

THE ROLE OF A DIPLOMATIC SPOUSE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CONCEPTUALISATION OF DIPLOMACY-RELATED CARE WORK

RESEARCH PAPER

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**April, 2026
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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.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines the largely undefined yet socially and institutionally significant role of diplomatic spouses and partners in 21st-century European diplomacy. Drawing on two large-scale EUFASA AISBL surveys from 2020 (1,238 respondents) and 2024 (1,678 respondents), it introduces and develops the concept of diplomacy-related care work—the unpaid labour performed by partners that supports diplomatic functions, facilitates representational duties and ensures the smooth operation of missions abroad.

Key Findings

1. Diplomacy relies on extensive unpaid labour by partners.

Despite the near absence of official role definitions in most European MFAs, a majority of partners engage in diplomacy-related care work, including hosting and attending events, managing representational households, supporting mission operations and maintaining diplomatic networks. Many partners perceive this labour as obligatory due to social norms and institutional expectations.

2. Engagement in diplomacy-related care work is declining but remains substantial.

While only 14% of partners reported no involvement in 2020, this increased to 40% in 2024. Nevertheless, 60% of partners in 2024 continued to perform at least one hour per week of diplomacy-related care work, indicating persistent reliance on unpaid partner labour.

3. Gender profoundly shapes the distribution of unpaid diplomatic labour.

Women consistently participate more often, spend more time on diplomacy-related activities and feel greater pressure to perform them. The largest gender gaps appear in representation, cultural promotion and residence staff management.

4. Diplomat seniority significantly increases partner workload.

Partners of ambassadors and heads of mission shoulder the heaviest burden: more than half spend over eight hours per week on diplomacy-related care work, and qualitative responses show that these tasks often resemble part-time unpaid employment.

5. Employment and unpaid diplomatic labour are inversely related.

In countries where partners spend the most time on diplomacy-related care work (Belgium, Switzerland, Spain), employment rates are lowest. In the UK—where partner involvement is comparatively lower—employment rates are higher. This suggests that unpaid diplomatic demands directly constrain partners' labour market participation.

6. Informal norms enforce compliance in the absence of explicit policy.

Two-thirds of partners feel pressure (from MFAs or peers) to adopt a specific social role. Eighty per cent believe their behaviour could affect the officer's career, and 85% moderate their public or private opinions accordingly. These findings indicate that MFAs implicitly depend on partners' conduct and labour even when they claim otherwise.

7. MFA policies vary, but few formally recognise partners' contributions.

Most European MFAs avoid defining partner roles. Exceptions include France (social security coverage for representational duties), Switzerland (a comprehensive accompanying persons policy), Poland (employment contracts for heads-of-mission spouses) and Estonia (compensation simply for accompanying the officer). However, these remain rare and inconsistent.

Overall Conclusion

The evidence shows that diplomacy in Europe continues to rely heavily on unpaid, gendered and often invisible labour performed by diplomatic partners. This reliance conflicts with contemporary values of gender equality, professionalisation and dual-career norms. Recognising and adequately supporting diplomacy-related care work—through clear policy frameworks, social protection, compensation or optional formalisation—is essential for the sustainability and modernisation of diplomatic services.

INTRODUCTION

The role of a diplomatic spouse in the 21st century remains largely undefined in European diplomacies. While in the previous century some Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) evaluated the performance of spouses as part of diplomats' career assessments (Enloe, 2014), and spouses themselves often understood their function as a form of unpaid employment, most European MFAs today avoid formalising or codifying this role. In the absence of contractual ties between the sending MFA and the accompanying spouse, states typically claim to have no official expectations. Yet research consistently demonstrates that such expectations persist informally and significantly shape the lives, choices and labour of diplomatic partners.

This paper draws on existing scholarship and two large-scale EUFASA surveys from 2020 and 2024, administered to European diplomatic partners (1,238 and 1,678 respondents respectively). Both surveys were distributed by EUFASA member associations, several MFAs and social media channels. Although participation was anonymous and voluntary, the breadth of responses provides a unique cross-European insight into partners' activities, responsibilities and constraints.

The results highlight the decisive roles of partner gender and diplomat seniority in shaping the extent of partners' involvement in diplomacy-related tasks. The paper develops the concept of **diplomacy-related care work**, a term capturing the interdependencies between the public and private spheres of diplomacy. The comparative data also indicate a decline in partner engagement between 2020 and 2024, although the majority of partners still perform at least some unpaid diplomacy-related labour.

CARE, WORK AND CARE WORK

The ILO defines *work* as “any activity performed by persons of any sex and age to produce goods or provide services for use by others or for own use,” and *care work* as “activities and relationships aimed at meeting the physical, psychological, and emotional needs of others,” including both direct and indirect, paid and unpaid forms (ILO, 2018). Decisions about who performs which activities—both within and beyond the household—are deeply political. Feminist scholarship has long emphasised that access to paid work and the distribution of unpaid work remain highly gendered, with women providing the majority of unpaid care work globally. Such work significantly contributes to national economies yet remains invisible in formal accounting, unrecognised and unrewarded (Waring, 1988).

Unpaid care work is motivated not by monetary reward but by affection, responsibility and social or familial pressure. Despite being work, it is undervalued and associated with material and emotional costs: time poverty, loss of income, and reduced access to social security. ILO estimates that if valued at minimum wage, unpaid care work would amount to 9% of global GDP (ILO, 2018). As Criado Perez (2020) notes, all women work; many simply do not get paid.

DIPLOMACY-RELATED CARE WORK

Within diplomatic families, the accompanying partner often becomes the primary caregiver, supporting the household and indirectly facilitating the diplomat’s career. The demands of diplomatic life—especially frequent relocations—make this shift less a matter of choice and more a structural necessity. Chart 1 illustrates a range of diplomacy-related activities that place significant burdens on partners’ time and behaviour. These include hosting and attending official events, managing representational households and staff, and networking within diplomatic communities.

Motivations for performing these activities parallel those of unpaid care work: affection, duty, social pressure and institutional expectations. Although unpaid, they entail considerable costs for partners and are performed in addition to routine family care responsibilities, which women disproportionately shoulder.

Existing research has seldom examined this labour quantitatively. Davoine et al. (2012) identified three repertoires of partner activity through qualitative interviews: supporting the MFA officer, representing the state and managing resources. This study confirms the prevalence of these repertoires across a much larger European sample and emphasises their economic dimensions—how many partners perform these tasks, how often and at what cost. By conceptualising these activities as **diplomacy-related care work**, the study foregrounds the entanglement of private and public life in diplomatic practice.

Diplomacy regularly spills into partners’ private spaces and time. Events hosted in diplomatic homes are not social leisure but integral components of professional diplomacy. As Enloe notes, “informal entertaining is part of the business” (2014: 185). Without a partner’s cooperation, she argues, diplomats may struggle to cultivate the interpersonal trust required for effective diplomacy.

Relocation itself is framed as part of diplomacy-related care work: a costly sacrifice that disrupts careers, income and social networks. While many partners accompany the diplomat, EUFASA (2019) data show that 40% have at some point lived separately to protect their careers.

DIPLOMACY-RELATED CARE WORK IN MFA POLICIES

Historically, MFAs relied heavily on unpaid spousal labour. Until 1972, the US State Department evaluated spouses in diplomats' efficiency reports (Enloe, 2014; Fenzi and Nelson, 1994). British spouses in the 1980s successfully lobbied to remove similar expectations. Although official policies have since retreated from formal requirements, informal expectations remain high.

Among EUFASA countries, explicit MFA policies defining partner roles are rare. The German Foreign Service Act acknowledges accompanying spouses' assistance but does not specify duties. The French MFA grants spouses the status of "Occasional Employee of the Public Service" for representational events. The Swiss "FDFA Accompanying Persons Policy" (2014) is exceptional in candidly articulating expectations, burdens and supports for accompanying persons, including allowances and recognition of emotional strain and limited career prospects.

In most other MFAs, partners' contributions remain both indispensable and invisible.

DIPLOMACY-RELATED CARE WORK AS AN ENFORCED SOCIAL NORM

In the absence of clear policy guidance, partners rely on informal norms. Chart 1 shows widespread participation in diplomacy-related care work despite lack of official instruction. Chart 2 suggests that partners follow longstanding diplomatic norms, reinforced through peer observation and expectations.

Chart 3 indicates extremely high levels of participation: most partners "often" or "always" accept invitations, and only 5% have never received one.

EUFASA Survey (2020) findings reveal that 66% of partners feel pressured—by MFAs or peers—to adopt a particular social role. Eighty per cent believe their behaviour could affect the officer's career, and 85% moderate their public or private opinions accordingly. This sense of obligation, though unofficial, is deeply embedded in MFA cultures. Many partners fear that non-compliance may harm the diplomat's career, constraining their autonomy and blurring the boundary between private person and unofficial representative.

DIPLOMACY-RELATED CARE WORK VERSUS EMPLOYMENT RATE

The 2024 data set allows comparison with 2020. First, the overall engagement in diplomacy-related care work appears to have declined: in 2020, only 14% reported no involvement; by 2024, this rose to 40%¹. However, a majority of partners in 2024 still performed at least one hour per week of diplomacy-related tasks.

Second, comparing seven European countries shows notable variation (see Chart 4). Countries with the highest partner engagement—Belgium, Switzerland and Spain—also have the lowest employment rates among partners (44%, 37% and 44%). Spain and Switzerland also have the highest numbers dedicating more than eight hours per week to diplomacy-related care work. Conversely, British partners spend the fewest hours on diplomacy and have the second-highest employment rate (54%). These patterns suggest that greater labour market attachment may reduce participation in diplomacy-related activities, and vice versa.

SENIORITY OF THE MFA OFFICER

Partner workload varies with context, but diplomat seniority stands out as a decisive factor. Chart 5 shows greater engagement in all diplomacy-related activities as officer seniority increases. Chart 6 highlights the stark differences in time allocation: over 50% of ambassadors' partners spend more than eight hours per week on such tasks, compared to only 5% of junior diplomats' partners.

Qualitative survey comments illustrate the breadth of responsibilities borne by partners of senior diplomats—from residence management, event logistics and procurement, to extensive representational duties that often amount to full-time unpaid work.

Partners of junior diplomats feel the least pressure to perform such roles and are most likely never to receive invitations in their spousal capacity (Chart 7).

¹This difference can partly be attributed to methodology. While in the 2020 survey, respondents were asked for an estimate of average weekly hours spent on diplomacy-related tasks during their last posting, the 2024 survey asked for an estimate of hours in the past week. Only respondents currently on posting were included in these statistics.

GENDER OF THE ACCOMPANYING PARTNER

Gender significantly shapes partner involvement. Across all data sets, women participate more frequently in diplomacy-related care work, spend more time on it and feel greater pressure to perform it (see Chart 1, Chart 2 and Chart 3). This aligns with prior research showing that men are less willing to assume secondary earner or homemaker roles (Anderson, 2001; Harvey & Wiese, 1998; Cole, 2011).

Davoine et al. (2012) observed that women place high importance on all partner repertoires, particularly representation, which aligns with gendered expectations. Men, by contrast, prioritise moral and psychological support and downplay representational and household management tasks. Male partners also risk stigma within diplomatic communities and therefore minimise visibility within representational roles.

The 2020 and 2024 data confirm these patterns: the largest gender gaps appear in representation, residence staff management and cultural promotion (Chart 1). Among partners of heads of mission—those with the highest exposure to diplomacy-related care work—85% were women.

THE IN/VISIBILITY OF DIPLOMACY-RELATED CARE WORK

The gendered division of diplomacy-related care work reflects global care patterns: women perform most unpaid labour. The work of diplomatic partners is largely invisible to MFAs, much like unpaid care work is invisible to national GDP. Few MFAs formally acknowledge or remunerate it.

Yet the boundaries between public (recognised) and private (unrecognised) contributions vary. France and Switzerland recognise representational labour, either through social security coverage or special allowances. Poland extends recognition by offering contracts to partners of heads of mission for residence management. Estonia adopts an even broader approach, treating the mere act of accompanying an officer as remunerable work, without requiring specific tasks.

If all economies depend on unpaid and paid care work to function, diplomacy appears no different. Diplomats without partners can succeed, but survey data suggest that diplomatic systems implicitly rely on partners' labour—labour that disproportionately constrains women and remains largely unacknowledged.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the role of diplomatic spouses and partners in the 21st century remains both indispensable and structurally undervalued. Through the concept of **diplomacy-related care work**, the analysis captures how the private lives, emotional labour and unpaid contributions of partners underpin the functioning of European diplomacy. Despite the absence of formal contractual expectations in most MFAs, partners across Europe continue to perform substantial unpaid labour that supports diplomatic missions, enables representational obligations and contributes to the soft infrastructure of international relations.

The two EUFASA surveys reveal several consistent patterns. First, the majority of partners engage in diplomacy-related care work, though the level of engagement appears to be decreasing. Second, partner gender and diplomat seniority profoundly shape the distribution of this labour. Women consistently carry the heavier burden, mirroring wider global trends in unpaid care work. Partners of senior diplomats, especially heads of mission, experience particularly significant time demands, sometimes amounting to full-time unpaid work. Third, countries with higher partner involvement in diplomacy tend to show lower employment rates among partners, suggesting that unpaid diplomatic expectations may directly limit partners' labour market participation.

Although MFAs publicly present partners as private individuals, informal expectations and institutional cultures produce strong pressures to conform to established norms. Many partners feel that their conduct and participation may influence the diplomat's career, and this perception creates a climate in which unpaid work becomes both expected and enforced. Only a small number of MFAs—most notably Switzerland, France, Poland and Estonia—offer explicit recognition of partners' contributions, and even these frameworks vary widely in scope and intent.

The findings highlight a fundamental tension: modern diplomacies proclaim gender equality and professionalisation, yet tacitly depend on a gendered, informal and largely invisible workforce. Without addressing this contradiction, MFAs risk perpetuating inequality, undermining partners' autonomy and reinforcing outdated notions of familial responsibility within diplomatic service.

Recognising diplomacy-related care work as work—whether through policy reform, financial compensation, social protection or clear role definitions—would not only acknowledge partners' contributions but also promote greater fairness and gender equality within foreign services. As mobility patterns evolve and dual-career families become the norm, MFAs will increasingly need to confront the embedded reliance on unpaid spousal labour. A transparent and equitable framework for accompanying partners is not merely a matter of welfare; it is essential for the sustainability and modernisation of diplomatic institutions in the 21st century.

CHARTS

Chart 1:

The proportion of partners and spouses performing diplomacy-related care work, segregated by gender, EUFASA Survey 2020

	Total (894)	Men (221)	Women (665)
Accompanying MFA Officer on posting	90%	84%	92%
Accompanying MFA Officer to events	84%	82%	85%
Hosting MFA Officer work related events	63%	55%	65%
Managing household/residence	70%	67%	71%
Managing residence staff	39%	28%	42%
Managing movers	69%	60%	71%
Representation (charity, events, national days)	66%	53%	70%
Promoting MFA country's culture	51%	39%	55%
Promoting MFA country's economy (brands, business)	22%	20%	23%
Network with MFA Officer's colleagues and other partners	77%	71%	78%
Speak in line with policy messages of sending MFA	17%	16%	17%

Chart 2:

The source of pressure to take on a certain social role in the capacity of a spouse/partner of a diplomat, segregated by gender, EUFASA Survey 2020

	Total (890)	Men (219)	Women (661)
MFA	13%	11%	13%
MFA Officer	17%	15%	18%
Other spouses/partner	26%	17%	28%
Observed norms in diplomacy	55%	51%	56%
N/A	34%	38%	33%

Chart 3:
How frequently partners accept an invitation to a diplomacy-related event, segregated by gender, EUFASA Survey 2020

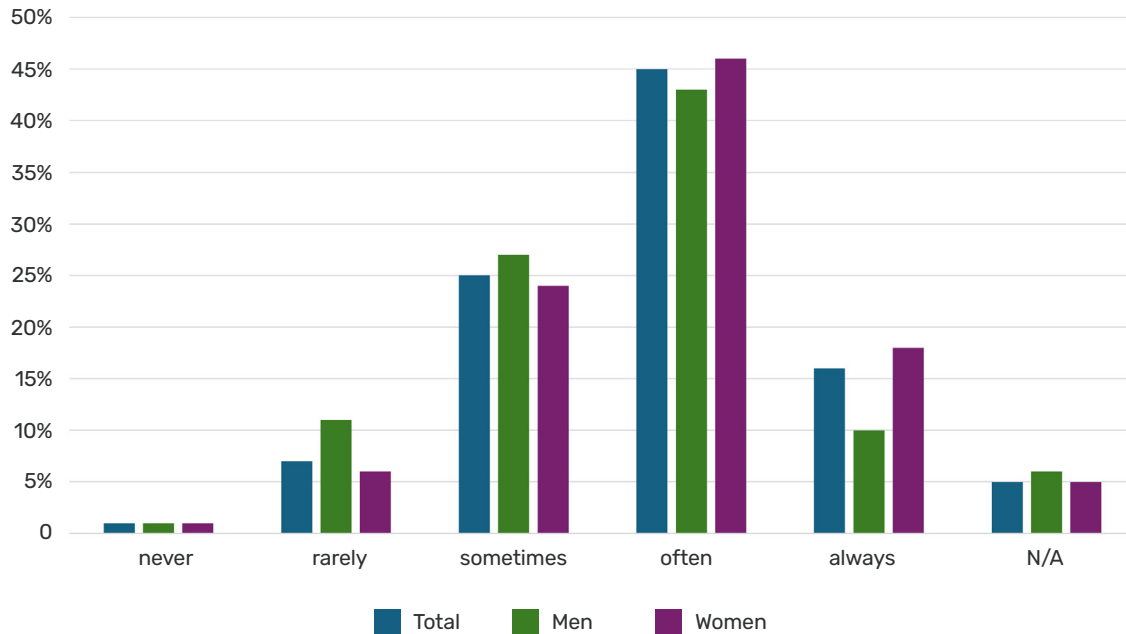


Chart 4:
International comparison of partner engagement in diplomacy and partner employment rate, EUFASA Survey 2024

Country	0 h spent on diplomacy	Partners' employment rate
Austria	52%	59%
Belgium	42%	44%
Ireland	58%	48%
Netherlands	54%	48%
Spain	45%	44%
Switzerland	42%	37%
UK	65%	54%

Chart 5:
Diplomacy-related care work performed by partners and spouses,
segregated by the seniority of the MFA officer, EUFASA Survey 2020

	HoM (252)	Senior (447)	Junior (146)
Accompanying MFA Officer on posting	94%	92%	85%
Accompanying MFA Officer to events	94%	84%	75%
Hosting MFA Officer work related events	93%	59%	36%
Managing household/residence	92%	64%	56%
Managing residence staff	81%	24%	14%
Managing movers	84%	67%	53%
Representation (charity, events, national days)	91%	61%	44%
Promoting MFA country's culture	78%	44%	35%
Promoting MFA country's economy (brands, business)	46%	13%	11%
Network with MFA Officer's colleagues and other partners	83%	77%	68%
Speak in line with policy messages of sending MFA	33%	13%	8%
Promoting MFA country's culture	78%	44%	35%
Promoting MFA country's economy (brands, business)	46%	13%	11%
Network with MFA Officer's colleagues and other partners	83%	77%	68%
Speak in line with policy messages of sending MFA	33%	13%	8%

Chart 6:
Partners' self-reported estimates of time spent on diplomacy-related care work per week, segregated by the seniority of the MFA officer, EUFASA Survey 2020

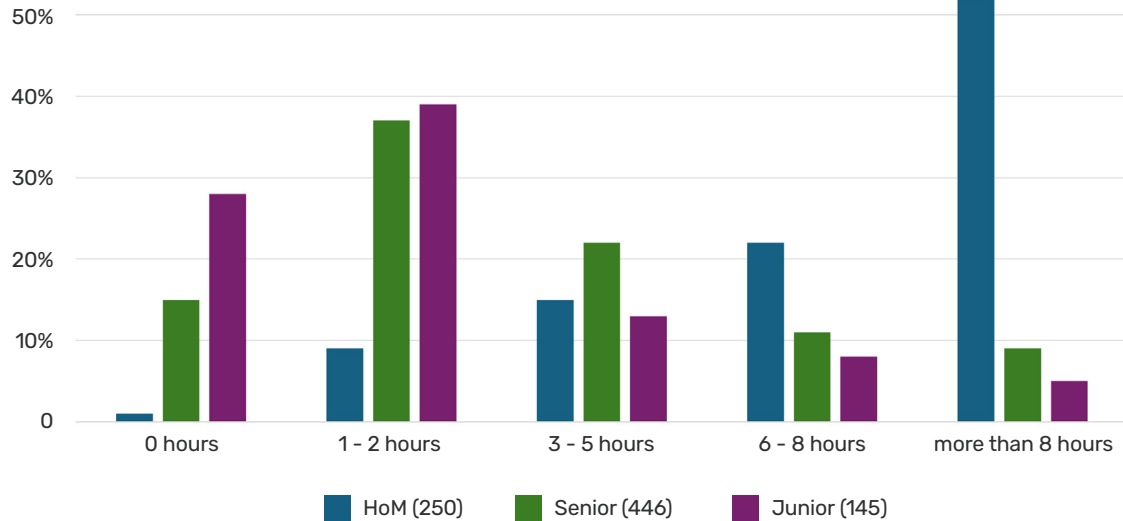
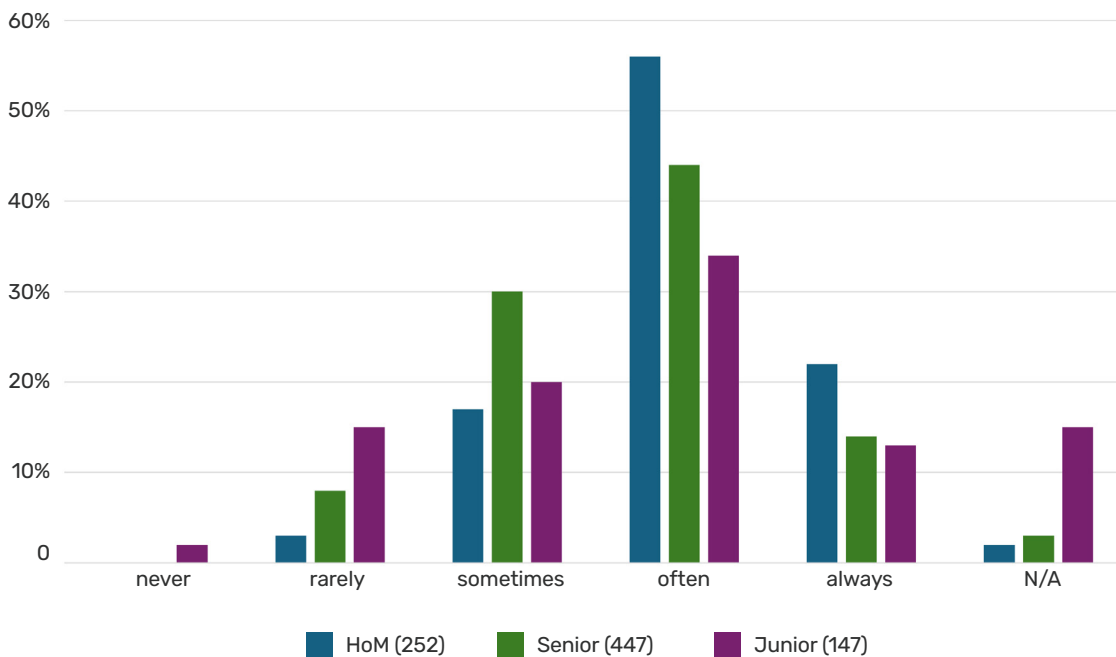


Chart 7:
How frequently partners accept an invitation to a diplomacy-related event, segregated by the seniority of the MFA officer, EUFASA Survey 2020



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