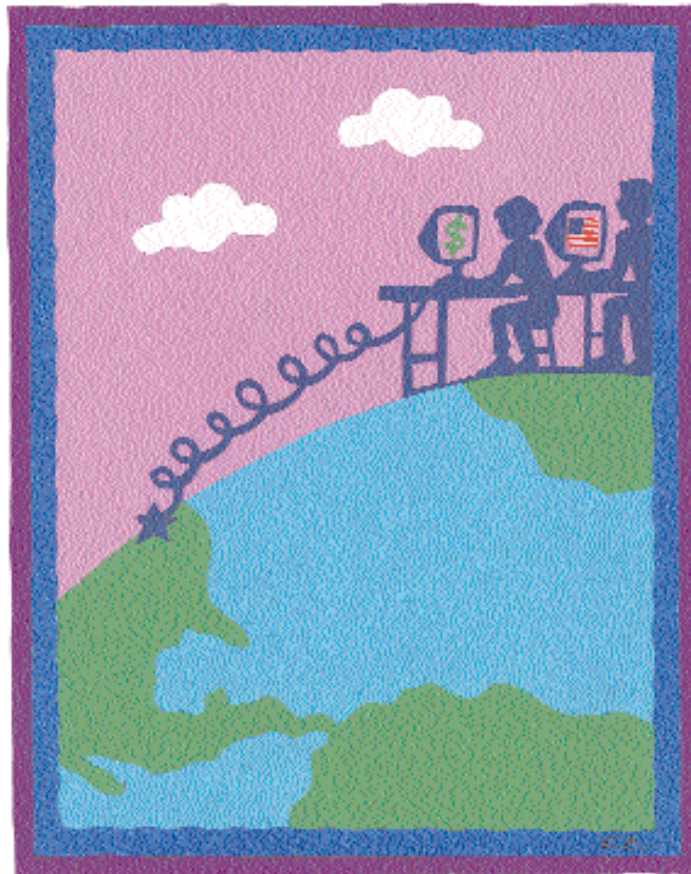


THE REALITY OF FOREIGN SERVICE SPOUSAL EMPLOYMENT



Edith Bingham

SPOUSAL EMPLOYMENT IS ONE OF THE TOP CONCERNS FOR TODAY'S FOREIGN SERVICE FAMILIES. HERE'S A LOOK AT THE REAL SITUATION FOR SPOUSES WHO WANT THEIR OWN CAREERS.

BY SHAWN DORMAN

A

June 1957 State Department publication, "Suggestions for Wives from Other Foreign Service Wives," offered the following advice:

"Being married to a man in the Foreign Service gives you the satisfaction of using your mind and developing your capabilities in working more closely with your husband than would be true in some other occupations. There is a real job for you to do in supporting your husband's effort, and satisfaction in doing so. You can be a great help to your husband in his career, and can live a rich and rewarding life by helping him in serving our country."

The Foreign Service has come pretty far in 45 years for the Foreign Service spouse who wants his or her own career. But has it come far enough?

Back in 1957, the vast majority of Foreign Service officers were men. Until 1972, spouses were considered government employees and their representational contributions were included in the FS employee's evaluations. A 1972 State Department directive ended that practice, leaving spouses posted abroad more freedom to host or not host representational events, but not, in many countries, free to find employment.

Until 1972, female FS employees had to resign if they married. Today, while the Foreign Service still has a male majority, the ratio is changing, and entering FS classes are more evenly split between men and women. September 2001 data from the department show that today's Foreign Service is made up of about 66 percent men and 34 percent women, out of a total of 9,333 employees. There are about 450 tandem couples in the State Department, and an additional 81 "interagency tandems," in which one spouse works for another foreign affairs agency.

Data from about 150 posts surveyed for the Family Liaison Office (FLO) Family Member Employment Report in 1999 showed that 55 percent of eligible family members were not working, 33 percent were working inside the mission, five percent held jobs in education, one percent worked for an American company, three percent were doing freelance work, and three percent were in other kinds of jobs.

Most FS spouses today are well-educated and, in many cases, just as professionally qualified in their own fields as their FS employee husband or wife. A survey from a few years ago found that 83 percent of FS family members had college degrees and 29 percent had advanced degrees.

Foreign Service spouses may be willing partners in the representation role and may spend some years not working outside the home in order to care for children, but

Shawn Dorman is the Journal's AFSA News editor. She was an FSO from 1993-2000. Her accompanying husband, Shawn McKenzie, worked in the public health field during postings to Bishkek, Jakarta and Washington.

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they are less likely to sign on for a lifetime of non-employment than were the spouses of generations past.

Can An FS Spouse Have a Career?

As with so many questions about the Foreign Service, the answer is "it depends." An informal survey of FS spouses and discussions with Foreign Service officials concerned with spousal employment lead to the following conclusion: most FS spouses not part of a tandem couple will not have "normal" careers, but can, with a combination of the right skills and the right postings, have a series of rewarding jobs in their chosen fields, if those fields are ones that lend themselves to Foreign Service life. Almost all spouses will have inevitable gaps in employment as the Foreign Service lifestyle dictates frequent moves, as well as transition periods for training and home leave.

FS spouse Melissa Hess says that a spouse cannot have a career in the traditional sense, "but spouses can build a 'career path' by taking jobs in their chosen areas of interest, whenever possible." Hess has held many jobs teaching and training adult learners, and is currently the director of education and staff development at an Arlington hospital. Her overseas experience played a key role in landing her this job. She's also just published a book, *Expert Expatriates*, along with fellow FS spouse Patricia Linderman.

While some FS spouses find a peripatetic lifestyle either ends or puts a significant damper on a career, others, like Francesca Kelly, find it works well for those seeking less traditional careers. Kelly told us, "In many ways, I've actually found being an FS spouse an opportunity, career-wise, rather than a hindrance, but that's because I've never felt like a true 9-to-5-er. I come from a long line of independent contractors, freelancers, entrepreneurs and starving artists. I also did not want to have to work when I started producing offspring, so being an FS spouse allowed us to live on one income and I have been able to be home for the kids."

Many FS spouses choose to stay home with children for some years. As FS spouse Jan Fischer Bachman notes, "If you want to stay at home with kids, the FS

makes it possible because of perks like free housing. The stay-at-homeers-by-choice are probably among the happiest group of FS family members.”

Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide (AAFSW) President Mette Beecroft, who notes that she has “made a career of not having a career,” explains that most FS spouses cannot have a regular career path in any occupation in which the work is anchored in a company or a place and in which there is a prescribed progression of positions: “If people are coming in with expectations of being able to have a regular career, they will be bitterly disappointed.” Beecroft said that back in 1978, when she was part of the efforts that opened the FLO and established it in the department, she suggested to the board of examiners that recruits be told more about the reality of spousal employment. She remembers a negative response: they might lose people that way.

Today’s recruiters, while anxious not to paint too negative a picture, are trying to provide more useful information so people can make the right choice about whether to join. Special Coordinator for Diplomatic Readiness Niels Marquardt says, “Through pre-employment communications, we strive to portray to prospective employees the reality of spousal employment in the FS. We recognize this to be the leading issue for some potential recruits and have no interest in misleading anyone. We say quite honestly that ‘the Foreign Service is not for everyone — but it may be for you.’”

Ray Leki, of the Foreign Service Institute’s Transition Center, said spouses can definitely have careers, but those careers are “probably not going to be the ones they envisioned.” He said that on the second day of junior officer training, representatives from the Transition Center and related organizations spend several hours with spouses. “We all want our new-hires and families to start out with realistic expectations, but this is an area of communication that is inherently problematic. It deals with aspirations and expectations that are formed without context. Most people will not have a good idea of what they are getting themselves into until after their first assignments.”

Even though the State Department recruiting site has

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links to the FLO, and the FLO site does provide spousal employment information, many incoming FS employees still complain that they were not informed about the spousal employment situation. FLO’s Employment Program Specialist Debra Thompson acknowledged this is still a problem and says FLO is currently putting together a special guide for the recruiting office to use in helping

better inform recruits about employment options for FS spouses. It should be ready soon.

In early 2001, the FLO published the second edition of a useful book called *Employment Options for Foreign Service Family Members*, which provides information on job search techniques, portable careers and skills, federal government employment and other employment options for the FS family member. It is available in the FLO office and on the FLO Web site (www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo). The introduction is perhaps a little too rosy: “Before 1972, being a Foreign Service spouse was a career. Today, the question is not whether a Foreign Service spouse should have a separate career, but how the spouse manages a career along with the other requirements of the mobile Foreign Service lifestyle.” But in the middle of the book, the section on portable careers gives a more realistic picture: “Since the definition of a ‘career’ means successive jobs with higher levels of responsibility and increased pay, few careers lend themselves to FS life. The best definition of a ‘portable career’ might be finding employment in one’s area of training on a regular basis.”

The Canadian Foreign Ministry is up-front about letting people know what the reality is for its Foreign Service. Displayed prominently on its Web site is this note about spousal employment, which seems just as relevant for its American counterparts: “Continuous professional employment overseas is usually not possible for spouses. In many countries, despite the lifting of formal barriers, it is difficult for spouses to find work due to linguistic and economic restrictions on the employment of foreigners. Some spouses find salaried work with an international agency, an embassy or an international school; others do volunteer work or studies related to their careers or personal interests. Self-employment has

been the approach taken by those with an entrepreneurial bent and portable skills.”

The Bilaterals

In order for an FS family member to work legally outside the U.S. mission while posted overseas, a “Bilateral Work Agreement” or a “De Facto Reciprocal Work Arrangement” must be in place for that country. A bilateral is an official agreement between the U.S. government and the host country enabling family members to seek employment on the local economy. It is established through a formal exchange of diplomatic notes. At present, there are 84 countries that have signed bilaterals with the U.S. (See chart on p. 39.)

The de facto reciprocal work arrangement also allows family members to legally work on the local economy, but the permission is not based on any official signed agreement, but established by precedent. In these countries, there is established practice for family members to apply for and receive work permits. There are 53 countries with de facto arrangements in place. This leaves about 30 countries in which we have a mission but no work agreement.

Although the FLO supports efforts to establish bilateral and de facto agreements with all countries, the FLO’s Thompson says it is the post itself that must take the lead on negotiating an agreement with the foreign ministry of the host country. The FLO provides posts with all the necessary supporting documentation. The critical ingredients for successful completion of a bilateral work agreement are post commitment and host country willingness. Some agreements take years to become final, and negotiations can be knocked off course by changes in host-country governments or by departure from post of whoever was taking the lead on the issue.

Spouses at posts in countries without bilateral agreements complain about lack of concern from post management. It is often the Community Liaison Officer who takes the lead on negotiating a bilateral, but without support from the front office, the CLO — who does not hold an official diplomatic position — is unlikely to succeed. Many FS employees and spouses point out that a strong and clear mandate from Washington could encourage, or force, post leadership in countries where there either is no agreement, or where there is a faulty

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one, to put it higher on the agenda.

Complicating this issue is the fact that in many countries that do have an agreement in place, there are few local economy jobs available to spouses, and those that are available are often at pay far below U.S. standards. In addition, some of the official agreements that are in place do not function effectively, while in some countries where no agreement is in place, FS spouses are able to work outside the embassy anyway.

Best-Bet Professions

Having a career while serving as a Foreign Service spouse depends on attitude, flexibility, transportable skills, strategic bidding, and luck. There are certain professions that do lend themselves to the mobile and not always predictable FS lifestyle. A basic list (not in rank order) might read like this:

- Teaching, training, translating/interpreting, writing/editing, Web design, Web-site management, information technology, consulting and project management, public health, accounting and finance, law, art, freelancing, and home-based businesses.

There are, of course, many caveats that go with each type of occupation on the list. For example, there are teaching jobs all over the world, but salaries are low. Wendy Schmitz, a certified K-8 teacher and FS spouse, said, “When my husband joined the Foreign Service, we were told I would not have a problem finding work. To date this has been true. What everyone failed to tell us was that I would be on a different salary tier than my ‘international hire’ counterparts with the same qualifications.” The FLO’s Thompson confirms that teaching is one of the most portable and marketable professions, but poor salaries and extremely limited benefits are consistent problems for educators.

Attorney spouses have mixed experiences finding employment overseas, and much depends on the kind of law they practice and the specific country situation. Lawyer Steve Payne, married to a former USAID lawyer and now practicing in Washington, told us, “There are opportunities for lawyers in civil society, democracy, legal reform and human rights programs in many countries. The work is most suitable for lawyers with litigation experience. In more commercial places, such as Indonesia, there are also opportunities in corporate law.” (Indonesia

is not one of the countries with a work agreement in place, but that has not stopped many spouses from working outside the mission there.)

Writers don't usually make a lot of money, but writing can be a rewarding profession that is highly portable. Some of the FS spouses who seem most at peace with Foreign Service life are the writers. Francesca Kelly told us that "Nowadays, being overseas, especially in a posting with reliable Internet connections, is perfect for a writer — you can't help having all these incredible experiences that you want to put on paper, and even the bad days are fodder for essays and articles." Kelly, along with Fritz Galt, was the founder of the *Spouses Underground Newsletter*, the SUN, which served to support and connect spouses and give a forum for satire and humor. It evolved into the *Tales from a Small Planet* Web site (www.talesmag.com), which has a broader scope.

The field of public health can offer a highly flexible career path for the FS spouse, offering employment or consultancy options with international organizations, USAID or USAID contracting organizations, and with nonprofit organizations. Public health professionals with expertise in traditional international health areas such as child survival, maternal health and family planning have done well in developing countries, but find that jobs in more-developed countries are scarce. In addition, technical skills in health education, epidemiology, needs-assessment, and program design are in demand in many developing countries.

According to the FLO's Thompson, more spouses are finding ways to take their jobs with them when they go overseas, arranging contracts with their home-base employers for work that can be done remotely via the Internet. Even some spouses working for the federal government have found success with this approach.

Language barriers to good jobs on the local economy can be significant for many spouses who were unable to study the language of the country before arriving at post. Although the Foreign Service Institute tries to include spouses in language classes, many spouses are unable to study while still in the U.S. either because of a lack of space in a class or for financial and other reasons. Many if not most spouses find themselves in-country before

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beginning study of the local language. In certain parts of the world the spouse without the local language will have an extremely difficult time finding a job on the local economy. This problem seems to be most acute in countries where Spanish or French is spoken.

Jobs in the Mission

Mission employment is an option for FS spouses in many posts around the world, though these positions are, more often than not, "support" jobs and come with artificially low salaries. Paula Riddle, FLO's employment program coordinator until recently, told AAFSW in an interview that "We are painfully aware of low salaries and are currently addressing this in our active working group. The Eligible Family Member positions were classified a number of years ago and we feel that many need to be reclassified."

Many spouses feel underappreciated and underpaid in their mission jobs. FSO Roger Street put it bluntly, "The department more or less takes this deep and diverse pool of talent for granted, tapping into it at the department's pleasure and assuming that these folks will take anything that is offered."

Many spouses working inside U.S. missions work on Personal Service Contracts in positions that come with no benefits and that are not considered long-term positions. Others work as PITs (part-time, intermittent or temporary appointments), who are eligible for only limited benefits.

The good news is that many mission jobs are now being designated Family Member Appointments as part of a program that started in 1998. FMAs are eligible for full benefits including annual leave and retirement, which accrue with each subsequent FMA job. The FLO's employment data from 150 participating posts in 1999 showed that of family members working inside U.S. missions, 39 percent were on PSCs, 34 percent were in FMA positions, 18 percent were in PIT positions, and nine percent were working for mission recreation associations. Some FMAs fill FSO slots in short-staffed consular sections. However, spouses are worried that with the major increase in hiring currently under way at State and USAID, these and other FMA jobs may become scarcer as junior officers retake some of those positions.

Work Agreement Status in Countries with an American Presence			De Facto Agreements		
Bilateral Work Agreements					
Albania	Ethiopia	Namibia	Austria	Morocco	Cambodia
Antigua & Barbuda	Finland	Nepal	Bangladesh	Niger	China
Argentina	Georgia	Netherlands	Belgium	Papua New Guinea	Congo (Kinshasa)
Australia	Ghana	New Zealand	Belize	Paraguay	Cuba
Azerbaijan	Grenada	Nicaragua	Burkina Faso	Portugal	Eritrea
Barbados*	Greece	Norway	Burundi	Qatar	Fiji
Belarus	Guinea-Bissau	Panama	Republic of Cape Verde	Russia	Guatemala
Benin	Guyana	Peru	Central African Republic	Senegal	Holy See
Bolivia**	Honduras	Philippines	Chile	Seychelles	Indonesia
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Hungary	Poland	Cote D'Ivoire	Singapore	Laos
Botswana	India**	Romania	Cyprus	South Africa	Malaysia
Brazil	Ireland	Rwanda	Dominican Republic	Sudan	Marshall Islands
Bulgaria	Israel	Samoa	Egypt	Suriname	Federated States of Micronesia
Cameroon	Italy	Sierra Leone	France	Swaziland	Nigeria
Canada	Jamaica**	Slovakia	Gabon	Syria	Oman
Chad	Kazakhstan	Slovenia	The Gambia	Taiwan	Pakistan
Colombia**	Kyrgyzstan	Spain*	Germany	Togo	Palau
Congo (Brazzaville)	Latvia	Sri Lanka	Guinea	Tunisia	Saudi Arabia
Costa Rica	Liberia	Sweden	Haiti	United Arab Emirates	Tajikistan
Croatia	Liechtenstein	Switzerland	Hong Kong	Uruguay	Tanzania
Czech Republic	Lithuania	Trinidad/Tobago	Iceland	Yemen	Thailand
Denmark	Macedonia	Turkey***	Japan		Uzbekistan
Djibouti	Malawi	Turkmenistan	Jordan	<i>* Spouses Only</i>	Vietnam
Ecuador	Mali	Uganda	Kenya		Yugoslavia
El Salvador	Malta	Ukraine	Korea		
Estonia	Mauritius	United Kingdom	Kuwait	No Work Agreement in Place	
	Moldova	Venezuela	Lebanon	Afghanistan	
	Mongolia	Zambia	Lesotho	Algeria	
	Mozambique	Zimbabwe	Luxembourg	Angola	
			Madagascar	Armenia	
			Mauritania	The Bahamas	
			Mexico*	Bahrain	
				Brunei	
				Burma	

** Limited number of family members permitted to work.
 ** Offer of employment required.
 *** Restricted employment fields.*

(Based on October 2001 FLO data.)

What Is Being Done?

What is being done for the FS spouse who wants to have a career, including employment with each posting? A lot but, perhaps, still not enough.

State management finally seems to realize that there is a connection between “recruitment and retention” — priority issues for the Foreign Service under Secretary Powell — and spousal employment opportunities. This appears to be leading to increased attention to spousal employment. However, as the FLO’s Thompson puts it, “there is no silver bullet.”

There are many spouses and FS employees who complain that State management has not done enough on the spousal employment front and has never made it a

top priority. One FS spouse, who declined to be named, expressed dismay at the lack of interest she still sees from State: “State views spouse employment as something to work on after everything else is done, which is never.”

To be fair, the FLO and the others tasked with working on this issue have a daunting task. Each host country has different issues influencing work opportunities. Each FS spouse is also unique, with his or her own priorities, goals, skills, and employment interests. FLO’s efforts on the spousal employment front have expanded in recent years, and more information and assistance for FS spouses is becoming available, especially via e-mail and the Web.

The FLO's Mexico Spouse Assistance pilot program, known as MESA, was established in Mexico City, Monterrey and Guadalajara in 2000 to assist FS spouses seeking local economy employment in their professional fields. The assistance, according to the FLO, "is in the form of culturally-specific job search tips and techniques along with an established network of professional contacts." The MESA program has not received rave reviews, however, in part because some family members mistakenly thought it was a job placement service rather than the less ambitious employment assistance program it was.

The pilot program has been expanded into a new program called SNAP, the Spouse Networking Assistance Program, and is being extended to include London, Brussels, Warsaw, Krakow, Tokyo, Seoul, Singapore, Cairo, Buenos Aires and Santiago. There is interest from State management in making it work, and the program has received significant funding for the expansion. Representatives from the FLO will visit each participating post this coming summer to check on the status of program implementation.

State management has also formed a Family Member Employment Working Group made up of employee relations personnel from the FLO and related human resources offices. The group meets weekly to discuss spousal employment issues and the policies that impact on spouse employment. According to Thompson, the group has come up with new ideas and solutions to problems, and has encouraged more open communication about the issue.

There are currently 162 posts participating in the FLO's Family Member Employment Report program. The FAMER database is a collection of information about local employment options from posts around the world. It lists current vacancies as well as positions held by family members inside and outside the mission. Data are collected by each participating post's CLO. The database can be accessed via State's Intranet site (<http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/flo>), but not via the Internet.

The FLO also publishes family member employment-related newsletters, now available by e-mail. The

Today's recruiters are trying to provide more useful information so people can make the right choice about whether to join.

Global Employment Monthly is published monthly for family members seeking jobs overseas. *Network* is published twice monthly and is for family members seeking employment in the Washington, D.C. area. (Subscribe to the GEM at www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/7236.htm. To subscribe to *Network*, replace 7236 with 7237.) Family members can find more employment information on the FLO Web

site, and can link to related FLO publications from the page: www.stat.gov/m/dghr/flo/c1959.htm. FLO also welcomes employment questions from family members via phone: (202) 647-1076, or e-mail: flo@state.gov.

A Final Reality Check

Employment for FS family members has become an increasingly critical issue for recruiting and retaining FS employees as the dynamics of American society have changed over the last several decades and more and more families are two-career households. However, State and the other FS agencies will never be able to ensure every spouse will have the kind of work he or she is seeking.

Here's what the agencies can do to make spousal employment programs a priority:

- Create as many post-specific networking and job-search tools as possible (especially those accessible on the Internet) so families can know the situation on the ground in every country on a bid list.
- Push all posts without functional bilateral work agreements to prioritize getting them in place.
- Provide realistic information on spousal employment to all recruits and new FS employees so that they can make informed decisions.

As was true in 1957, the nature of the Foreign Service career still dictates that not only the FS employee, but the whole family accompanying him or her, represents the U.S. abroad. It may never be possible for the FS spouse's career to take top billing in a Foreign Service family. But what has changed since 1957 is the notion that an FS spouse cannot have a separate and meaningful career of his or her own. The real trick now is figuring out how to make it work. ■