

Summary of Faforeport 2023:16

Norwegian Junior Professional Officers in the UN

The challenge of retaining JPOs
and increasing the number of
Norwegians in the UN system

Norwegian Junior Professional Officers in the UN

This report identifies and discusses factors that may encourage Norwegian Junior Professional Officers (JPOs) to proceed with a career within the United Nations (UN), and barriers that may constrain their decision to do so. The report also examines whether some of the factors of relevance to JPO retention hold different significance for women and men. It concentrates mainly on the Norwegian JPO programme: that is, what Norway does to recruit Norwegians into JPO positions, what it does to prepare them for the job, what kind of support Norway provides during the JPO assignment, and what is done by Norwegian authorities to ensure that people remain in the UN when the JPO period comes to an end. The report also examines the working conditions of the JPOs, including their relations with colleagues and superiors, and it compares their salaries and non-pay benefits with those normally offered by employers and the welfare state in Norway.

The report builds mainly on information from 7 key informants, in-depth interviews with 11 former and 2 current JPOs, and a questionnaire survey disseminated to 127 former and current JPOs. Whilst the report draws equally on the qualitative and quantitative data, this summary emphasizes the survey statistics for brevity.

Perception of the overall JPO programme and the JPO assignment

Only 4 in 10 JPOs held the opinion that the programme does a good job in recruiting Norwegian professionals into the UN system and launching their UN careers; 4 in 10 believed that the programme does a decent job; and 2 in 10 were dissatisfied with the programme.

However, three out of four were satisfied with their time as a JPO, and about 1 in 10 were dissatisfied with it. One half of the JPOs living with partners during their JPO assignment found that their partners were satisfied with their stay whilst one in five were dissatisfied.

Motivation

Seven in 10 women and 8 in 10 men intended to pursue a UN career, or at least remain with the UN for some time after the JPO assignment came to an end.

JPO retention

There is a higher proportion of former JPOs employed in the UNDP from Sweden (23 per cent) and Denmark (20 per cent) than from Norway (15 per cent). However, our survey data suggest that the Norwegian retention rate is not significantly different from that of Sweden: at the time of the survey, one in four former JPOs — and a higher share of men (34 per cent) than women (23 per cent) — were employed by the UN at the time of the survey; and 7 in 10 former JPOs were offered employment in the UN when their JPO assignment ended.

Six in 10 former JPOs — and as many women as men — had worked in the UN for a shorter or longer time since their JPO period, as has been found for former Swedish JPOs. The proportion is even higher, 7 in 10, amongst respondents younger than 40.

Twenty-four per cent of former JPOs currently not employed by the UN said they would consider applying for a UN position sometime in the future, 29 per cent answered that they would not, and the remaining respondents were not sure.

Information before the assignment

Only 6 in 10 had attended a course or meeting in Norway that provided practical information and a briefing about the JPO assignment before they arrived at their duty stations. Three out of four JPOs-to-be who had attended such a course or meeting expressed satisfaction with it.

Yet, their level knowledge about social security and other rights prior to assuming their JPO posts was rather poor: only 1 in 4 were well informed about the ability to retain their membership in the Norwegian National Insurance Scheme; 1 in 3 were well informed about the UN pension scheme; and 45 per cent knew the UN health insurance scheme well. A mere 17 per cent were well informed about their rights to sickness benefits. Furthermore, more than one half of the JPOs lacked proper information on UN arrangements for parental leave, childcare support, and support for children's education.

Supervision at the UN

Only one half of former or current JPOs reported having, or having had, a designated supervisor. Six in 10 of those who had a supervisor were satisfied with them (71 per cent of men and 54 per cent of women); twice the share of women than men were dissatisfied. Of note is the significantly lower level of satisfaction among the youngest JPOs — of these, only one third voiced their satisfaction and 3 in 10 were dissatisfied.

Follow-up from Norway during the assignment

During their time as a JPO, 1 in 5 had been in touch with Norec, 1 in 4 had been in touch with Norad, 8 in 10 had had contact with the MFA in Oslo, and 9 in 10 had been in contact with a Norwegian diplomatic mission. The contact was initiated by the individual JPO as often as it was by the four organizations.

However, in the view of many JPOs, the level of contact was inadequate. For example, 52 per cent said that they would have liked more regular contact with embassies, and 57 per cent would have liked more interaction with the MFA in Oslo. A higher share of female than male JPOs would have preferred more contact with Norwegian authorities, and the share is higher amongst those below 40.

It was suggested that systematic contact at regular intervals would benefit both the individual JPOs and the Norwegian authorities. It was reported that JPOs from other countries were followed up more closely by their respective authorities — a factor believed to have a positive effect on retention.

The working environment

Around 30 and up to 40 per cent of the survey respondents were satisfied with various aspects of the performance of their UN organization (duty station), such as the decision making, management and planning, and utilization of staff and other resources. About 30 per cent expressed dissatisfaction, and men were slightly more satisfied than women.

Fifty-three per cent of women and 72 per cent of men were satisfied with the overall working environment; 25 per cent of women and 17 per cent of men were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; and 23 per cent of women and 11 per cent of men were dissatisfied with the working environment. The next two paragraphs provide some details.

In what was described as a hierarchical and bureaucratic organization, 62 per cent of male and 48 per cent of female JPOs were satisfied with the support they received from superiors when facing challenges. However, as many as 15 per cent of men and 30 per cent of women were dissatisfied. When asked about problems that they may have experienced during their time as a JPO, 48 per cent of women and 23 per cent of men acknowledged having had difficult relations with one or more superiors.

Four in five JPOs were satisfied with the opportunity to work independently; two thirds were content with their role in decision-making processes; and the same proportion expressed satisfaction with their work tasks.

The work pressure at many JPO duty stations was substantial. Only one half of the JPOs (57 per cent of men and 49 per cent of women) were satisfied with the workload during their assignment. One in 4 women and 1 in 10 men expressed dissatisfaction with their working time. Similarly, 1 in 5 women and 1 in 10 men were dissatisfied with the work flexibility and free time offered.

The qualitative interviews suggest that some JPOs are concerned about, and have personal experience with, two aspects that can particularly take the joy out of the working life of women: gender discrimination regarding promotion to a higher professional level or a permanent UN position and sexual harassment.

Salaries and benefits

Nine in 10 JPOs were satisfied with their salaries. Two in three believed that the UN's support for childcare was too low; 85 per cent considered the UN health insurance as good; 53 per cent rated the UN scheme for sick pay as good; but only 11 per cent thought that the UN arrangement for parental leave was good.

One half of the JPOs believed that the UN pension scheme – from which Norwegian JPOs are exempt – was good. The qualitative interviews suggest that the JPOs would prefer adherence to the UN pension scheme over the private-sector scheme they are offered. The qualitative data also suggest that the JPOs would want to remain full members of the National Insurance Scheme whilst serving in the UN.

Competition from the Norwegian labour market

UN salaries are comparable to or higher than salaries in Norway. Still, in the view of many, the Norwegian labour market trumps UN employment when factors beyond payment are considered: the Norwegian market is characterized by low unemployment and good access to decent and stable jobs, a very good social protection scheme, and opportunity for dual career families with two incomes. Regulations in favour of work–life balance and a family-friendly work culture also favour employment in Norway and appear to work against the retention of JPOs in the UN system.

When the survey was distributed, one third of the former JPOs held positions at the MFA, Norad, or NGOs, which shows that many have remained engaged in development work. The others worked in the UN (1 in 4), the private sector (also 1 in 4), or in the Norwegian public sector outside MFA and Norad.