seem to be three main reference groups that influence or shape them: partner, peers and family. The respondents tend to compare their career achievements with those of their partners. Major differences in seniority, level of responsibility or sense of achievement may impact perceptions of success in professional life. The respondents also compare themselves with peers – former fellow students or colleagues. They serve as benchmarks for where they could have been in their own career, had they not accompanied a spouse on a posting. As a reference point, ‘family’ can be either negative (“Women in my family left their jobs after they got married, I don’t want that to happen to me”) or positive (“My father had an international career, I also wanted that in my life”).

Dual-career models

We identified 7 different models of dual-career couples in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK. The models reflect **the nature of the posting** (e.g. “local employer” refers to the country of posting, “foreign based” employer refers to a country different to the UK and the country of posting). The couples and their career situations are unique. The following describe model situations based on specific characteristics. In practice, these models can be combined and they can change over time. For example, although a partner may take on a local job during a career break, the dominant career path remains.

1. FCDO and FCDO (job sharing)
2. FCDO and FCDO
3. FCDO and British civil service
4. FCDO and a UK-based employer (outside of the civil service, usually in the private sector with global business operations)
5. FCDO and an international organisation (governmental or NGO)
6. FCDO and a local employer in the posted country
 - a) Local employer is an FCDO mission
 - b) Local employer not related to the FCDO
7. FCDO and freelance/self-employed

We analysed the models by asking the following questions: How easy/difficult is it for the couple to align two careers in the long term (sustainability)? How easy/difficult is it to plan ahead with respect to employer policies (predictability)? To what extent can the model be “copied” (universality)? What can the FCDO do to support the second career (FCDO scope of action)? To what extent does this set-up structurally enhance equality in a relationship?

The taxonomy high (H), medium (M) and low (L) was used to classify these variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6a	6b	7
Sustainability	H	H	M	M	L	L	L	H
Predictability	H	M	M	L	M	M	L	M
Universality	L	L	M	H	L	H	H	H
FCDO Scope of Action	H	H	M	L	L	H	M	L
Equality	H	H	M	L	L	L	L	M

1. Job sharing

In this model both partners are civil servants working for the FCDO. Although it arguably offers more equality in access to pensionable earnings than any other, it is not replicable for many couples. Partners have to work in a similar area and on a similar level of seniority in order to be able to share a posting. Both partners have linear careers; foreign postings do not disrupt career paths. The FCDO determines whether to allow couples to job-share on postings; at higher grades (e.g. ambassador appointments) the host state may need to agree to such arrangements. A potential weakness from the perspective of the partners is that they may dedicate much more than 50% of their time to the job. Regular handovers are necessary and both partners have to stay on top of

things; this may make it difficult to maintain a clear boundary between private and work life. Even with repeated “off-duty” periods, both partners maintain their professional identity. This model is also very dependent on the stability of the relationship. Any problems in the relationship may spill over into the work environment and vice versa. Moreover, this model is not very common globally. The UK was the first country in the world to appoint a job-sharing couple as ambassadors; Switzerland, France, and most recently Germany have followed suit.

2. FCDO and FCDO

In this model both partners are civil servants working for the FCDO but they do not job-share. This model also guarantees equal access to pensionable earnings. Couples applied various strategies under this model. Either they both tried to secure a job at the same mission abroad or one partner tried to negotiate remote working for the length of the posting. Another strategy was to take turns in foreign postings and career breaks. Alternatively, both partners went on a posting to a different country and commuted between the two. Either way, both partners maintain their job security as civil servants. Career breaks cause only temporary interruptions in their career path. The success of these strategies is subject to negotiation with FCDO, whose power to support (or not support) both careers is substantial. Maintaining a balance in their relationship is also open for negotiation between the partners. Although relatively egalitarian, this model could also tilt the balance. For example, foreign postings or the career progress of one partner could be prioritised more often than the other; partners may not wish to slow down their career with repeated career breaks or be the “trailing spouse”.

3. FCDO and British Civil Service

This model is similar to the previous one, only that one partner works in a different part of the British Civil Service. Career paths and job security remain relatively stable in the short term, although repeated career breaks tend to reduce sustainability. Also, the strategies applied by couples to maintain a balance between their careers and relationships may be similar. While one partner has a foreign posting, the other could negotiate remote work or take a career break. Although the FCDO has more limited scope to support both careers than in the previous case, this model is within the remit of the British Civil Service. In the long term, this model may be biased towards the FCDO career as career adjustments to foreign postings would have to be made more often by the accompanying partner. If remote work cannot be negotiated, career breaks remain the only option. Tension may arise in the relationship if one partner has to make more compromises in the long run.

4. FCDO and UK-based employers

The success and sustainability of this model depend highly on the willingness of the second partner's employer to allow remote work. The conditions are not always clear; they depend on the country of posting and the willingness of employers to take on the administrative burden and related risks. Although anecdotal evidence collected in this research suggests that UK employers may be more open to remote working arrangements due to the covid-19 pandemic, partners cannot rely on this option in planning ahead. This research also suggests that it may be comparably easier for British partners to secure employment with UK employers than in previously unfamiliar job markets. The FCDO has no direct influence over private sector companies to support both careers. Due to the unpredictability of the impact of practices of the second employer on remote work, an FCDO career seems more stable and secure. The balance in the relationship is structurally tilted towards the FCDO officer.

5. FCDO and international organisations

In this model the second partner works for an international organisation that enables "work abroad". The main challenge of this model is therefore to align timing and the country of posting/work. Although the FCDO may be unable to provide the second career with effective support, it may facilitate alignment for the FCDO officer. This model may, however, be difficult to sustain in the long-term and one career may become the leading one.

6. FCDO and local employers in posted countries

In this model, accompanying partners typically give up their jobs and seek a new one with every international move. Overall, it is probably the most common set-up in dual-career couples and also the most unequal in terms of access to pensionable (or any) earnings. There are two variations of this model: 6a) when the local employer is the FCDO mission and 6b) when the local employer is not related to the FCDO. In the former, the FCDO has a policy in place that prioritises partners for job openings at the mission. In the latter, the FCDO is able to exert only a limited impact on the employability of accompanying partners on postings. There is currently one main tool available: bilateral agreements that make it legally possible for a partner to work in the local labor market. The structure of this model strongly favours the FCDO career. Accompanying partners can struggle to maintain a career, career paths are interrupted and the damage can be irreversible in the long term. There is also a general lack of information about taxation, social security and various legal issues related to working abroad.

7. FCDO and freelancing/self-employment

In this model, partners are not dependent on a specific employer. They (for example artists or consultants) provide portable services. Depending on the specific services or field of work, they can face challenges similar to those in the previous models. For example, they may need to re-register their business in every new country, which is an enormous administrative burden for an individual. There are also unclear tax and legal issues. If their business is linked to the country of posting, they will need to build a network of customers that may be lost with the next international move. They do not depend on an employer and still have to start from scratch with every move. Although this model may be sustainable for the couple, frequent international moves may make the income of the self-employed partner irregular. In comparison with FCDO careers, self-employment/freelancing seems less secure and less predictable.

Dual-Career Strategies

As partners in a relationship, the respondents applied various strategies to accommodate the needs of two careers.

Prioritising the location of postings

The vast majority of respondents working for the FCDO make decisions about the location of their next posting together with their partner. Work permits and the partner's ability to work during the posting are top priorities. They therefore bid for jobs in those countries where it is possible for the partner to work.

Carefully planning the timing of postings

Unlike in other European MFAs, it is not a contractual obligation for FCDO officers to go on foreign posting. They continue to work in London. In fact, London jobs were considered better for career progression than foreign postings. FCDO officers therefore adjust the timing of their foreign postings to the needs of their families (a partner's career or children's education).

Opting for career breaks

Where possible, partners use career breaks to enable foreign postings while maintaining their attachment to the labour market. While this is easier said than done, respondents who managed to take career breaks have expressed more satisfaction with their relationship and were energised work-wise because of the break. FCDO staff can benefit from Special Unpaid Leave, a policy under which the civil servant remains a permanent

employee of the FCDO. This is a more favourable option than the career break in which the employee has to resign on his/her job and a return to the FCDO is not guaranteed. In general, career breaks are not regulated and employers do not have to offer them in the UK.

Securing remote working

Remote working is probably the most effective solution to the challenge of foreign postings and would help many partners with an office job. Whenever partners are allowed to take their work to the posted countries, there is significantly less conflict between careers and relationships.

Embracing career transformation

Some respondents have adjusted their skills or field of work to be more competitive abroad. This strategy is often combined with career moves in space – one partner acquires skills marketable in certain countries and the other partner aims to secure a posting in those countries. Although teaching English may seem an obvious career adjustment, the anecdotal evidence from this research suggests that this option does not further the career aspirations of respondents and is taken instead only in the last resort.

Considering job sequencing

Some respondents see their career as a sequence of jobs, not necessarily in their field of expertise. They would be open to a wide variety of employment. For example, several respondents took on various jobs at the mission (such as CLO) that had no relation to their previous line of work. This tended to be the most precarious and unpredictable strategy.

Actionable Insights for Employers

As a large government institution with a set of internal policies and a certain organisational culture operating within an international framework of diplomatic relations and established practices in diplomacy, the FCDO has multi-layered scope for enhancing gender equality (or reproducing inequality). Through the prism of our respondents, this section looks at several levels on which the FCDO impacts dual-career couples and potential (im)balances/(in)equality in their relationship.

The concept of gender equality in an organisation is often understood primarily as **equal representation** of men and women. The respondents noted the FCDO's long-standing efforts to appoint women to senior and prominent positions within the organisational structure, especially to certain HoM positions that have not previously been occupied by a woman. These efforts normalise women in leading positions and empower other women in the FCDO to climb the career ladder but also to tackle gender stereotypes, for example while working with different cultures. On the other hand, the respondents also noticed that many of these women do not have a partner or children, which raises doubts about how realistic it is for women with families to reach top positions.

The FCDO impacts gender equality in a less obvious way through its **posting-related policies**. Many respondents felt that these are still built around the full-time provider and full-time caregiver model where the careers of spouses receive little or no regard and institutional support. It is assumed that accompanying partners will be flexible, observe FCDO instructions loyally and prioritise the careers of FCDO officers by enabling them to work full-time on postings. This creates inequalities that may be difficult to overcome by individual couples. International relocations weaken the attachment of accompanying partners to the labour market, therefore putting them in a vulnerable position in the relationship.

Although the strong desire of partners to maintain their careers throughout posting cycles seems to be recognised within the FCDO, the support currently provided does not seem to be sufficient. Anecdotal evidence from this research suggests that partners secure jobs mainly through their own network of contacts rather than with FCDO support. Couples therefore have to rely on their own coping mechanisms and strategies to overcome this structural disadvantage. We provide the following actionable insights for the FCDO.

Promote gender equality in policies and communications

High international mobility of staff has a major impact on accompanying partners and the personal life of posted staff. Gender equality, within the institution as well as in the privacy of personal relationships, should be a guiding principle in policy-making and in shaping organizational culture. Any specific division of roles in couples should not be assumed, explicitly or implicitly. FCDO policies and internal or external communication should acknowledge, support and create conditions for individuals to determine their own identity, and address inequalities and imbalances of power that couples face as a consequence of international mobility.

Acknowledge the importance of careers for accompanying partners

Employers should take the careers of both diplomats and their accompanying partners seriously. The assumption that partners should be standing by to take over caring responsibilities from a diplomatic spouse does not resonate with contemporary dual-career diplomatic couples. The FCDO could evaluate and strengthen employment

support measures for partners, especially in the area of remote working. Job sequencing and career transformation seem to be the most challenging and costly solutions. The FCDO could therefore identify tools to enable accompanying partners to maintain their existing employment/career.

Apply a stratified, evidence-based approach to diplomatic partners' employment

Diplomatic partners face various employment situations (see the 7 models above) that require stratified approach based in a better understanding of what working diplomatic partners are engaging in, both on posting and in the UK. FCDO policies and employment supports should reflect this heterogeneity. In terms of practical employment support, the FCDO/DSFA could for example set up support networks for diplomatic partners in various employment situations to share best practices. The FCDO could also look into piloting local employment support in countries with a large number of posted diplomatic partners, so that diplomatic partners are better informed about the local job markets.

Provide opportunities for flexible and remote work

Whenever possible, opportunities for flexible and remote work for diplomats are always viewed as positive signs to the partners that their career needs are also taken into consideration. While such offerings can be short-term and even sporadic in nature, they will provide dual-career couples with extra breathing space when non-diplomat partners typically bear all the pressure of flexible and remote work.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the DSFA for kindly disseminating our call for participants. Most of all, we would like to thank each and every person who took part in this study. We feel very privileged to have talked to so many brilliant and inspiring people and we hope this research will contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of dual-career couples in diplomacy. We look forward to engaging in a continuous dialogue with you in the future.