

EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS OF EUROPEAN DIPLOMATIC PARTNERS

RESEARCH REPORT

**Jarka Devine Mildorf
Karen Winnie Larsen
Melissa Woods Nelson
Francesca Bonechi
Tommy Ekers**

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RESEARCH@EUFASA.ORG.ORG



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The European Union Foreign Affairs Spouses, Partners and Families Association (EUFASA) is an international non-profit association (Association Internationale Sans But Lucratif or AISBL) under Belgian law.

The purpose of EUFASA is to promote the exchange of information and ideas among its member associations, thus improving the support of spouses, partners and families of officers employed by European Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs). EUFASA aims to identify effective family support practices, raise awareness both at national and EU levels, and gain support for family-friendly policies within European MFAs.

More information about EUFASA can be found at www.eufasa.org.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Diplomatic partners accompanying European career diplomats experience exceptionally high international mobility, with international moves typically every three to five years. This study presents the first systematic cross-European analysis of their employment conditions, based on 1,678 survey responses gathered in late 2024. Despite being a highly educated population – 91% hold a university degree – diplomatic partners face severe labour-market disadvantages linked to frequent relocation, legal barriers, and structural constraints in host-country labour markets.

Key Findings

- **Low employment rates:** Only 48% of respondents were employed or self-employed, compared with an OECD¹ average of nearly 87% among tertiary-educated adults.
- **High unemployment:** 18% met the OECD definition of unemployment – substantially higher than typical national rates in the sending countries.
- **High economic inactivity:** 34% were economically inactive, exceeding the EU average of 24.4%.
- **Precarious work:** 50% of employed/self-employed respondents held temporary contracts or no contracts at all, or ran their own businesses; only 61% of employed/self-employed respondents had pensionable income.
- **Gender disparities:** Female partners and spouses are significantly more likely than men to be economically inactive, to hold precarious jobs, and to report dissatisfaction with their work situation.
- **Nationality effects:** Non-EU foreign-born spouses face substantially worse labour-market outcomes, including lower employment, lower job satisfaction and reduced access to permanent or pensionable work.
- **Posting vs. headquarters:** Respondents on posting fare significantly worse across all labour-market indicators, compared to those based at headquarters.
- **Mobility is the strongest employment-related determinant:** Employment outcomes, job satisfaction and job security all improve significantly after four years in the same location.
- **Significant variation between systems:** Partner employment rates vary widely among foreign service systems, from 59% in Austria and 54% in the UK to 37% in Switzerland.

The survey highlights persistent structural barriers to labour-market integration for diplomatic partners and underscores the need for coordinated policy interventions at both the national and European levels. Without targeted support, the diplomatic service risks continued losses of talent, reduced family well-being, and increasing gender inequality.

¹The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

2. INTRODUCTION

Partners and spouses accompanying European career diplomats experience exceptionally high international mobility, typically relocating every three to five years. This mobility poses substantial challenges to maintaining continuous employment and pursuing long-term careers. While previous research indicates that diplomatic partners are generally highly educated and motivated to participate in the labour market, no systematic data on their employment rates have been available to date. To address this gap, the EUFASA Research Department (ERD) conducted the first Europe-wide survey in late 2024 to determine the principal economic status of diplomatic partners on posting and at headquarters.

A total of 1,678 responses were collected from more than 30 countries. The results reveal exceptionally low employment rates, elevated unemployment, and high levels of economic inactivity, despite the average level of educational attainment of this population being significantly higher than that of the general OECD population. Moreover, respondents who were employed often held precarious positions characterised by reduced hours, temporary contracts, and limited access to social security.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Drawing on OECD and ILO definitions of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity, the ERD developed an online survey to measure these categories in the diplomatic-partner population. A draft questionnaire was circulated among EUFASA member associations for feedback, which informed the final version. The final instrument comprised 21 questions, including eight demographic items and one open-ended question on employment-related experiences, generating over 500 comments. These qualitative data are analysed in the second part of this report.

The questionnaire was designed to examine how respondents' principal economic status (employed/self-employed, unemployed, economically inactive) relates to demographic variables such as gender, age, nationality and education. To capture the effects of international mobility—an inherent feature of diplomatic life—the survey also collected data on current location, length of stay, and family living arrangements (split or together).

Data Collection

EUFASA member associations disseminated the survey through newsletters, social media channels, and direct communication with members. Several Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) disseminated the survey link through their officers. Data were collected via SurveyMonkey. Data collection took place from mid-October to the end of November 2024.

² Devine Mildorf, Larsen, Bonechi: Diplomatic partners and paid work: challenges and remedies (2024), EUFASA AISBL

³ European Union Foreign Affairs Spouses, Partners and Families Association AISBL

⁴ International Labour Office

Confidentiality

The survey was fully anonymous. All quantitative data are reported in aggregate form, and potentially identifying information (such as specific posting locations or unique personal circumstances) was redacted. Qualitative data are presented in anonymised quotes. SurveyMonkey asserts GDPR compliance, and IP addresses were not collected to further safeguard anonymity.

Methodological Challenges

Diplomatic partners are an under-researched population. No existing datasets provide a reliable estimate of the population size or its demographic composition, which complicates assessments of statistical representativeness. National-level results in this study are considered plausibly representative when at least 100 respondents per country participated and when the sample is balanced across gender and age.

Internationally accepted definitions of employment, unemployment, etc. were used in the study to allow meaningful comparison to national rates and, where data permit, between foreign service systems. However, it is important to note that standard labour statistics typically rely on administrative records and known population parameters. By contrast, this study relies on self-selected participants, self-reported data, and estimated population sizes. Employment, unemployment and economic inactivity rates reported here therefore represent the proportions of respondents aged 18–64 who self-reported conditions meeting OECD/ILO definitions.

4. DEFINITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT CATEGORIES

Employment rate

“Employment rates are defined as a measure of the extent to which available labour resources (people available to work) are being used. They are calculated as the ratio of the employed to the working age population. Employed people are those aged 15 or over who report that they have worked in gainful employment for at least one hour in the previous week or who had a job but were absent from work during the reference week. The working age population refers to people aged 15 to 64.” (OECD)⁵

Self-employment

“Self-employment is defined as the employment of employers, workers who work for themselves, members of producers’ co-operatives, and unpaid family workers. The latter are unpaid in the sense that they lack a formal contract to receive a fixed amount of income at regular intervals, but they share in the income generated by the enterprise. Self-employment may be seen either as a survival strategy for those who cannot find any other means of earning an income or as evidence of entrepreneurial spirit and a desire to be one’s own boss.” (OECD)⁶

Unemployment

“Those in unemployment are people aged 15 and over who were without work during the reference week, available for work and actively seeking work during the previous four weeks including the reference week. Without work refers to those not in paid employment or self-employment during the reference week. Available for work refers to those who were available for paid employment or self-employment during the reference week or four weeks after the reference week in the case of EU countries. Seeking work refers to those who took specific steps to actively seek paid employment or self-employment during a specified recent period operationalised as previous four weeks including the survey reference week.” (OECD)⁷

Underemployment

Persons in time-related underemployment are those willing and available to work additional hours. Persons in employment-adequacy related underemployment are those willing to change their current employment situation for reasons of inadequate or insufficient use of workers’ occupational skills, or due to inadequate income in the current job (ILO)⁸.

Economic inactivity

Economically inactive persons are those who do not work for pay, do not have a job, do not want to work or are not available to work (ILO)⁹.

The discouraged worker effect is defined as the decision to refrain from job search as a result of poor chances on the labour market¹⁰.

⁵ OECD, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/employment-rate.html>, accessed 24. 8. 2025

⁶ OECD, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/self-employment-rate.html>, accessed 24. 8. 2025

⁷ OECD, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/unemployment-rate.html>, accessed 24. 8. 2025

⁸ ILO, <https://ilostat ilo.org/methods/concepts-and-definitions/forms-of-work>, accessed 24. 8. 2025

⁹ Mata Greenwood, A. International Labour Organisation (1999) Bureau of Statistics

¹⁰ van Ham, Clara H. Mulder and Pieter Hooimeijer (2001) Urban Studies

5. QUANTITATIVE SURVEY RESULTS

Population Characteristics

A total of 1,678 respondents from more than 30 foreign service systems, predominantly European, completed the survey. Women accounted for two thirds of the sample and men for one third – likely reflecting the still male-dominated nature of diplomatic services. Age representation was broad, with nearly two thirds of respondents aged 36–55.

More than one third (36%) of respondents were born in a different country than their MFA-officer partner, confirming previous findings that foreign service officers often have partners/spouses from another country. This pattern varies substantially between countries: in Ireland, over half of respondents were foreign-born, compared with fewer than 30% in the UK or the Netherlands. Overall, the proportion of foreign-born diplomatic partners is several times higher than in general national populations.

Educational attainment is strikingly high: 91% of respondents hold a university degree, compared with an OECD average of 40% among adults aged 25–64.

At the time of the survey, 79% of respondents were on posting abroad, and 92% lived in the same household as the MFA officer. Only 10% had lived in their current location for more than four years, confirming the expected high mobility of foreign-service families.

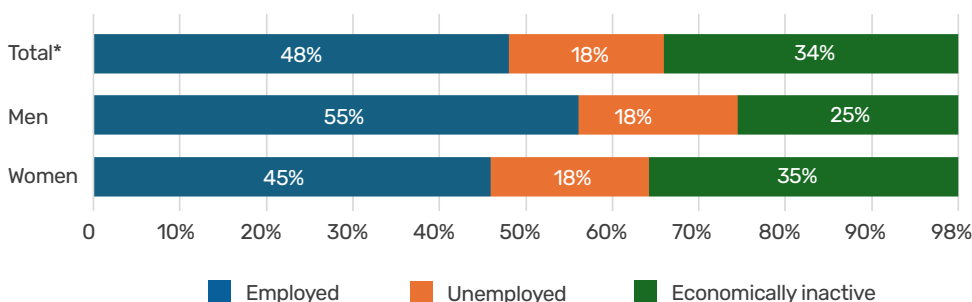
All comparison results discussed below are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ($p = .05$).

Principal Economic Status

The findings demonstrate the severe impact of frequent international relocation on partners' labour-market outcomes.

- **Employment rate:** The overall employment rate among the respondents was 48%, significantly below the OECD's 2023 employment rate of 86.98% among adults with a tertiary-level education.
- **Unemployment rate:** The unemployment rate was found to be 18%, almost four times higher than the unemployment rate of 4.9% in OECD countries at the time of the survey.
- **Economic inactivity:** A third (34%) of respondents were economically inactive, a substantially higher rate than the EU 2024 average of 24.4% for people aged 15–64.

Chart 1: Economic status by gender



* Totals do not always sum to 100% due to missing data or a small number of respondents who do not fall into any of the listed categories.

Factors Associated with Economic Status

1. Gender

Clear gender-related patterns emerged among the respondents, as follows:

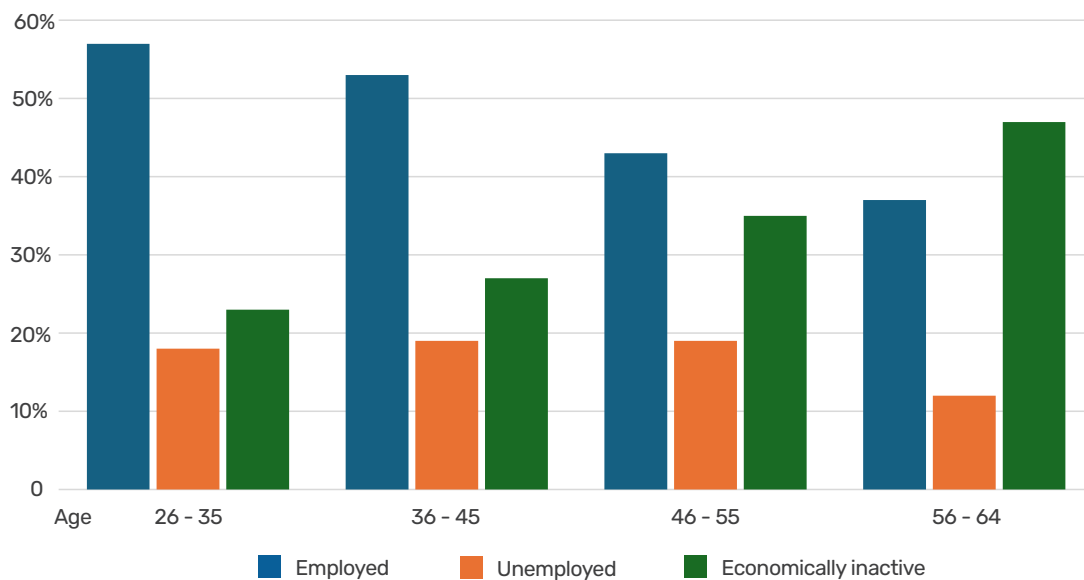
- Men are significantly more likely than women to work for an employer, to work full-time, to hold permanent contracts and to be satisfied with their work situation.
- Women are significantly more likely to have temporary contracts, to work in the public sector, to report barriers to working (costs, conditions, other obligations), and to be unavailable or not actively looking for work in the previous four weeks.
- Women also report lower overall job satisfaction than men.

2. Age

Employment declines sharply with age, while economic inactivity rises:

- Employment falls from 57% in the 26–35 age group to 37% among those aged 56–64.
- Economic inactivity rises from 23% to 47% across the same age groups.

Chart 2: Economic status by age



3. Nationality

Nationality is strongly associated with labour-market outcomes.

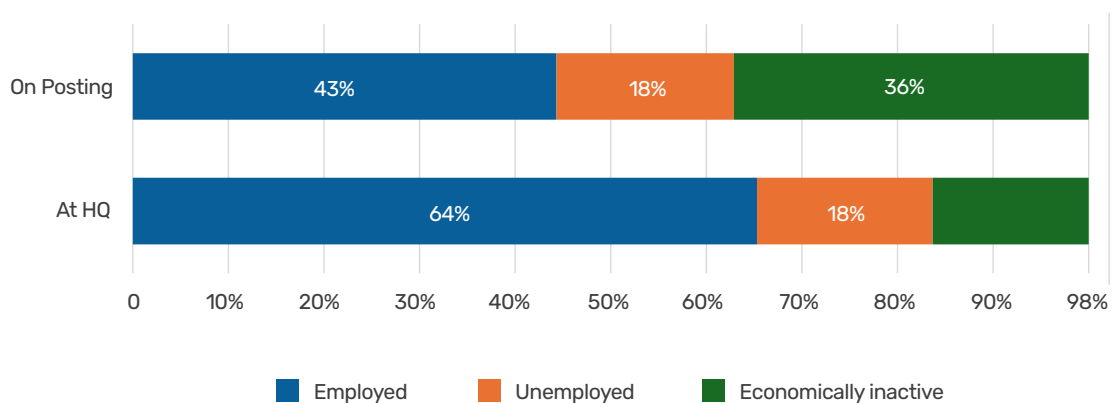
- Non-EU foreign-born spouses (FBS) are significantly more likely not to have worked in the previous week and significantly less likely to work full-time than partners sharing the MFA officer's nationality.
- Partners with the same nationality as that of the MFA officer also report significantly higher satisfaction with work, greater prevalence of permanent contracts and higher likelihood of pensionable income, compared with non-EU FBS.

4. Current Location (Posting vs Headquarters)

Respondents who were currently on posting fare significantly worse than those at headquarters. Partners and spouses who were currently on a posting abroad had lower employment rates and were less likely to work full-time than those currently at headquarters. They were less satisfied with their amount and type of work, and were also less likely to have permanent contracts and pensionable income.

- More respondents on posting report not actively seeking work in the past four weeks, despite being available to work. This suggests that more partners/spouses give up on looking for employment when posted abroad than when at headquarters ("discouraged workers").
- Respondents at headquarters are more likely to work in the local labour market and report higher levels of satisfaction across all measures.

Chart 3: Economic status by location



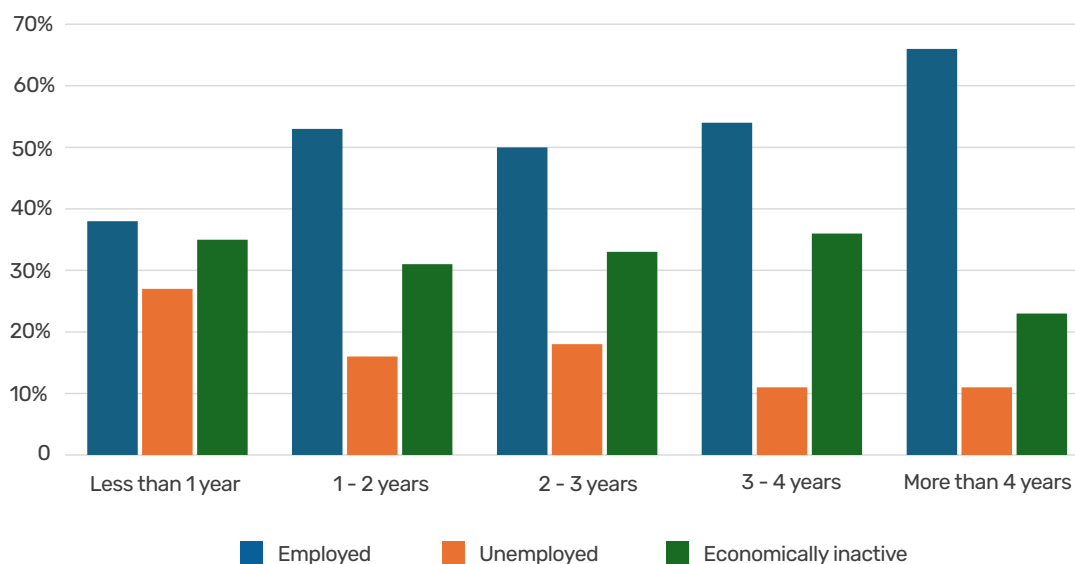
* Totals do not always sum to 100% due to missing data or a small number of respondents who do not fall into any of the listed categories.

5. Mobility (Length of Stay)

Length of stay in a location emerged as the strongest predictor of employment.

- Respondents who were living in their current location for less than one year have the lowest employment rate and the highest job-search activity and availability.
- Employment rates, satisfaction, prevalence of permanent contracts and pensionable income are all highest among those who had been in their current location for more than four years.
- Respondents in their first two years of posting report the lowest satisfaction with their work situation.

Chart 4: Economic status by length of time at current location

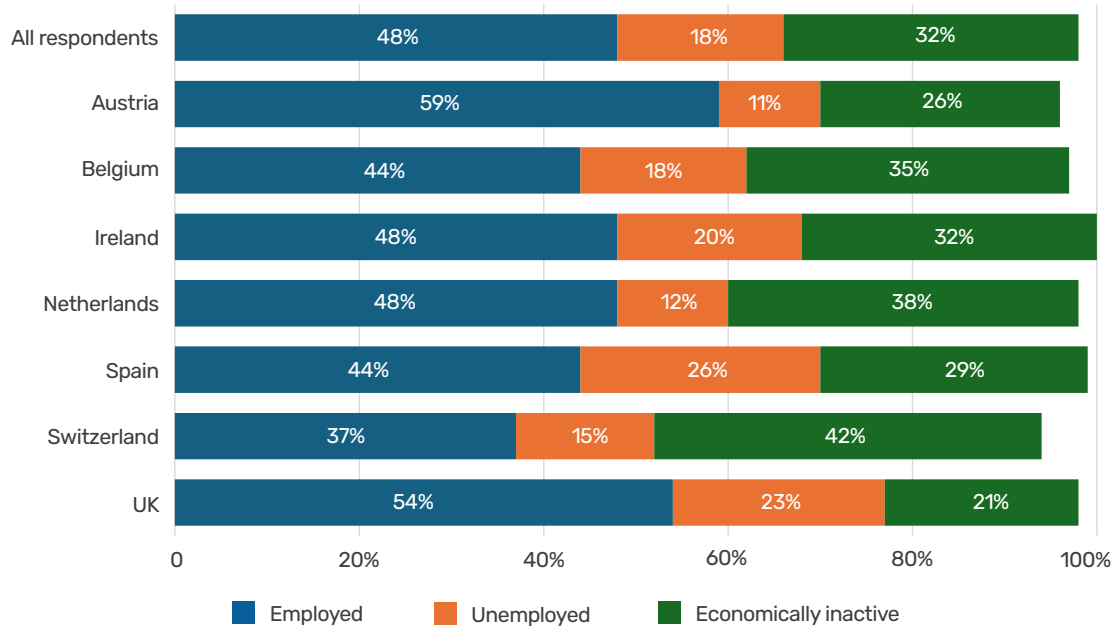


International Comparison

Foreign service systems with at least 100 respondents were included in a comparative analysis. Employment outcomes varied considerably by system.

- Austria (59%) and the UK (54%) are the only countries with above-average employment rates. The UK also has the lowest rate of economic inactivity.
- Switzerland shows the lowest employment rate (37%) and a very high economic inactivity rate (42%), which is double that of UK respondents.

Chart 5: Economic status by foreign service system



* Totals do not always sum to 100% due to missing data or a small number of respondents who do not fall into any of the listed categories.

Workload and Satisfaction

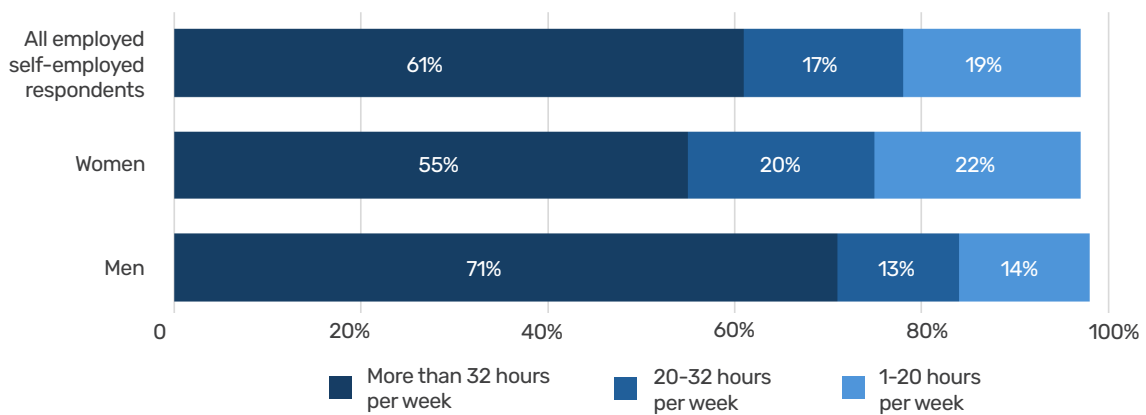
- Among employed/self-employed respondents, 55% work full-time (30% of all respondents).
- Women are significantly less likely to work full-time than men.
- A substantial proportion of respondents are underemployed, reporting a desire for more hours or work that better reflects their skills.

Respondents with the highest satisfaction levels tend to be those who:

- Worked for an employer in the previous week,
- Worked full-time,
- Held a permanent contract,
- Had pensionable income.

These characteristics all correlate strongly with higher job satisfaction.

Chart 6: Workload among employed/self-employed respondents, by gender



* Totals do not always sum to 100% due to missing data or a small number of respondents who do not fall into any of the listed categories.

Precarity and Social Security

Half (50%) of employed or self-employed respondents hold a permanent contract; the remainder hold temporary contracts, operate their own businesses or work without any contract. These conditions reflect high levels of labour precarity. Women are more likely than men to hold precarious jobs.

Just 61% of employed/self-employed respondents have pensionable income, and only 34% of all respondents currently accumulate pension rights.

Labour-Market Sectors

Among respondents who work for pay:

- 34% work in the private sector.
- 53% work cross-border, while 47% work in the local labour market.

Work in the public sector (local labour market) is associated with:

- The highest rates of full-time employment,
- The highest rates of permanent contracts,
- The highest prevalence of pensionable income.

All these rates are significantly higher than in other labour-market sectors.

Reasons for Not Working

The most frequently cited reasons respondents gave for not working were:

- Inability to find a job,
- Legal barriers to employment,
- Competing obligations (e.g., family care),
- Discouragement due to perceived poor labour-market prospects.

Other reasons included high costs associated with taking up employment (e.g., loss of MFA benefits), inadequate local salaries and pending work-permit processing. Fewer than 2% of respondents reported not working because they did not want to work.

6. QUALITATIVE SURVEY RESULTS

Comments from diplomatic partners reveal a picture that is diverse yet deeply challenging, where personal factors, geography, and institutional support—or the lack of it—shape opportunities and limitations in profound ways. For some, circumstances can be favourable, but many stress how arbitrary success feels: *“It’s all luck.”*

Frustration with **structural barriers** is clear. Despite rhetoric about progressiveness, many spouses experience a stark gap between promises and reality. Limited career paths, combined with financial and pension issues, discourage professional engagement and undermine independence. *“I made the mistake of becoming the spouse of someone from the [MFA]... now having practically no retirement pension of my own.”*

Long-term unemployment is common, creating **dependency** and eroding self-worth. *“It leads to anxiety and even depression.”* Gender expectations and representational duties compound these pressures, limiting autonomy and reinforcing imbalance: *“Being a woman and a traveling spouse places me in a traditional gender role I didn’t choose.”* Even when work is possible, it often means low-paid or volunteer roles squeezed between social obligations: *“I only have time to do [BLANK] language teaching work remotely as a volunteer once a week.”*

Challenges persist after postings. Reintegration is fraught with **gaps in allowances, medical coverage, and career re-entry support**: *“It is very challenging to re-settle at home country and with no support from the government.”* These realities highlight the need for holistic approaches that extend beyond the posting itself.

Finally, respondents stress that **unemployment** and **dependency** are not lifestyle choices but structural issues that **undermine family stability and diplomatic effectiveness**: *“It is essential that employers of diplomats consider supporting accompanying spouses as their long-term unhappiness constrains the working spouse stability at work”.* Without meaningful opportunities and recognition, the diplomatic system risks losing talent and credibility.

6.1 Suggestions at the Policy/Institutional Level

The following suggestions translate respondents’ experiences into systemic actions that ministries and missions can implement. They focus on enabling legal pathways to work, consistent employment support across postings, clarity on tax and pensions, honest communication before and during assignments, and formal recognition of spouses’ contributions to diplomatic life. The emphasis is on practical measures that close the gap between policy statements and day-to-day reality.

Measures Supporting Professional Development and Employment

Respondents describe a persistent mismatch between policy rhetoric and lived reality: ministries still treat spouses as nonworking dependents, while most partners are professionals whose careers are interrupted or restarted with each posting. The cumulative impact is **deskilling, stalled progression, and widening gaps in pension and social security protections**. One respondent wrote, *“Don’t expect to be able to work and don’t let your Ministry persuade you otherwise.”* Another warned, *“If this is not gripped then you are going to lose officers as their partners will not want to accompany them on foreign postings. This is not the 1950s with a docile housewife ‘trailing’ her spouse.”*

The call is for consistent, structured **job-search support at post**, not dependent on the personal preferences or risk appetite of local mission leadership. Spouses ask for clear, country-specific guidance on labour markets, visa routes, and social security rules, active facilitation of costly or complex processes, and practical help with barriers such as work visa fees. *“It would be greatly appreciated if the [MFA] could support spouses into work instead of it being very dependent on who is the head of the mission.” “The same way rent or school fees are paid when at post, it would be essential that at least part of the spouses’ work visa fees are also covered.”*

Retraining is framed as essential rather than optional, particularly where local employment is legally blocked. Respondents call for flexible budgets for self-study, portable career seminars, and the inclusion of spouses in officers’ pre-posting language training. *“Partners should get the opportunity/funding to participate in the language training of ‘their’ MFA officer before a posting abroad.” “It would be great if there is a higher and more easily applicable budget for self-study... because apart from a lack of personal income, there is by definition a big gap in your resume.”* They request training not just in language but also in practical topics—pension rights, taxes, business setup—and access to career coaching.

Recognition of professional qualifications remains a major barrier across regulated professions. Procedures are described as “very complex and expensive,” particularly for medicine and law, discouraging continued practice abroad. Respondents encourage ministries to co-finance and administratively support recognition processes, pursue reciprocity at EU level, and where host country systems are prohibitive, facilitate pathways for remote practice anchored in the home country.

Employment within embassies and MFAs is widely viewed as a realistic solution to prevent skills loss and support family cohesion. Partners propose interim personnel pools, short-term contracts, and remote HQ roles, alongside formal recognition of social and representational tasks already performed informally. *“Some missions actively employ spouses but this isn’t always the policy. Massive untapped talent pool... is currently being wasted.” “Gaining employment with our MFA while deployed was the best thing for me and my career moving forward.”* Yet feasibility is often constrained by pay: *“Although I’d love to work at the [EMBASSY] here at post, the local salary they offer is simply too low.”* Others describe promised roles that did not materialise, or concerns about conflict of interest overruling staff needs: *“This does not happen with our MFA which seems to fear accusations of nepotism.”*

Given the growing complexity of global mobility, it is increasingly important for MFAs to establish partnerships and **agreements with private sector** organisations to support the employability of diplomatic partners. *“It would be beneficial if government agencies could better engage with the private sector to explain the rules (specifically tax).”* By fostering dialogue and flexibility between the public and private sectors, MFAs can play a decisive role in reducing career discontinuity across diplomatic postings.

Support with Tax and Financial Planning

Tax, social security, and pensions are the most anxiety-inducing themes. Respondents describe contradictory or incomplete advice, unclear obligations, and the risk of losing entitlements when working abroad, even in embassy roles. *“Not knowing my tax position between countries causes me immense anxiety and I live in fear of breaking any rules and hence I view not working as a safer option.”* Others discovered that paid employment meant losing health insurance or stopping state pension accrual: *“Because of these rules, it is better for me to stay at home... I don't feel encouraged to work at all and I think it's a huge waste of the potential of partners.”*

Pension discontinuity is particularly worrying. Many recount years of lost contributions and the absence of mechanisms to pay voluntarily. *“I lost many years of pension as I was not working and won't be able to complete 15 years as my work outside [COUNTRY] does not count.”* Some report unfairness compared to unemployed citizens at home who still accrue credits, or policies that penalise spouses who attempt to work. The request is for state pension credits or voluntary contribution routes during postings, clear guidance on making remote work pensionable, and parity where appropriate with officers' arrangements. *“More countries should permit diplomatic spouses' work that is also pensionable.”*

Requests for **specialist financial planning** recur: *“I feel we should have access to advice, especially around pensions and employment.”* Where ministries cannot offer individual advice, respondents ask for standardised guidance for common scenarios—remote employment, self-employment, and embassy contracts—and a list of trusted advisers. Several note that unclear rules create perverse incentives: *“By working, I lose out on certain rights to pension and health insurance I would otherwise get by not working, so the pay has to be 'worth it.'”*

Increased Communication and Support

Families want honest, **country-specific information** before committing to postings. Many recount being passed among staff, associations, and external advisers without anyone taking ownership: *“It would be ideal to get country specific advice from staff rather than be shunted from staff member to the family association to tax advisers or lawyers.”* The consequence is late or contradictory guidance and constraints discovered only after arrival. *“Be very honest in post reports about the employment situation for partners and make these reports easily available before agreeing to a posting.”*

Respondents argue for named **liaison roles in missions** with clear accountability so support does not depend on individual goodwill. *“Need a staff member who actually can be a link between spouses and the family association... The one we have at post is not doing that!”* Some even struggle to receive responses: *“They told me if I have questions I should ask them through my husband, but they don't even answer him.”*

Communication gaps continue on return. **Repatriation support** is described as minimal, despite the need to reenter employment, restore social security and health coverage, and reintegrate children. *“When heading out to post there is usually adequate information and support, however when returning back to [COUNTRY]... post holders, their spouses and families are not given any support whatsoever.”*

The request is for centralised, **transparent pre-posting materials**, a living repository of post-specific employment intelligence that families can consult before and during assignments, and mission roles that take ownership of spouse support from preparation through return.

Recognition of Contributions and Impact

Spouses describe extensive unpaid labour—hosting events, managing residences, liaising with communities, producing materials—that sustains diplomatic life yet remains unrecognised. *“Here is a snapshot of the unpaid work I do: hosting events, community events, ministerial dinners and events, bilateral events, ambassadorial dinners and national days... I find it extremely galling that not even my state pension credits are being paid when I do so much to support the state in its activities abroad.”*

Respondents connect **recognition directly to mission effectiveness, family wellbeing, and retention.** *“The lack of options for partners... affects the mental health of spouses, the family life and—as a consequence—the performance capacity of diplomats.”* Limited professional options reduce the attractiveness of diplomatic careers to prospective officers and can drive serving diplomats to reconsider postings: *“There are examples of qualified people... that did not even consider the diplomatic career because of the important effects it has on the spouse’s work possibilities.”*

Legal frameworks also matter. In some contexts, tying work permission to waiving diplomatic immunity is particularly unattractive, especially in hardship locations. Partners ask for legal options to work remotely to the home country without waiving protections, complying fully with home country tax and social security, and refraining from host country services. The overarching request is formal acknowledgement through credits, compensation, and pension continuity, validating spouses’ contributions and aligning incentives with family stability and mission performance.

6.2 Suggestions at the Personal Level

Policy change takes time. In the meantime, partners navigate complex systems with practical strategies that preserve employability, income, and wellbeing. The reflections below present a portfolio approach—remote work, freelance and entrepreneurship, volunteering, proactive job search and skill-building, legal and financial diligence, and a resilient mindset—grounded in the realities of frequent mobility.

Employment and Career Pathways

Spouses assemble career paths from what is possible in each context: job retention through leave without pay or negotiated remote arrangements; remote employment to the home country or a third country firm; freelance or self-employment; entrepreneurship; and, where paid work is blocked, volunteering. *“For me, the prime issue... is that a number of separate challenges combine to make remaining unemployed the ‘path of least resistance’... you will be moving location every few years; the ability to work in country is not guaranteed; language may become a barrier; working remotely... is increasingly a possibility, but only for certain careers.”* Others describe strategic pivots across postings: *“I have been lucky... I worked remotely, part time... had to pivot and shift career focus, all to be flexible for the diplomatic life.”*

Cross-border telework is widely seen as the most reliable form of continuity. *“Overseas remote working seems to offer the best opportunity to maintain wage, professional networks and retirement savings at least cost.”* Yet security protocols, IT restrictions, and employer risk concerns remain barriers; in some cases missions reassured employers directly. *“The support of the consulate in communicating directly with my employer was vital.”* Public administrations occasionally offered exceptional arrangements to work from home, allowing partners to contribute locally while maintaining employment.

Freelance and self-employment offer portability and autonomy, and many advocate building a portable business early. *“I highly recommend building a portable business to not have to start from scratch with each move.”* Practicalities are central—accounting, invoicing, insurance, and pensions—alongside psychological realities such as isolation. *“Self-employment... enables you to somehow work and keep a professional network alive, [but] it does not solve the social isolation.”* Senior roles can be hard to sustain fully remotely, and self-employment often lacks benefits: *“I’m currently working as self-employed... not entitled to any work-related benefits such as sick leave and maternity leave.”*

Volunteering is consistently framed as strategic. It maintains skills and networks, supports mental health, and fills CV gaps in ways valued by employers. *“If finding employment is difficult during posting, try doing volunteer work... I was able to get my current job mainly because I could add... years of volunteering with a UN agency.”* Several encourage treating volunteering as professional development—curating roles, documenting outcomes, and keeping profiles current.

Career Development and Job Search

Respondents emphasise **preparation** and visibility. Reconnaissance trips should double as employment visits, applications should start early, and expectations should remain flexible on seniority and sector. *“Start looking early. Utilise all your potential contacts. Make your employment a crucial part of your reconnaissance trips to your posting.”* Sectors such as international development, education, NGOs, and government often provide meaningful routes; some specifically advise aiming for roles in embassy sections where feasible, or becoming a teacher in international schools.

Coaching, mentoring, and peer groups help reveal transferable skills and sustain confidence after gaps. *“Having a support network... including mentorship would be very useful.”* Continuous education—host country language, online courses, and new qualifications—features prominently, with some MFAs funding spouse learning. *“Our [MFA]... has an education budget for spouses. I am now working as a result of it.”* Respondents also stress CV framing for diplomatic mobility, articulating representational work and volunteer roles as skills and outcomes.

Networking is consistently highlighted, with nuanced observations about local norms. In some regions, job markets move primarily via face-to-face contacts rather than digital platforms; elsewhere LinkedIn and recruiters are helpful. *“Networking (in any form) is the best way to find work... Always have business cards on hand!”* Maintaining visibility with former colleagues and employers in the home country preserves pathways back into the labour market and supports remote or independent arrangements.

Financial and Legal Awareness

Partners caution against assuming MFA guidance will cover individual cases. They recommend local legal and fiscal advice, second opinions, and careful reading of internal rules to avoid hidden negative surprises. The administrative reality can be daunting: *“Nothing prepared me for the difficulty of dealing with taxes internationally – moving one’s tax base, defining one’s professional freelance activity according to local laws and regulations which vary incredibly even within the EU; invoicing, and preparing and filing tax documentation in four different languages.”* Banking, invoicing, and compliance differ dramatically between jurisdictions.

Planning for pension continuity, health insurance, and social security is critical. Where voluntary contributions are possible, respondents advise arranging them early; where they are not, they call for

policy change. *“Family members of posted staff need to be given the option to make voluntary state pension contributions while on posting – this is currently not available.”* The personal stakes are high in cases of divorce, separation, or bereavement: *“I feel uneducated about... being prepared in case of divorce... I am worried about regulations in terms of custody and inheritance.”*

Ultimately, many conclude that the partner must lead on compliance and financial planning and document decisions thoroughly. *“You are on your own. You are the one who has to try to make it work. Be very conscious, open and upfront in dealing with the issues.”* They urge ministries to clarify employer obligations for remote roles to reduce organisational risk perceptions and unlock opportunities otherwise blocked by fear of tax and social security exposure.

Change in Perspective and Motivation

Respondents reflect on **identity, agency, and the compromises of diplomatic life**. Some advocate redefining success and embracing nonlinear career paths that prioritise learning, contribution, and resilience. *“Do not overlook any opportunities. It is a unique opportunity to work in a foreign country and one can learn a lot. It’s not about the logical next step or progression in your CV. It’s about being proactive and gaining experience in multicultural environment.”* Others stress perseverance under pressure: *“Pursuing your career, while accompanying a spouse overseas, is possible. It is hard, very hard, but it is possible.”*

Wellbeing is a constant thread. Partners describe the emotional strain of unemployment and repeated restarts and recommend intentional self-care, hobbies, and, when needed, professional support. *“Finding a job abroad can be truly arduous... Do not hesitate to seek mental support from a therapist in parallel.”* Practical encouragements reappear—*“Keep busy, be creative, save money”*—alongside cautions about bitterness and the importance of recognising unpaid work. Some spouses, especially in regulated professions, decide not to accompany future postings or to step back from the diplomatic system after rebuilding careers at home. *“I do not think that I am ready to give that up to go and live abroad again with my spouse. Finding job in another country is too difficult.”* Realism about pensions and independence is recurrent: *“Fight for the right to have a decent pension and always have a backup plan.”*

The collective message is to retain agency, plan deliberately, and balance short-term sacrifices against long-term security, recognising that family cohesion and personal fulfilment both matter.

Social and Community Support

Community and peer networks are essential to navigate unfamiliar systems and sustain morale. Several propose platforms to exchange practical employment insights and to map spouses’ skills for potential employers. *“A platform... would be useful for spouses to exchange their experiences.”* *“Foreign service spouses do have a unique set of skills that could be very valuable to some employers.”*

Strong relationships depend on intentional communication about expectations, finances, and the tradeoffs inherent in this lifestyle. Some couples maintain dual careers by living apart at times, focusing on the quality rather than the quantity of time together. *“Remember to talk through all aspects of being a trailing spouse with your partner before departure.”* *“A self-determined life with a fulfilling job is possible but it needs a mindset where you accept that the partners cannot live at the same place together all the time.”*

Foreign service family associations—including EUFASA and national bodies—feature as vital sources of information, mentoring, and advocacy, although experiences vary. *“EUFASA and your home country Families and Spouses Association are a great source of information and advocacy.”* Where official structures are weak, these associations often become the primary support system for practical guidance and voice. Others report frustrations when family offices have limited power or resources, reinforcing the need for consistent standards and genuine advocacy.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this research, the ERD proposes the following policy recommendations for Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) and EUFASA member associations.

7.1 Strengthen Spousal Employment Support

Improve access to work permits and legal authorisation

- Negotiate bilateral or multilateral agreements facilitating spousal employment in host countries.
- Expand legal assistance for navigating visa restrictions, recognition of qualifications and local administrative requirements as well as cross-border telework and portable career legal issues.
- Advocate for host governments to treat diplomatic partners as a priority group for work authorisation.

Provide structured job-search support

- Establish or expand career centres within MFAs offering CV review, local labour-market guidance and job-search coaching.
- Provide host-country labour-market briefings before departure and upon arrival.

Promote access to stable, pensionable work

- Encourage employers and partner organisations to consider diplomatic partners for permanent or long-term roles.

Facilitate retention of jobs across postings

- Enable remote work across borders where legally feasible, including clear MFA guidelines and support mechanisms.
- Promote flexible working arrangements for MFA staff that accommodate partner employment (e.g., longer postings, optional extensions).

Support career continuity and professional development

- Provide opportunities for professional development and retraining. This may include access to language training, career coaching, online education, entrepreneurship training, and financial support for skill development that allows partners to adapt their careers across postings.

Improve administrative clarity and financial guidance

- Provide centralised, accessible guidance on taxation, social security, and employment regulations, including standardised information materials and access to professional advisory services when needed.

7.2 Ensure Continuity of Social Security, Pensions, and Health Coverage

- Establish mechanisms enabling diplomatic partners to maintain social-security coverage and pension contributions during postings abroad.
- Review MFA policies that unintentionally penalise working partners, such as loss of health insurance or allowances when the partner becomes employed.

7.3 Address Gender Inequalities

Targeted support for women's employment

Given that women face significantly higher economic inactivity and precarity:

- Implement gender-sensitive career counselling.
- Provide targeted return-to-work programmes, especially for partners experiencing repeated career interruptions.

Enhance family-support measures

- Improve access to affordable childcare on posting, especially where host-country provision is limited.
- Expand access to mental-health support and work-life balance resources.

7.4 Support Early Integration in New Locations

Since employment outcomes are poorest in the first two years after relocation:

- Offer structured arrival programmes including professional networking events, sector-specific introductions and mentorship schemes.
- Provide relocation-transition grants for professional accreditation, job-search costs or language training in the host country.

7.5 Enhance Data Collection and Monitoring

- Institutionalise regular surveys of diplomatic partners to track employment outcomes, satisfaction and long-term career progression.
- Develop an EUFASA-wide anonymised database for longitudinal analysis of partner mobility and labour-market participation.
- Encourage MFAs to report annual metrics on partner employment support outcomes.

7.6 Strengthen International Coordination

- Advocate at EU and OECD levels for recognition of diplomatic families as a distinct mobile labour-market population.
- Develop shared EU guidelines for best practices in supporting spousal employment.
- Support coordinated lobbying towards third countries on work-permit reciprocity and labour-market access.

7.7 Address the Psychological and Social Impacts of Career Disruption

- Strengthen community support networks, provide access to mental-health resources where needed, and encourage initiatives that help partners remain professionally and socially engaged.

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