

DIPLOMATIC PARTNERS AND PAID WORK: CHALLENGES AND REMEDIES

RESEARCH REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Partners and spouses accompanying foreign service officers on their missions abroad experience severe difficulties in maintaining pensionable income¹. The great majority (87%) of European diplomatic spouses prefer to have a job while on posting, yet they face many barriers.

These include:

- **Work rights restrictions** – diplomatic partners do not have automatic access to the local labour markets of hosting countries and cannot legally work in many of them. Some Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) also restrict partners' work rights, i.e. for security reasons or when the partner's employment is seen as a conflict of interest for the sending country.
- **Lack of clarity on taxation and social security** – navigating taxes and social security in an international setting with various and ever-changing domiciles is extremely difficult, even for tax professionals. Most partners say they need more information on social insurance/pensions and taxation (72% and 69% respectively).
- **Reduced competitiveness** – partners often lack sufficient knowledge of local language, a work history in the country, and professional networks that could help them secure a job. Although most partners are highly educated (over 80% of partners hold a university degree), their qualification may not be recognised or may be irrelevant abroad. Gaps in employment histories as a result of postings make them less competitive in their home countries as well and companies are reluctant to recruit employees that move on every few years.

European countries provide various remedies to facilitate partners' employment abroad. The main provisions include:

- **Bilateral agreements** – most European countries sign bilateral agreements with host countries that allow diplomatic partners to engage in gainful occupation in the host country. However, there are significant differences in the number of bilateral agreements European countries have in place. No European country has been able to secure work rights for spouses in all the countries in which they have a mission.
- **Jobs at missions** – some European countries, especially those with bigger missions (the UK, France), have a policy in place that gives priority to diplomatic partners when there is an opening at the mission, providing the spouse's qualifications are equal to those of the competing candidate(s). This policy caters only to a small proportion of partners and is not often an option for smaller countries with comparatively smaller missions.
- **Accompanying partner as a job** – two EU countries, Estonia and Poland, provide accompanying spouses with taxable and pensionable income. In Estonia, this applies to all spouses of posted officers. In Poland, a job contract with a specific job description is offered to spouses of ambassadors.

¹ Pensionable income or pensionable earnings are the individual's earnings eligible for calculation of his/her retirement pension.

- **Career break** – in some countries, partners with public service positions can apply for an unpaid leave if they accompany the officer abroad. However, the length and the frequency of these career breaks may not match the posting cycle, and the granting of these career breaks is not guaranteed. In Slovenia, the Foreign Service Act establishes the right of returning diplomatic partners to their job, in both the public and private sectors.
- **Structured career support** – a small number of European MFAs provide up-skilling courses, access to career advice, and information about open positions at missions. However, data evaluating the efficacy of these provisions is not available.

Overall, these provisions do not sufficiently prevent career interruptions, or the subsequent severe economic losses that diplomatic partners experience. Moving internationally every 2-5 years on average puts them into a state of economic dependence on their family, which, in the absence of appropriate pension solutions, may continue into and during retirement.

Accompanying partners' employment against the backdrop of frequent international relocations, multiple jurisdictions, legal pitfalls and many grey areas, is a complicated issue and solutions on a national/MFA level are limited. The main recommendations include:

- **Remove barriers** to accompanying partners' employment or self-employment.
- Provide **effective career support** services that will connect partners with jobs.
- Support partners in **retaining jobs** they already have, including the right to their current job, when returning from posting.
- Provide MFA officers with robust **work-life balance** policies in headquarters (HQ) and on posting.

INTRODUCTION

Maintaining paid work that allows for contributions toward, and therefore access to, social security (pensionable income) is the main structural issue European diplomatic partners have faced for decades. Dual-income² couples have become the standard throughout Europe and two incomes are often a financial necessity for families in European countries. The right of European citizens to “engage in work and to pursue a freely chosen or accepted occupation” is stipulated in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 15).

However, the career path of partners who accompany officers on foreign postings is heavily shaped by posting cycles. While the length and the pattern differ across countries (career diplomats usually spend 3-5 years abroad and 2-3 years in HQ), foreign service officers typically spend the larger part of their career abroad. This means that the work biographies of accompanying partners tend to be fragmented and their ability to secure independent pensionable income is severely compromised. Work abroad might be legally and administratively complicated or impossible and the competitiveness of partners in foreign labour markets is often significantly reduced.

For accompanying partners, the cycle of international postings throughout their economically active lifetimes places the right to work³ and the right to family life and family unity⁴ in direct conflict; diplomatic partners must often choose to exercise one of these rights at the cost of sacrificing the other.

A 2021 study of the British Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) identified seven different models of dual career couples where at least one works as an FCDO transferable officer. These range from job sharing with both partners civil servants, to one partner being employed or self-employed in the country of posting (Devine Mildorf et al., 2021). While there may be differences across European countries, depending on varying legislation and public service regulations, the model that seems to allow the greatest continuity is to work long-term for one employer that facilitates work abroad. This, however, is not a common practice, and not always possible. A great majority of diplomatic partners experience interruptions to gainful employment, or even the end of their career, once they embark on overseas postings.

This report brings together the lived experience of hundreds of diplomatic partners across Europe with the main focus on paid work and related challenges. The first part presents quantitative and qualitative data from two large EUFASA AISBL (European Union Foreign Affairs Spouses, Partners and Families Association) surveys, each with over 1200 respondents. The second part looks at existing partner employment provisions from various European countries and offers some policy recommendations for Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs).

² Although there are various types of income, this report refers to active or earned income that comes from employment or self-employment.

³ Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 15.

⁴ European Convention on Human Rights, Article 8.

METHODOLOGY

Two Pan-European online anonymous surveys were conducted on the main issues facing the population of partners and spouses accompanying European foreign service officers on foreign missions. A Survey on Partnership Issues conducted in 2019⁵ (Survey 2019) aimed to identify the main areas of concern shared by this specific target group. Based on the results, a follow up Survey on Employment, Role of Diplomatic Spouse, and Mental Health was conducted in 2020 (Survey 2020). Online questionnaires were distributed via EUFASA AISBL member associations, and in some cases also via MFAs. Both quantitative and qualitative data have been collected on the lived experience of diplomatic partners. Both questionnaires were based on preliminary research, focus groups within the target group, and they were tested on the population before dissemination. SurveyMonkey was used to collect data for both surveys. Data collection took place in 2019 and 2020, and each period lasted approximately 2 months. In both surveys, the participation was over 1,200 respondents (1,233 and 1,238 respectively).

Given that the method of data collection was the same, there was certainly an overlap between the groups of respondents of the two surveys. However, differences in demographic characteristics and turnout in individual countries in the two surveys indicate that the two groups of respondents were not identical. The survey design included both closed-ended and open-ended questions and included the following demographic categories: gender, age group, marital status, sexual orientation, nationality, highest level of education, rank of MFA officer, and number of children. The survey quantitative results are presented as aggregate data using descriptive statistics, i.e., showing the proportion of respondents who made a certain choice to a closed-ended question. The survey also allowed for comments, providing material for a qualitative analysis. Qualitative data is presented in the form of quotes by individual respondents.

Demographics of respondents

The results show that most respondents were married, heterosexual, highly educated women with children. The majority of them are EU nationals.

The gender disparity in the representation of men and women in this population is significant and encompasses all countries represented in the surveys. Three quarters (74%) of the respondents in both surveys were women.⁶

Most respondents (90%) were married or in a registered partnership (3%). Most respondents also had at least one child, with only 20% being childless. Five percent of respondents identified their relationship with the MFA officer as same-sex (Survey 2019).

⁵ For further details see Devine Mildorf, J. (2020) The issues facing partners and spouses of European diplomats: A gender perspective, Institute of International Relations.

⁶ The survey questionnaire offered three options for gender identification: female, male and other. Fewer than 5 respondents in both surveys chose the "other" option.

One-quarter (Survey 2020) and one-third (Survey 2019) of respondents reported they were born in a country different to the one the MFA officer represents as a diplomat. Of those respondents, commonly referred to as foreign born, approximately one-half were born in another EU state and the other half outside of the European Union. On average, some 85% of partners were born in an EU member state. Both men and women show a similar ratio of spouses and partners born in and outside of the country the MFA officer represents.

Partners of European diplomats are generally highly educated. Eighty-three percent of the respondents reported they hold a university degree, with the majority of those being a master's degree. A small proportion of the respondents (15%) said they have a secondary school leaving diploma or the equivalent, or some higher education but no degree (Survey 2020). This is well over the education attainment levels in the European Union. According to Eurostat figures from 2022⁷, just over 30% of the EU population (aged 25-74) had completed tertiary education.

⁷ Eurostat, Educational attainment statistics.

MAIN FINDINGS

1) Weakened economic status

Low employment rate

According to Eurostat, the employment rate in the EU was 75.4% in 2023 (80.5% for men, 70.2% for women), and ranged from 85.3% in Iceland to 66.3% in Italy. The level of educational attainment has a significant impact on the employment rate; in 2023 the employment rate for people with high levels of education was 86.3%⁸.

The 2019 and 2020 EUFASA surveys have found foreign service partners to be highly educated, with a high desire to work. Eighty-seven percent of respondents said they prefer to have a job while on posting (Survey 2019). While having one's own income and more independence were given as important reasons to have a job on posting, the most common reason given for working at post was that it is an important part of their identity (Survey 2020).

What are the most important aspects of having a job on posting (or in HQ) for you personally?
(you can choose more than one option)

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Important part of identity	66,20%
Having own income	62,50%
Sense of independence	62,50%
Pursuing own career	55,28%
Earning towards pension	47,87%
Social status	25,93%
N/A	4,35%
TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS 1,080	

To what extent is the desire to work fulfilled? The honest answer is that we don't know exactly. There is very little data available that would indicate the employment rate among partners of European foreign service officers⁹. EUFASA AISBL surveys suggest a relatively low employment rate on posting overall. Only one-third of all respondents said they had ever worked in the local job market on posting, and even fewer respondents had ever worked remotely or had been self-employed on posting.

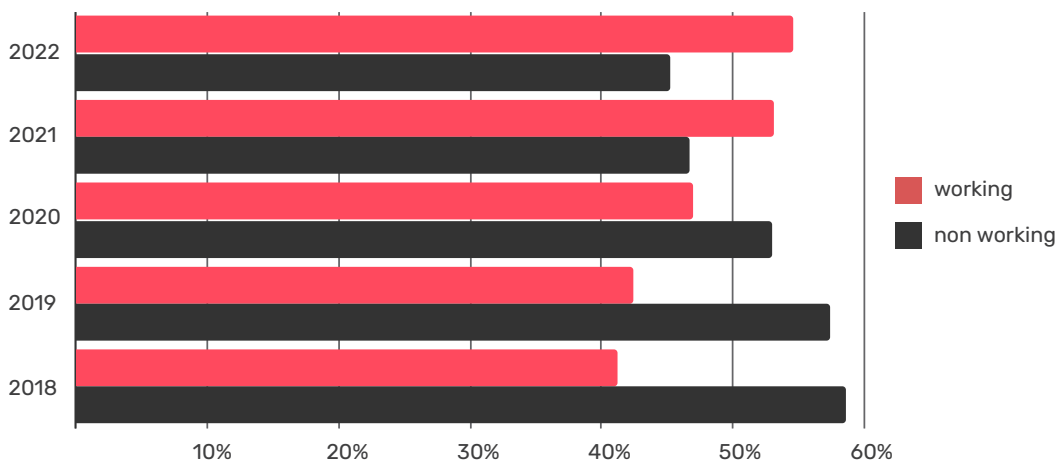
⁸ Eurostat, Employment rate.

⁹ EUFASA Research Department is planning to launch a survey measuring the employment rate of European diplomatic partners in 2024.

- **26%** of respondents have experience with **cross-border remote working**
- **24%** of respondents have experience with **self-employment** abroad
- **34%** of respondents have experience with **working in the local labour market** on posting

MFAs are usually the only stakeholders with access to all posted partners (through MFA officers or directly) but almost no European MFA regularly surveys the population of partners in its system. One exception is the UK. The Diplomatic Service Families Association (DSFA), which provides family support for the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, annually surveys partners of FCDO and other government departments officers posted abroad. With a response rate of around 2,000 respondents, this data from 2018 to 2022 provides a unique glimpse into the employment of accompanying partners in given years, and suggests some trends.

First, the percentage of partners who work while on posting is steadily growing. In 2018, the majority of respondents were not working, while in 2022, the majority of respondents reported they were working on posting.



Source: DSFA

Second, the percentage of partners who reported working remotely across borders from post doubled from 7.2% in 2018 to 14.2% in 2022. This increase could have been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased employers' interest in facilitating remote work, resulted in some temporary easing of official cross-border restrictions¹⁰, and increased awareness of and interest in remote work among employees.

¹⁰ For example, the European Commission issued a guidance note on telework to coordinate social security systems in the EU for workers who were temporarily not able to work in the country of their employer due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Third, the percentage of partners working in the local economy abroad remains relatively low, between 11% and 13%. The UK is a European champion in the number of bilateral agreements and active employment support to partners. These figures suggest that securing a job in the local market on posting is not easy, even with MFA support.

Fourth, the percentage of respondents employed by UK missions also remains stable, at around 13%. This means that UK missions employ nearly one quarter of all working partners of UK posted officers.

It is important to note that due to methodological differences, the UK data on partner employment rate is not fully comparable with EU employment rates mentioned above and cannot be extrapolated to other European countries. The UK data is self-reported, with loose definitions of employment and self employment, no minimum number of hours worked, and no exact knowledge of the total number of posted partners. Additionally, as this employment information was not collected anonymously, it is possible that some partners who work but are not sure they are fully compliant with local employment or tax regulations under-reported their employment-related activity. Finally, as the UK provides significantly more support to posted officers' partners seeking employment than other European countries, it is likely that the percentage of partners from other European diplomatic services who work while on posting will be notably lower.

High untapped potential

Low employment rate would suggest high unemployment. However, with the population of diplomatic partners, the classification of their un-/employment status may be more complicated. As with the data on employment, there is little data available on how many partners do not work on posting and even less on the reasons why. The data from EUFASA surveys 2019 and 2020 show that partners work less than they would like to, in less qualified jobs, or they do not work at all. In economic terms, these are classified as underemployment, unemployment or economic inactivity. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) distinguishes two forms of **underemployment**¹¹. 1) A time-related underemployment where individuals work fewer hours than a full-time job in their chosen fields, and 2) an underemployment related to an inadequate employment situation. In the latter scenario, individuals are unable to work in their chosen field and therefore work in a job below their skill set and customary wage. Although definitions of **unemployment** vary, the basic factor is that an individual has to be actively seeking a job in order to be classified as unemployed. In European countries, this is usually linked with jobseeker support as part of social security coverage. However, because posted partners do not live in their home countries, they fall out of the national unemployment statistics and cannot benefit from the jobseeker support while on posting. Partners who don't engage in gainful employment on posting and who are not actively seeking a job could be classified as **economically inactive**. Economically inactive is when an individual of a working age (those aged 15-64 years according to OECD), is out of work and has not actively looked for work in the past month. The EUFASA survey data suggests a significant proportion of economically inactive partners may be so-called discouraged workers. These individuals are available to work and would like to work but are not, or have given up, seeking a job for various reasons (e.g. poor working prospects, no work permit, loss of allowances, etc.). Further research is needed to establish the proportion of diplomatic partners with various un-/employment status and the extent of untapped potential among foreign service partners.

¹¹ Greenwood, A.M. (1999) International definitions and prospects of Underemployment Statistics.

¹² OECD, Working age population.

High costs of going on posting

Accompanying an MFA officer on posting comes at high costs, which are mostly unrecognised and uncompensated.

Financial costs

There are several significant financial and opportunity costs of being a foreign service partner, including earning less or no income at all while on posting; missing employment and salary history which makes it harder to get a fairly-paid job even when returning to headquarters; reduced or missing contributions to social insurances and pensions¹³.

There may also be direct expenses related to obtaining work permits in foreign countries, such as costs of tax advice and accountant services, which may also be significant. These are all work-related costs that partners would not have, had they not accompanied the officer on foreign posting.

Emotional costs

Being economically dependent has consequences not only for financial but also mental well-being. According to the surveys, the difficulty in maintaining a job and an independent income is the most stressful aspect of repeated relocations for 76% of all respondents (Survey 2019). Loss of financial independence is stressful for 59% of respondents, and 49% feel stressed because of the potential loss of their pension entitlement and social security (Survey 2019).

Professional costs

Respondents reported that frequent relocations had a negative impact on their careers, for example due to incurred gaps in work and salary histories, fragmented biographies, a long-term inability to work in their chosen fields or loss of their qualifications.

Time costs

The process of searching for a new job consists of many steps that together take a lot of time. Seeking a job is a job in itself, from sifting through job boards and career service websites, researching the chosen field, and researching employers, to preparing application materials, polishing interview skills, and networking. The interview process alone can take over a month¹⁴. The average unemployment period in EU27 was over 10 months in 2021 according to OECD¹⁵. Both statistics refer to job seekers in their home countries. Although quantitative data is not available, it is reasonable to assume that a job search in a foreign labour market will take even longer.

¹³ For more details on retirement pensions see Devine Mildorf, J. and Larsen, K.W. (2023) European diplomatic partners' and spouses' pensions: problems and solutions, EUFASA AIBL.

¹⁴ Chamberlain, A. (2017) How long does it take to hire? Interview duration in 25 countries.

¹⁵ OECD, Average duration of unemployment.

2) Specific challenges

While the desire for independent status and income through a salaried job is clear, diplomatic partners face many barriers and obstacles in securing a paid job, both on posting and in HQ.

Restricted access to labour market

As citizens of a foreign country, partners are not automatically permitted to access the local labour market on posting. Based on the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961), the host country typically grants diplomatic status to foreign diplomats and their eligible family members, which allows them to reside in the host country and enjoy certain privileges and immunities. Working rights and access to the local labour market for family members of diplomats are not covered by the convention. When posted to countries where there is no legal agreement or mechanism allowing diplomatic partners access to work permits, partners are generally prohibited from working, with few exceptions.

Within the EU the freedom of movement should guarantee EU citizens right to work, but even for EU citizens posted within the EU, access to a foreign labour market is not always straightforward. In 2020, 15% of partners who had EU passports and were posted to another EU member state reported that they encountered problems because their diplomatic status conflicted with their right to work in the local labour market, according to the EU Free Movement Directive (Survey, 2020). The following are specific examples of such conflicts as experienced by respondents:

"In Finland I was told I could not work, pay tax, access health care etc. Eventually I persisted and got all the above. We even considered getting a divorce to give me the same rights as any Nordic citizen. When I first pursued the issue in Finland I was told I had to give up my diplomatic status. When I asked to have my diplomatic status removed I was told it wasn't a privilege I could renounce."

"While posted in Denmark [after 2000] I was told by the DK tax office that my diplomatic status didn't entitle me to a tax allowance. I deregistered as a diplomat and registered as an EU citizen, and after a period they accepted I was no longer a diplomat (basically I found someone in the tax office who actually knew the rules) and was granted tax allowances. They never refunded me the excess tax I paid."

"In Sweden I am unable to register as resident under freedom of movement whilst associated with a diplomatic spouse. Getting a tax code has proven immensely difficult."

Local labour markets can also be further protected. For example, some countries allow the employment of foreigners only when there is no interest in the job from nationals. Survey results suggest that these protective measures are applied on diplomatic partners even when there is a bilateral agreement in place.

For couples whose relationship status is not officially recognized by either the sending or the host state (e.g. same-sex or unmarried), simply keeping the family together is already a challenge. Trying to secure a work permit in such precarious conditions might be too risky. As one respondent noted:

“Under the current visa as a diplomatic spouse in a locally unrecognized registered partnership, my visa doesn’t allow me to work or start my own business here without risking being expelled from the country—or attempting to convert my work visa which has a very low success rate and would result in separation from my husband.”

Diplomatic status challenge

Diplomatic status in the host country is another potential hurdle in securing a paid job. Having a diplomatic status may preclude partners from opening their own bank accounts or having a tax status in the host country, both of which may be needed for employment or self-employment. Many respondents noted that employers are reluctant to employ a diplomatic partner due to immunity and other issues related to diplomatic status in the country. For many, paid work was not possible while they were in the country on a diplomatic visa. Family members of diplomats who wish to work on posting often have to change their residency status in the host country¹⁶. With the exception of other diplomatic missions and some international organisations, a spouse would typically have to renounce his/her diplomatic status and, if needed, obtain a work and residence permit. In some countries it is possible to renounce only some immunities related to employment and keep other diplomatic immunities when outside the workplace. However, in countries with high security risks, renouncing diplomatic status is not a realistic option for a diplomat’s family members. Also, a clear guidance on the procedures related to immunities and self-employment in the host country may not be available. While 38% of respondents reported they were not well informed about the implications that taking on paid employment while on posting might have on their diplomatic status, 55% of respondents thought their diplomatic status had an impact on their chances to secure paid employment on posting (Survey 2020).

Conflict of interest

Spouses and partners of posted diplomats are not completely free to make decisions about their engagement in paid work on posting, and their working rights are shaped and scrutinized by written and unwritten rules or personal decisions of people in power who they cannot influence. Some sending states effectively reserve the right to approve (or reject) a potential job position before the partner accepts it. This may be due to a potential conflict of interest, for example when working for an NGO, company or host government that represents conflicting values or receives funding from the sending state.

¹⁶ See for example the Protocol guide immunities and privileges in Belgium.

"I had an offer to work at the (non-European) Embassy in the visa section, but we have had a halt by our Ambassador who told my husband that my decision would have had an impact on the security clearance of my husband to deal with some delicate dossier of our Embassy."

Spouses of diplomats are linked to their sending states, and the political situation and relationship between the host and the sending state/institution is considered by all: the sending state, the host state and the potential employer.

"Working for locals is seen as in conflict with my country's interest."

"I was refused a position because of my diplomatic status and public role of my husband. It was not a legal problem in the country, but the employer feared a conflict of interest because it was an NGO."

"The EU is so much involved in this country that most employers would risk a conflict of interest."

"Often employers don't want to hire me as they don't want to be connected to the country of the Embassy, or suspected of nepotism, even when I am the most qualified applicant. This has happened more than once and I have been told directly by the person responsible for hiring."

Temporality and transition period

It can be a long process to enter a new employment even in one's home country. On posting, however, partners face additional administrative and financial hurdles that further prolong the process. Obtaining a work permit may be lengthy and expensive. Furthermore, accessing the local labour market on posting will generally require lifting the partner's diplomatic status, which is an additional administrative step partners have to navigate, often without any guidance or support. On some postings, especially outside of Europe, the only option for partners to find a paid job is with foreign missions or international organisations, where the hiring process can take over a year.

Moving internationally every 2–5 years could make partners less competitive in the labour market when applying for long-term positions. Employers may be less inclined to hire and invest in an employee who seems sure to leave the position in a few years. Moreover, the length of the posting is volatile also because it depends on the actual geopolitical situation. Diplomats can be recalled home or expelled by the host country based on reasons they cannot influence.

"Employers consider my status as temporary and don't invest in me because they know I will have to move as I am a diplomat's wife."

"When I mentioned that I was in the country only temporarily (diplomatic posting of my husband), employers immediately thought, "she won't stay long enough" and therefore were not interested in hiring me."

"The knowledge that my wife is a diplomat and is therefore on a fixed term posting was a significant barrier to some employers who believed a 3 year term was not enough for them to consider me for the job."

Many spouses try to solve the above challenges by becoming self-employed. Twenty-four percent of respondents reported having experienced freelancing. However, self-employment is no panacea as the following quotes demonstrate:

"I cannot work as a freelance graphic designer because I lose all my contacts with every move, and time zones are also a factor. In applying for full-time positions, all employers must accept a fixed timeframe, therefore [there is] no opportunity for advancement and [I am] not likely to be trained or [have my] skills developed."

"Not allowed to work in many countries. Hence, self-employed now but the move after 3-4 years makes it difficult to maintain a steady client base."

"It is difficult for example when you decide to work as a freelancer/consultant, ideal would be to be a freelancer for your own country, to have one single country to deal with (taxes, insurances, health insurance, etc.). It is extremely difficult and impractical to register as a freelancer in every country [in which] you live for a while and then to work out all the details. Especially for freelance jobs like language teacher – you [perform] this service in a country so you would need to register in that country, but for a person moving frequently it does not make any sense to register in every country you live in. It would be the easiest to be able to register in your home country."

Seeking a new job is time intensive, even more so in a foreign country and unfamiliar labour market. The high frequency of international moves, the uncertainty around the length of stay and the specific location of a posting do not provide conditions for accompanying partners to maintain a paid job without significant interruptions.

Decreased competitiveness

Respondents felt disadvantaged in the **labour market on foreign posting** based on their:

- insufficient knowledge of the official local language **48%**
- diplomatic status **36%**
- gaps in their CV **29%**
- being married to a diplomat **27%**
- nationality **14%**

Decreased competitiveness on posting

Being a foreigner significantly limits the pool of jobs spouses can apply for and decreases their competitiveness in comparison to locals. One-half of respondents (49%) said they felt disadvantaged in the labour market on posting because of insufficient knowledge of the official local language. In the competition for jobs, spouses of diplomats are disadvantaged by the lack of a local professional network, local knowledge, contacts or work history in the country. Other common issues are related to recognition of diplomas, qualification or experience. In addition, there may not be any work opportunities available in a specific field of expertise.

"As a [medical profession], my chances to get a job abroad depend on mutual recognition of diplomas. English-speaking countries do not recognize my degrees so I have to keep my job in [home country] and commute. The only solution is to reduce my working hours, and commute (3 weeks work - 2 weeks abroad), and that will reduce my income and my pension with no compensation."

Gomes de Araujo (2020) conducted a study on highly skilled women and intra-EU mobility. She looked into the main obstacles this group faces when integrating into the labour market of an EU country that is not their home country. According to her findings, it was the lack of social networks, public support services and relevant information that made it difficult for this group to find an appropriate job. Even within the European Union, where intra-EU mobility is guaranteed by law and is even supported through various EU programmes¹⁷, national labour markets of individual member states are still difficult to penetrate for EU citizens as migrant workers¹⁸. The disadvantage of being foreign applies within the European Union as well as outside of it.

¹⁷ E.g., Erasmus and Erasmus plus.

¹⁸ The access to the labour market has been restricted even within the European Union. After the 2004 enlargement of the union, a number of member states applied a transitional period before they allowed citizens of the "new" member states to enter their labour market without a work permit. Some of the original EU member states (before May 2004) still apply transitional agreements that currently restrict freedom of movement to workers for a certain time period.

Underemployment

The difficult position in foreign labour markets leads to underemployment. The underemployed are people who work below their capacity, e.g. fewer hours and in less-qualified jobs. According to a respondent: “usually the first job in a new country is below your professional level.” Many respondents reported they took on precarious types of work such as private language lessons, translations and other temporary, unprotected, insecure jobs, sometimes unrelated to their professional qualifications. One respondent summarized her experiences:

“Luckily enough, I teach French so I can find a job more easily. My career, if we may call it so, is like a Gruyere cheese: 6 months there, one-and-a-half years here. Over time, one is supposed to get a certain professional reckoning and get to higher professional ranking. That doesn’t happen to me. My experiences are so different that it’s like starting fresh from the beginning just like a novice. What I earn doesn’t really allow me to contribute to the family expenses. I could do it last year in [an EU city] because I found a job at [an employer] as a teacher. Amazing environment! But the work status was awful. There’s no protection for the worker. The work contract didn’t give any of the benefits any work contract usually gives in [an EU country]. That was [an employer] in [an EU city]. So how suitable can a contract be in [a non-EU country]? What about my retirement pension? How will my numerous jobs abroad be taken into account? I don’t think they will ever be and even if they were, the many short periods of work will surely lead to a ridiculous retirement pension.”

“As qualifications differ from country to country and experiences are different, I always found myself on the lowest pay rung, as if I had no work experience, simply for the fact that whatever I had done previously was not fully recognized, as it was not done in that particular country.”

Loss of qualifications

Disruptions in work biographies have a negative effect on career prospects and can lead to a complete loss of qualifications, as demonstrated by the following:

“I was not allowed to work in either of the countries we have been in. It has meant I have had to lapse my nursing registration as well as losing my grade, pension and long-term (healthcare) service and annual leave entitlement. If I don’t re-register within the next few months then I lose my registration completely and will then have to pay to retrain and do 3 months full-time unpaid work to re-register and regain my qualification. I will then have to start at the bottom of the pay scale.”

Decreased competitiveness at home

While on posting partners are less competitive mainly because it is not their home job market. At home they gradually become less competitive due to CV gaps caused by periods spent abroad.

In the **labour market at home** respondents felt disadvantaged based on:

- gaps in their CV **44%**
- being married or related to a diplomat **19%**
- age **11%**
- **38%** did not feel disadvantaged on any basis

According to some respondents, returning back home could be more difficult than going on posting:

“So far, coming back to my country after years abroad proved to be the most challenging situation I had to face so far in terms of employment. I had [many] more issues here than anywhere else in finding a job, being considered often overqualified and not being able to guarantee a continuity to potential employers. Now I am very worried that the “holes” in my curriculum [vitae], not having found a job for a long time, are going to affect badly my chances for future employment too.”

A significant proportion of partners come from a different country than the MFA officer. Their “home” posting is therefore yet another foreign posting with all the above-mentioned disadvantages.

Work-life tensions

Living in a foreign country without the usual informal and formal support networks such as family, friends or childcare facilities, means partners may have to spend more time on childcare. Within the family unit, partners tend to be assumed primary carers who organise their schedules around childcare to a much higher degree than MFA officers, who are assumed primary breadwinners expected to prioritise paid work. Long working hours outside of the regular office hours seem to be a common feature for posted officers, especially due to numerous social events where their participation as representatives of the sending state is expected. In fact, the lack of work-life balance and long working hours are seen by partners as the most common aspect of the MFA officers’ job that is most challenging for their relationship (Survey 2019).

The carer/breadwinner division of roles is therefore amplified by long working hours of the officer on one hand and the difficulties of the accompanying partner to maintain full-time employment on the other. The parenting role can also become more time-intensive because some children may not transition well and may need more parental support at home.

Furthermore, research shows that the work of embassies/missions abroad sometimes places significant demands on the partner as well, for example in the preparation, hosting and attending of diplomatic events (Survey 2020). This informal work in the interest of the sending state is typically unpaid and unrecognised, and can conflict with the potential gainful employment of partners. Some respondents found it difficult to combine the role of a diplomatic spouse with a professional job:

“The spouse’s role requires nearly 20 hours a week, on average, including commute times, to support husband, who is the Head of Mission.”

Nearly **one half** of all respondents said they extended their stay on posting or **did not join** the officer on posting (or seriously considered doing so), the most common reason being family, closely followed by not losing a job.

Stereotypes

The model of “diplomatic wife,” e.g., a spouse who does not have a paid job and dedicates her time to support the diplomat’s career, is deeply embedded in the institutional culture of MFAs. Sometimes, partners can be prevented from getting a paid job because a dual-career model does not seem to be always accepted as a norm in diplomacy. As one respondent experienced on her first posting when she wanted to seek employment outside of the embassy, “the Ambassador said ‘my spouses do not work’ and that was that.” While this particular experience may give an impression of a different era, multiple other respondents also reported similar experiences. “Ambassadors’ spouses are not supposed to work on posting,” reported one respondent. She added that it was not a written policy, only an understanding – a part of the institutional culture of the MFA. Another respondent noted:

“When my husband was a consul in [an EU country], I passed a special training at the ministry and was working as Administration and Financial Officer at the Embassy but later when he was a General Consul or an Ambassador, I could not work.”

Sometimes, the obstacle might be purely prejudicial. “They thought I had already enough money [so] I did not need a job,” reported one respondent. There is a strong assumption that people involved in diplomacy are always wealthy and privileged. Spouses of diplomats might be seen as, as one respondent called it, “luxury wives.”

Restrictive policies

While the EU's declared objective is full employment and many active labour market policies aim to maximise employment levels, diplomatic partners face policies with the opposite impact. Internal policies of numerous European MFAs indirectly but effectively discourage partners of diplomats from accepting employment on posting. These policies make employment on posting costly and disadvantageous. The most common policies include the loss of health insurance, loss of social insurance or loss of allowances if the partner has his or her own income.

For example, the Czech MFA pays its officers allowances (defined as "compensation for increased living expenses"¹⁹) and contributions to the state pension system on behalf of spouses – but only if those spouses have no income of their own.

Similarly in Slovenia, the Regulation on Salaries and Other Benefits of Civil Servants Abroad²⁰ (Article 24) provides that the reimbursement of the costs of voluntary inclusion in the mandatory pension and disability insurance, and reimbursement of the costs of unemployment and parental care insurance for the spouse, belongs to the officer if the spouse or partner is unemployed on posting.

Other countries have a certain threshold for cutting allowances or benefits. A respondent representing Italy noted:

"In case I get a paid employment with a gross salary higher than EUR 2,000 per year, I will be deprived of the health insurance and the diplomatic passport. The former, in some countries, is extremely expensive and, unless you manage to secure a very good job, which is not always the case when you move around the world every 4 years, few employers will provide it as part of the contract."

Spouses representing Austria have a similar experience:

"Before 2005 a spouse could only earn marginal earnings at post, otherwise spouse and housing allowance were taken away from MFA officer, i.e., we were, in reality, not allowed to work. In 2005, [the] MFA removed [the] income limit for a spouse working at post, i.e., spousal earnings no longer affect the MFA officer's post allowances. But a spouse is excluded from the Austrian social security insurance if his/her monthly income exceeds €446.81 (marginal earnings threshold) i.e., the situation is not advantageous, unless one has top earnings to compensate for the cost of private health insurance and this is rarely the case. This situation has seriously impacted foreign-born spouses with resulting low or no pension, due to insufficient contribution months."

¹⁹ Government Regulation No. 62/1994 Coll., on the provision of reimbursement of certain expenses to employees of budget and contributory organizations with regular workplaces abroad.

²⁰ Regulation on Salaries and Other Benefits of Civil Servants Abroad.

Health insurance for spouses representing Portugal is also threatened by their paid work on posting:

"We can't have a job outside Europe, except in countries (very few) with bilateral agreements. Besides that, if we have a job outside our country we lose all health insurance in Portugal."

Several European MFAs also have policies in place that restrict family members from working at a mission. These policies do not allow family members to work in line-managing positions at post. Especially for smaller countries with smaller missions this completely rules out partners from applying for jobs at their own embassy/mission, as the MFA officer would likely be their superior. While this practice is understandable, it limits work opportunities for partners.

Lack of information and clarity

50% of respondents said they **were not well informed** about the administrative steps they need to take in order to take on paid employment on posting, while only **17%** felt **well informed**.

Of those employed abroad, **70%** of respondents found it difficult, complicated or impossible to ensure they fully comply with their tax, social insurance and other obligations, **23%** found it feasible and only **5%** easy and straightforward.

If spouses want to work on posting, they have to navigate through different national and international legislations, made even more complicated by their diplomatic status, which is a niche area for many employers, authorities and legal advisors. The following quote from a respondent encapsulates this informational vacuum:

"Neither I, nor my clients, nor the state of posting, nor my state of nationality, nor my last state of residence, nor my accountant, know where I am supposed to pay tax and social security contributions. And I don't know where will be my next state of posting or where I will retire. I am a dual national, my wife has a third nationality and she works for a fourth."

The lack of clarity and availability of information is yet another significant barrier that keeps members of this community out of the labour market and in a position of economic dependence.

Among the respondents, **77%** admitted they lack information on social insurance/pension, **67%** on taxation, and **49%** on health insurance.

The following quotes demonstrate as much:

"It's difficult to know what you don't know! It's not always easy to get good advice on tax, social insurance and pensions either at home or away."

"It is difficult to find a job. Then if I find one, it is difficult to find out all information on the impact to my situation – social security system, impact on pension, health insurance in [the sending state]. We do not have one common office we can contact. Neither can our office of foreign affairs answer those questions. I as a private person need to deal with every subject and authority office individually."

"My company had to appoint a tax advisor to sort out my taxation. If this was not the case and I was not lucky enough to have my company's support, it would have been really difficult and complicated. If I were to get a local salary for example, I would need to appoint a tax professional to navigate local taxation rules and also figure out the impact on the [a European country] earnings."

"My employer didn't know under which tax rules I would fall and it took the MFA a few weeks to gather all the information from HQ and me gathering information from local tax authorities. As a [EU country] national I do not fall under any social insurance even though I am married to an [another EU country] diplomat, which will cause tremendous problems in my future of not having paid into any social insurance. Neither my home country, nor my spouse's country or the country I currently live in are responsible for me."

"My business is registered in my home country. I pay my taxes there. I am not sure if this is ok at all the destinations I lived, but I do not know how else to ensure my pension after coming back."

"I think my pay was always low enough that I didn't have to comply but again I didn't have much information."

"I had to go through a painful process both at home and in the host country. I had to seek professional help but even then it was unclear if I was fully compliant with all the regulations."

"Difficulty mostly related to the tax report. I'm still not sure if I am doing this right and kind of fear getting a massive bill at some point."

"It is all very unclear how it affects [us] since the laws in the country are very complex and no one at post can clarify. Working as a freelancer may seem a better solution but once again information at post is non-existent."

"Our embassy staff at post try hard to be helpful on this but the situation is complicated, and in many countries there is no clarity – the host authorities prefer to keep things rather unclear, so as not to establish precedents."

The ambiguity and uncertainty applies to healthcare and other social security provisions such as childcare benefits, maternity and parental leave or unemployment benefits. It is clear from the experience of the respondents that due to the repeated relocations, persons accompanying diplomats on foreign missions can drop out of the social security system of the sending state but at the same time cannot easily join the social security system of another.

Lack of support

While a certain level of MFA support is expected, partners often feel they have to fend for themselves when navigating their career in foreign labour markets. So far only a few MFAs dedicate resources to active employment policies that would include job placement activities, counselling or vocational guidance (see below). Most MFAs' partner-employment efforts are limited to bilateral agreements with host countries that allow partners to work in the host country legally.

78% of respondents **received no support from their MFA** in seeking work/employment. Only **15%** of respondents have been informed about job openings at other EU missions.

3) Partner employment policies

Bilateral agreements

The issue with partners not having access to labour markets on posting was already officially recognized at the EU level in 1987, when the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation in this area. The recommendation recognises "the difficulties encountered in many states by members of the family (...) of a member of a diplomatic mission (...) who wish to engage in a gainful occupation" as well as the desire of spouses to work²¹. The recommendation provides language for a model bilateral agreement that enables diplomatic family members to engage in gainful employment on posting.

Many European countries have signed such bilateral agreements that allow access to the labour market to a diplomat's "dependents." The number of signed bilateral agreements varies significantly across European countries. While the UK has over 50 bilateral agreements in place, other countries have signed fewer than 10.

²¹ Recommendations No. R (87) 2, containing a model agreement to enable the members of the family forming part of the household of a member of a diplomatic mission or consular post to engage in a gainful occupation.

Who qualifies as a “dependent” is the subject of a decision by both the sending and the receiving state. Typically, these are an accompanying partner and the child/ren of a diplomat²². With respect to spouses and partners, heterosexual marriage is certainly the most common and globally recognised relationship status. Unmarried or same-sex partners do not always receive equal treatment to married spouses. Most European countries recognise same-sex couples, however some exceptions still exist. For EU/European countries, it is more often the host state that does not recognise same-sex partners/spouses. That can create difficulties for the diplomat’s partner not only in benefitting from the bilateral agreement in terms of accessing the local labour market, but sometimes even in accompanying the diplomat to the posting.

Jobs at missions

Some countries – for example the UK, France or Germany – seek candidates for job openings at Missions among diplomatic partners as a policy. Should a partner have similar qualifications as other candidates, s/he will be given preference in the selection process. The UK statistics (see above) show that a significant number of partners are employed at UK Missions. However, this provision is possible mostly for larger missions, where there is a wider range of positions and required competencies, and more jobs in which one would not have to report directly to one’s spouse.

Some attempts have already been made to find solutions on an EU level. In 2015, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU member states informally agreed to open local staff vacancies to spouses and partners of EU member state diplomats and EU officials accredited in the same host country²³. The aim was to create a communication channel between the various missions and EU delegations, where information on vacant posts would be exchanged on a reciprocal basis. However, the implementation of this informal agreement seems to have faltered, as 83% of respondents have never received any information about job openings at other EU missions or delegations (Survey 2020). A survey of EUFASA diplomatic spouses’ associations conducted in 2020 showed that most of them were also unaware of such an arrangement.

Structured career support

The essence of these measures is to provide targeted information and tools so that partners have a better chance in competing for jobs. This includes information on the specifics of the local labour market, information on job openings, and access to local professional networks. Some of these are provided directly by MFAs, and some indirectly, e.g., through diplomatic family associations or commercial providers.

²² Some countries, for example Czechia, use a wider definition of a family.

²³ This informal agreement stems from the 2015 meeting of EEAS - Member States Human Resources Network where a discussion on the expansion of employment opportunities for spouses of EU diplomats was held.

For example, the FCDO subscribed to the services of NetExpat²⁴, a company that provides structured assistance to mobile employees and their accompanying partners. The partner support ultimately aims to assist in finding a job in the host country through tailored services such as career counselling, networking skills, or job search assistance.

The Swiss MFA introduced measures to help partners to return to employment by introducing competitive mid-career internships within the Swiss government. Courses are also offered on career orientation, networking, and self-employment. The Swiss approach to partner employment seeks to cover both the improvement of employability (skills) and the actual acquisition of work within the government sector to close gaps in the CV and give partners current experience, references, and a professional network.

The partners of German MFA officers can apply for financial support (up to €4,000 per posting). This funding can be used for reskilling/upskilling, further education, coaching, consultation with employment agencies, etc. It is possible to apply repeatedly (on posting and on return to Berlin).

In France, partners can discuss employment options on posting with the MFA's HR section. On their return to Paris, partners are entitled to support from MFA's career adviser. MFA also hosts employment forums with external job recruiters to which partners are invited.

Income for accompanying spouse

A European outlier, Estonia, provides accompanying partners with payments directly from the MFA for the duration of their posting abroad. These payments are made monthly and directly to the spouse. The Estonian Foreign Service Act sets the amount of the allowance to double the minimum monthly wage of Estonia²⁵.

This provision eliminates the problem of finding a job in the local labour market of a foreign country. The downside is that partners cannot pursue their own career, as they may be effectively motivated to stay out of the labour market in order to benefit from the allowance. The resulting gaps in their CV might make it more difficult to find a job on their arrival to headquarters. Still, the Estonian example is probably the best existing solution in terms of maintaining economic independence (own income) and sustaining contributions to the social security system for partners of diplomats.

The Polish MFA offers work contracts to accompanying partners of ambassadors. Unlike in Estonia, these contracts include a specific job description, such as managing the residence and residence staff. The work contract allows partners to make social security contributions toward the pension system in Poland.

²⁴ www.netexpat.com

²⁵ Foreign Service Act of Estonia (2006).

Unpaid leave

Taking unpaid leave for the duration of posting is a possible means of maintaining jobs for partners. Civil servants in some European countries are entitled to an unpaid leave of certain duration by law. However, the length and frequency may not match the posting cycles. Some countries, such as Lithuania, therefore harmonise the unpaid leave of civil servants with the length of posting in their Foreign Service Act. This means that by law, a diplomatic partner who works in the Lithuanian civil service should be granted unpaid leave for the duration of all postings the diplomat is assigned²⁶.

Slovenia provides for unpaid leave for the duration of posting(s) in the public and private sector as well. According to the Slovenian Foreign Service Act: “The spouse of a diplomat (...), who stays abroad with the diplomat, has the right to suspend the employment contract during the stay with the diplomat abroad, in accordance with the law governing employment relations. During the suspension of the employment contract, contractual and other rights and obligations from the employment relationship, which are directly related to the performance of work, are suspended. During the suspension of the employment contract, the employer may not terminate the employment contract, unless the reasons for extraordinary termination are given or if the procedure for terminating the employer is initiated.” (Zakon o zunanjih zadevah (ZZZ-1-NPB7), Article 51, para 2). The pitfall of this provision is that in case the spouse does work on posting, the officer loses entitlement to reimbursement of social security payments on behalf of the spouse, which may demotivate spouses from seeking employment on posting²⁷.

Although not legally embedded, a similar provision involving the private sector exists in France. A French-based network of European businesses with a significant number of expat employees, Cindex, offers a spouse solution in the form of a spouses’ convention. Signatory businesses (41 companies as of June 2023) pledge to offer the benefit of unpaid leave to spouses of posted employees. The French MFA signed this agreement in 2009 (www.cindex.fr). The Spouses Cindex Convention aims to improve the international mobility of employees of signatory companies by allowing the accompanying partners to take 3-5 years of unpaid leave. When back in France, they can return to their jobs. The Cindex was founded in 1980 by 9 major French companies²⁸, all operating in international markets, to pool their knowledge and achieve better international mobility management. In order to benefit from the convention, it is necessary that both companies – that of the expatriate employee and that of the spouse – are members of Cindex and signatories of the agreement. The impact of this provision is therefore limited.

²⁶ See article 28 of the Lithuanian Law on the Foreign Service.

²⁷ Regulation on Salaries and Other Benefits of Civil Servants Abroad.

²⁸ Air France, Banque Paribas, Charbonnages de France, Elf Aquitaine, Institut Français du Pétrole, Renault, Schneider Electric, Société Générale, Total.

4) Recommendations for MFAs

Diplomatic partners' employment is a complex issue with many variables, international stakeholders and grey areas. National governments have limited options for supporting this target group and effectively increasing their employment rate. The following recommendations are based on existing practice and need-gaps identified in research.

The underlying recommendation is to mainstream a dual-career and dual-income family model in all HR and foreign posting-related MFA policies.

In diplomacy, the public and private spheres are interconnected to a much higher degree than in other sectors. The two careers and family responsibilities within one family unit also impact each other. The recommendations therefore focus not only on the active labour market policies for accompanying partners, but also on work-life balance and family-friendly policies for MFA officers.

Remove barriers

- Increase the number of Work Dependent Agreements (or similar provisions) to increase the number of labour markets accessible to partners.
- Provide assistance to partners with the process of work permit application on posting. Consider covering related fees.
- Review and amend posting-related policies that restrict or disincentivize partners' employment on posting (e.g. loss of health or pension insurance, loss of various allowances, etc.).
- Provide direct and adequate information and assistance to partners on the administrative steps necessary to take at post in order to engage in gainful employment.
- Identify ways to reduce barriers to cross-border remote work.

Connect people with jobs

- Provide access to upskilling/reskilling courses for partners.
- Provide access to tailored career-support services for partners.
- Expand employment opportunities for partners in the civil service, for example in the form of a traineeship.
- Inform partners about job openings at missions of EU countries.
- On a regular basis, evaluate to what extent career-support policies for partners improve their employment rates.

Retain jobs

- For partners who are also public servants, explore options that would allow them to continue working from post.
- Motivate employers in the private sector to enable employees to continue working from post.
- Introduce and/or harmonise the length and frequency of unpaid leave for partners in the public and private sector with posting cycles of posting.

Work-life balance

- Introduce robust work-life balance policies for officers in HQ and abroad that will include provisions such as the right to disconnect, work from home or utilise flexible working hours.
- Ensure officers are informed about their foreign assignment well in advance of the beginning of posting. Posting cycles should be aligned with the school calendar to enable children completing a semester/school year.
- Support officers' access to pre-school childcare facilities on posting.

In conclusion, the challenges diplomatic partners face in maintaining pensionable income abroad are multifaceted and profound. Despite various provisions implemented by European countries to facilitate employment, significant obstacles persist, leading to economic dependence and career interruptions. Therefore, raising awareness among partners, family associations and within the MFAs is imperative. A change of perspective and the implementation of new measures are necessary to foster partners' autonomy and liberate them from the role of merely being an "accompanying spouse". Addressing barriers to employment, enhancing career support services, ensuring job retention upon return from postings as well as encouraging robust work-life balance policies for foreign service officers are essential to alleviate the difficulties the accompanying partners have to tackle. By adopting these recommendations, MFAs can better support the well-being of partners, promoting a more equitable and balanced life for diplomatic families.

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