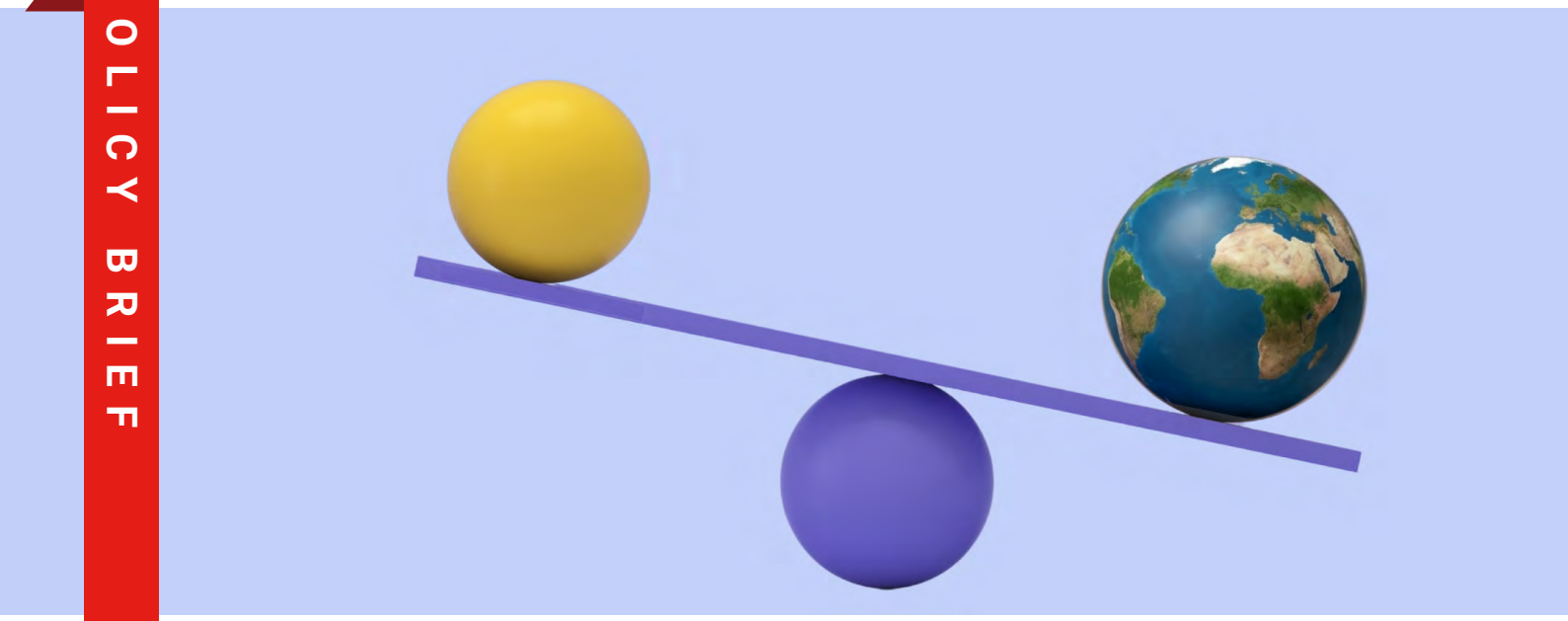
POLICY BRIEF



Women in Diplomacy: Work-life balance

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June 2026

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Women in Diplomacy

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In March 2026, the LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy project published a research report on *Strengthening the Representation of Women in Diplomacy: Lessons from the Field* (Smith and Kozielska, 2026). The report analyses the findings from research and dialogues that we conducted in 2025 with women diplomats across several global cities: Abu Dhabi, Brussels, Geneva, London, Mexico City, New York and Ottawa. It situates the challenges to women's representation in diplomacy within their broader institutional and socio-political contexts, identifying practical, actionable, and transferable solutions to the underrepresentation of women in senior diplomatic roles. Through our dialogues we identified a range of structural, institutional, and cultural barriers – co-creating a practical toolkit, based on proven practices, that address them. Alongside the report, we are producing four additional briefing papers, on mentorship, targets and quotas, work-life balance, and handling the media. While these topics are addressed in the report to some extent, they warrant deeper examination given their prominence in our research, allowing us to provide more evidence and best practices.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most widely recognised barriers to women's participation in diplomacy is work-life balance. Although this challenge is not exclusive to the diplomatic profession, it manifests in ways that are distinctly shaped by its unique demands: mandatory postings to locations that often offer little infrastructure for families, long and unpredictable hours, an institutional culture of presenteeism, and promotion and progression systems that are frequently tied to hardship postings or overseas experience. These characteristics create structural conditions that disproportionately affect women and are, in practice, more difficult to navigate for women than for men.

This is rooted in the history of diplomacy which has been known as 'the preserve of men' (Bloch, 2004, p. 94) and continues to shape gender disparities today. Women's contribution to diplomacy was often as diplomats' wives, until bans preventing women from joining the diplomatic corps were gradually lifted between the 1920s and 1970s (Kreft, Niklasson and Towns, 2022, p. 280). After the bans were lifted, women were permitted

to join the diplomatic corps, but they were still forced to choose between marriage and a diplomatic career. Women diplomats were expected to resign upon marriage, on the presumption that married women could not balance family and professional responsibilities or serve abroad because their husbands would be unwilling or unable to accompany them.

Even after these rules were lifted, the problem endured. Institutional practices and organisational culture were slow to change, and many diplomatic services continue to fall short of creating an environment where diplomatic careers can be effectively reconciled with family responsibilities. The challenge, however, cannot be addressed through institutional reform alone. Lasting progress also requires broader cultural change, including moves toward equal sharing of family and caregiving responsibilities, as well as stronger support systems provided by families (where and when possible), employers, and the government.

Thus, this policy brief focuses on two intertwined dimensions of work-life balance: first, the institutional challenges surrounding work-life balance, and second, the normative and cultural challenges that come from entrenched attitudes toward the role of women in diplomacy and the perceived incompatibility of diplomatic careers with family life. In the main report (Smith and Kozielska, 2026), we present a range of solutions that we hope will inspire action and demonstrate that meaningful change can begin with a single, well-designed measure. While in this brief, we take a closer look at work-life balance in diplomacy, examining its root causes, consequences, and the ways in which it perpetuates gender inequality and the underrepresentation of women in diplomacy.

It is important to emphasise that, in considering the recommendations proposed in this brief, the aim is to benefit all diplomats, regardless of gender. At the heart of this short paper is the recognition that improving work-life balance is not a zero-sum exercise that advantages women at the expense of men. Instead, it is about creating greater flexibility, support, and choice for all diplomats and, as a result, a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient diplomacy and diplomatic profession for everyone.

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

Based on the conversations we held as part of the 2025 dialogues, work-life balance emerged as one of the most quoted challenges, with the most significant barriers seen to be the unequal burden of care work falling on women, combined with workplace inflexibility.

A recurring finding, in both the literature and our research, is that the absence of robust family support policies negatively affects both women's representation in diplomatic services and the career trajectories of women who enter the field. A lack of institutional support combined with lack of flexible working options frequently pushes women into accepting less prominent roles to manage domestic demands (Barrington, 2020), while more ambitious positions come to feel unattainable – eventually pushing women out of the diplomatic sphere entirely (Flowers, 2025). This creates conditions in which a successful career and family life appear mutually exclusive (Fellegi, Koci, and Benešová, 2023).

Limited institutional support is not only a matter of policy or intent but is also often linked to funding constraints within foreign ministries. Naturally, those holding larger budgets have greater capacity to provide additional support. However, as our main report (Smith and Kozielska, 2026) highlights, many effective measures require relatively little funding and can still make a meaningful difference.

Overseas postings represent the most acute concentration of work-life balance challenges. The key barriers to work-life balance compound and multiply. These include:

- **Childcare and schooling support** – in general, diplomats receive little to no institutional support with childcare or education costs at home, let alone on postings. In some ministries, piecemeal measures exist where, for example, a grant is given for school-age children but there is no support for younger children. Dialogue participants also noted the administrative and logistical burden of finding new childcare, schools, and support networks from scratch is significant with each country rotation, sometimes with little to no help or guidance from the foreign ministry.

- **Arrangements for trailing spouses** – men rarely follow women on postings. When they do, it is often met with social stigma and there are limited environments where they feel fully able to integrate, professionally and personally. Moreover, toll of repeated international relocations has contributed to a high divorce rate in the diplomatic corps or women choosing not to marry in the first place or delaying marriage considerably for these reasons.

- **Arrangements for dual-career couples** – literature shows that the already-established tendency for women's careers to become secondary to their spouses' is amplified by the rigidity of the diplomatic posting system (Lecler and Goltrant, 2024). Job-sharing arrangements for diplomatic couples have shown promise, but require deeper institutionalisation and, in particular, greater certainty around career progression, pension continuity, and promotion eligibility.

Often, the unpredictability of postings cycles further compounds these challenges. While some foreign ministries have a more transparent rotation schedule (e.g., four or five-year cycles), others have no set rotation schedule. In these cases, women described spending years in one posting without clarity on when the next would come, making family and life-planning effectively impossible.

Beyond the immediate challenge of balancing family and diplomatic responsibilities, often without adequate support, these pressures result in:

1. **Time poverty** – a primary driving factor in women's burnout and departure from the profession. It encapsulates and refers to the impossible pressure of managing work, childcare and/or elderly parent care, and the networking demands of international settings, without the institutional understanding and support.

2. **Psychological burden** – caused by operating in a competitive environment that makes no room to accommodate additional responsibilities beyond the office, without the institutional understanding and support.

CULTURAL CHALLENGES

Gaps in institutional support are compounded by cultural attitudes that operate both inside and outside diplomatic institutions. Three key dimensions have emerged from our research.

First, in most contexts, women continue to take on a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities, including for children, elderly parents, and other dependants, which can make progress more difficult in the absence of broader change. Until women and men share caregiving responsibilities more fairly, and such arrangements are actively supported through government incentives and policies, it will be difficult to achieve a more holistic and lasting change. This can be achieved and encouraged through, for example, equal parental leave policies or shared parental leave and extended paternity leave, subsidised childcare that enables both parents to remain in the workforce, and structured post-maternity re-entry programmes. Furthermore, for these measures to deliver meaningful change, they require a degree of formality and clarity that is often absent: maternity policies need written rules covering benefits, leave entitlements, work coverage arrangements, and return-to-work timelines (Flowers, 2025), while childcare provisions need to offer substantive and reliable access rather than nominal availability.

Second, existing socio-cultural norms and expectations often deter women from accessing available support measures, even when these exist, due to concerns that doing so may be viewed negatively or signal a lack of commitment. What this means in practice is that there is gap between the formal availability of support measures and diplomats' willingness to use them without fear of professional repercussions – both overt and covert (e.g., less likely to be considered for a promotion). The social and cultural rhetoric also often frames a diplomatic career as fundamentally incompatible with family life which dissuades many women from entering the field at all or from pursuing senior roles.

Third, despite the near-universality of women being seen as the designated care-takers, there are cultural variations across countries and capitals which dictate which postings are more family-friendly, not only in terms of the local conditions but also the work and local culture that have more acceptable working hours and working culture. This, for example, means that there is less or no expectation to work during the weekend or attend weekend functions, to work into late evenings, or attend evening receptions. Thus, the local working culture also affects the extent to which the workplace for women diplomats is flexible and understanding.

A more amenable working culture will also heavily depend on the leadership and role models who visibly demonstrate a different relationship to work and family. Some participants in our dialogues cited women leaders who attend meetings with children as a visible signal that family life and senior leadership are compatible. Elsewhere, the presence of senior women and men who normalise leaving the office for school pick-up was described as transformative for junior women's sense of what is possible and acceptable.

Addressing work-life balance in diplomacy therefore requires not only structural reforms, but also a sustained effort to change the cultural attitudes. While slower and harder to mandate, cultural change is no less essential to achieving lasting progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the main report (Smith and Kozielska, 2026) presents a range of case studies and example measures that have been trialled or implemented by different foreign ministries, their effectiveness will vary depending on institutional, political, and cultural contexts. These examples are intended to illustrate approaches that may be adapted and adopted elsewhere. To avoid duplicating existing efforts, in this policy brief, we instead focus below on recommendations that are relevant and applicable across all foreign ministries and contexts.

Institutional measures

- Establish formalised maternity, paternity and adoption leave policies that clearly define entitlements, cover arrangements, and return-to-work timelines. Ambiguity in existing policies invite bias in their application.

- Provide childcare support in the capital and at postings. While subsidised childcare or subsidised childcare facilities within ministries/embassies may not be feasible within all foreign ministries' budgets, this has proven to be the single most effective measure in supporting mothers, fathers and families alike. However, support can also take other forms, such as nursery fee contributions, education allowances, and assistance with school placements and access to vetted lists of local childcare providers on postings.

- Promote and incentivise the uptake of paternity and shared parental leave among male diplomats through clear leadership support, equal leave entitlements, and workplace culture (leadership and beyond) that actively encourage its use.

- Institutionalise job-sharing and career-sharing arrangements for diplomatic couples. These arrangements require explicit rules around promotion eligibility and career progression to be effective.

- Negotiate and actively implement bilateral agreements with receiving countries to provide enabling conditions for incoming diplomats. Even though they can take some time and effort, there is significant scope for what bilateral agreements can achieve and provide. They should aim for: enabling conditions and support for spouses of diplomats to seek employment (e.g., facilitating work rights and employment opportunities for accompanying spouses or partners), as well as broader measures, such as streamlined visa processes, access to local job markets, and recognition of qualifications (where possible). A key strength of bilateral agreements is that they are, by definition, mutually beneficial, as both countries can agree to provide equivalent arrangements for each other, to the extent possible.

- Encourage senior leadership to visibly model healthy work-life balance by leaving at normal working hours (when it is possible), normalising parental leave uptake, normalising school pick-ups and participating in family responsibilities and actively protecting their teams from the culture of unlimited availability.

Towards a new culture

- Achieving meaningful work-life balance in diplomacy requires more than the introduction of institutional measures. It requires a fundamental shift in how foreign ministries define work, success, and professional value. Foreign ministries should move away from a culture that equates long hours and constant availability with commitment or excellence, and towards one that measures performance by results, impact, and sustainability.

- Redefine success and career progression. Diplomatic careers should be seen beyond a single linear trajectory. Foreign ministries should formally recognise non-linear career paths, including lateral moves, part-time periods, and career pauses for caregiving as legitimate and valued, removing the stigma of professional plateaus, while ensuring they do not constitute a barrier to advancement.

- Normalise flexible and remote working. While certain diplomatic functions require physical presence and real-time responsiveness, a significant share of diplomatic work can be performed flexibly. Building on lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, ministries should institutionalise hybrid and flexible working arrangements as a default option rather than an exception, making them available equally to all staff regardless of grade or gender.

- Engage men as active advocates and participants. Work-life balance should not be framed as a women-only issue. Foreign ministries should actively encourage men to take up flexible arrangements and parental leave, signal that doing so carries no reputational cost, and include male diplomats in conversations and initiatives around sustainable working cultures.

The shift in culture and perception can't be driven by individual diplomats alone. It requires visible leadership from senior officials and heads of mission who set the informal norms that can often shape behaviour far more powerfully than written policy and make the written policies more effective, as a result. ■

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LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy Project

Women are still underrepresented in diplomacy, foreign policy and public policy, particularly in senior positions. The LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy project was set up to help address this issue, understand what obstacles remain and how they can be overcome. The project aims to share knowledge and tools about how to create better access to and accelerate women's representation in international organisations. It also examines how to more effectively integrate a gender-lens into government action and policy-making.

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