

SUPPORTING DIPLOMATIC PARTNERS AND SPOUSES DURING A CRISIS – LESSONS FROM COVID-19

POLICY PAPER

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

EUFASA’s Research Department conducted an international study in December 2020 – February 2021 to examine resilience, personal burnout, and organizational support among foreign service partners and spouses during the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper presents the findings and implications of that research, gives context from previous research, and makes data-based policy recommendations to better support partners and spouses in future crises and emergencies. The terms “partner” and “spouse” are used interchangeably in this document, and refer to all partners and spouses.

Demographics

A total of 421 partners completed the online anonymous survey, most of whom (89%) were accompanying foreign service officers from European countries. Three-quarters (75%) were women and 35% had been born in a different country than the foreign service officer. More than a third were currently based in Europe, 12.4% in Asia, 9% in North America, 8% in Sub-Saharan

Africa, with smaller percentages elsewhere. One quarter (25.6%) had been at the current location for less than one year; 39.4% from one year up to three years; and 22.1% for three to four years. More than a quarter (28%) reported being the partner of a Head of Mission, and 28.6% made an official move during the pandemic.

Research design

The EUFASA Research Department conducted several interviews with members of the target group to determine the main issues related to the pandemic that diplomatic families were facing. Based on these preliminary interviews, a questionnaire with 26 questions was compiled and tested. The questionnaire assessed the main sources of stress, as

well as levels of resilience and burnout using Connor–Davidson’s 10-item resilience scale and the personal burnout questions from the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory. The survey also included questions on supports offered by Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs), and work-life conflict.

Method of data collection

In December 2020, an on-line anonymous survey was circulated among partners and spouses of diplomats via EUFASA member organizations and several

European MFAs. The survey was also published on social media. Data were collected via Google Forms.

Confidentiality

All respondents were guaranteed anonymity. All quantitative data are presented in aggregated form. Any information that might lead

to identification of a specific person has been redacted. Google Forms complies with GDPR legislation.

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 <https://eufasa.org/>.

FINDINGS



Most partners have been significantly affected by Covid-19.

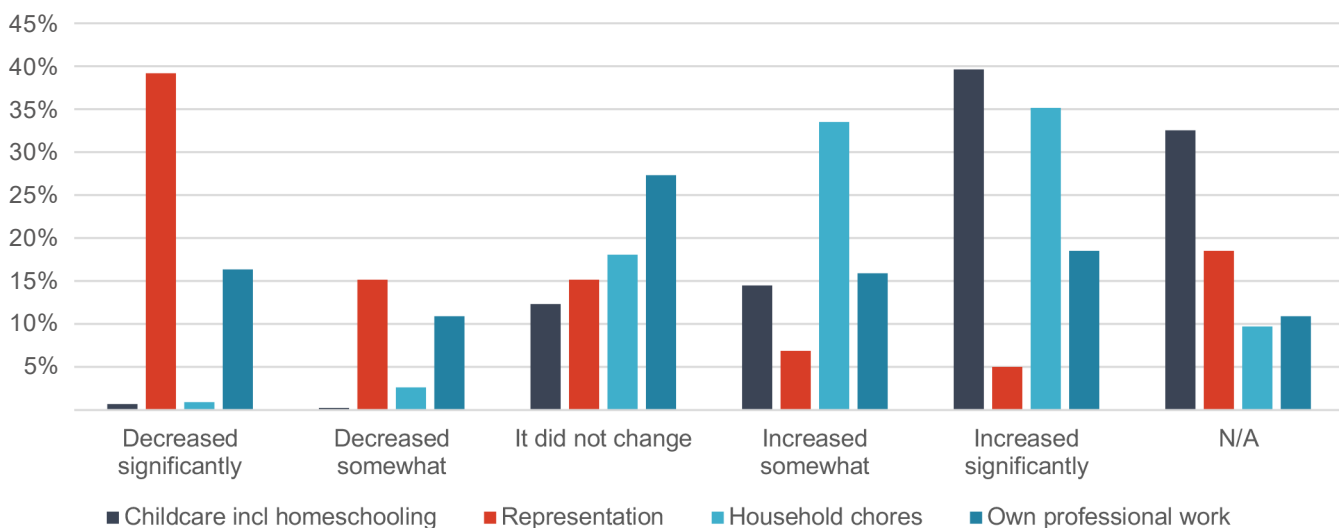
Already by late 2020 / early 2021, most partners had been significantly and personally affected by Covid-19. About one-third said that a close friend, immediate family member, or they themselves had contracted the virus; and 10% reported having had a family member or close friend die of Covid-19. About a quarter (26.1%) had been separated from family members for at least a month due to the pandemic.



The pandemic significantly increased workloads of both MFA employees and their partners/spouses.

Most (80.3%) partners with children under 16 at home reported an increased workload related to childcare and home schooling; the increase in workload was significantly greater for women than for men. Foreign service officers working in home office has further increased partners' workloads, because of increased meal preparation and housework, and spending more time helping the employee manage his or her own stress. More than half of respondents (58.7%) reported that their partner's (the foreign service officer) workload had also increased due to the pandemic.

Figure 1: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your own workload in the following areas: childcare, representation tasks, household chores, and your own professional or volunteer work?



**The pandemic created many stressors for foreign service partners.**

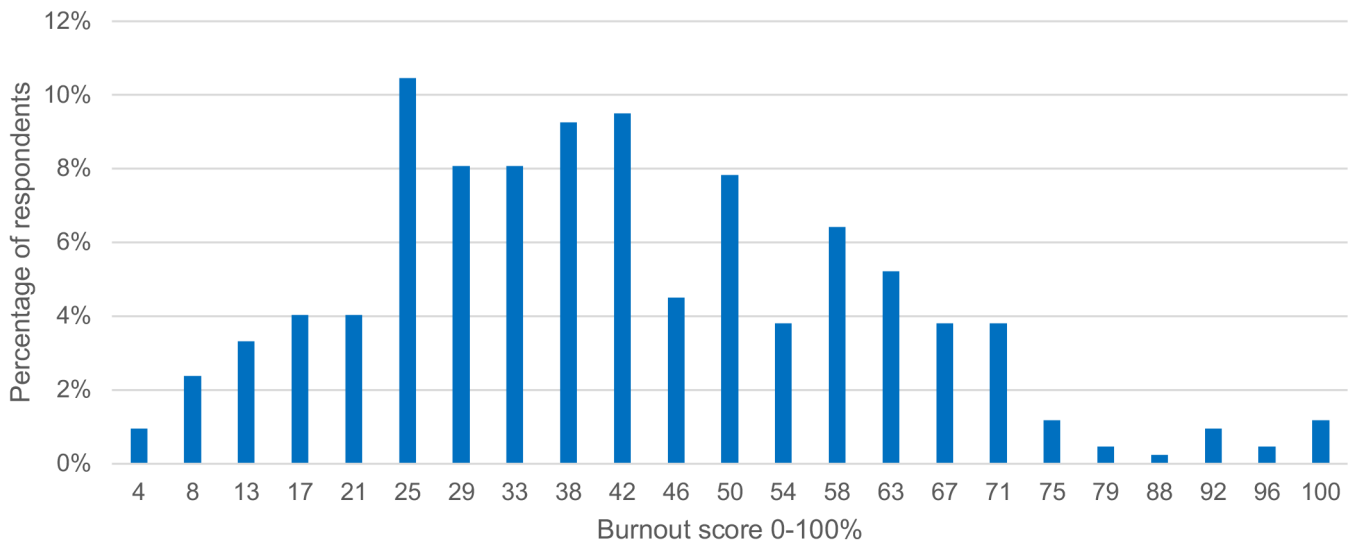
Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents reported concerns about the health of family living elsewhere to be the most stressful aspect of the pandemic, and 42.3% reported their own health and safety, and that of those living with them, to be the most stressful aspect. Among respondents with children under age 16 at home, 55% reported home schooling as a stress factor, and this stress increased with the number of children. Respondents reported feeling stressed by many other factors as well, including concerns about poor health infrastructure at post, being separated from family, losing their own employment, marital stress, and feeling trapped/stuck.

**Foreign service partners were found to be less resilient during the pandemic than the general population was before the pandemic.**

Resilience was measured with the 10-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale. The low resilience observed in partners and spouses was likely to be at least partly due to the continued stress and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. However as the researchers were unable to find any academic studies on resilience among diplomatic partners and spouses, the baseline level of resilience in this group is not known. Resilience in diplomatic partners and spouses may be different than in the general population, for example because repeated international relocations can disrupt social supports, physical and linguistic access to health care services, one's own professional life, etc. More experience as a diplomatic partner/spouse was not found to be correlated with greater resilience.

**Personal burnout scores indicated a high level of distress among foreign service partners.**

Personal burnout (i.e., burnout which is not related to employment) scores as measured with the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory were found to be higher among foreign service partners during the pandemic than among many previously-studied high-stress professions such as prison wardens, social workers, hospital doctors and nurses. Three out of ten respondents (31%) had indications moderate personal burnout, and 4.5% had indications of high or severe personal burnout. Personal burnout was found to be more likely among those with lower resilience, and those with school-age children at home; and less likely in older partners. Perhaps surprisingly, moving back to headquarters during the pandemic was associated with significantly lower personal burnout scores, but respondents moving abroad had about the same levels of burnout as those who did not move during the pandemic.

Figure 2: Personal burnout among MFA partners/spouses, assessed with Copenhagen Burnout Inventory

Most partners are aware of some limited support from their MFA.

About two fifths (40.6%) said that their Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) had a clear policy / measures to reduce risk due to Covid-19, and 27.3% knew they could be evacuated if necessary. Only 21.4% said that they have a contact person or Family Office at headquarters; and less than one fifth (19%) said they had access to helpful information for partners/spouses. Only 17.1% of respondents stated that they had access to psychological support services, and more than a quarter (26.1%) reported not having any support from their MFA at all.



Several measures offered by MFAs appear to effectively support partners' mental health.

Partners who reported having a designated contact person at their MFA had significantly lower personal burnout scores. Those who said that their MFA had a clear policy and/or measures abroad to reduce risk were also less likely to have indications of personal burnout. Respondents who knew that they could be evacuated if needed had significantly greater resilience. Interestingly, tips or workshops on managing stress offered by MFAs were associated with higher personal burnout scores. This may be because this support was only introduced once stress levels were already very high, and partners/spouses who were more stressed may have been more likely to participate.

When asked what support would help them during the pandemic, evacuation if necessary (61.3%) was most important, followed by clear policy/measures to reduce risk (57.5%), a message from the MFA acknowledging partners'/spouses' contributions and challenges (38%), helpful information in a website

or newsletter (35.2%), access to a psychologist (34.9%), and being able to ask questions to the MFA or Family Office (30.4%). Workshops/courses/tips on managing stress and social events / social support were rated as the least helpful measures (22.3% and 19.5%, respectively).

**Partners and spouses need more information from their MFAs.**

Only one fifth (19%) of respondents said that they had access to helpful information for partners/spouses; three quarters (75%) of spouses did not feel they were receiving enough information from their MFA. Respondents who said that they had a contact person for information at their MFA were aware of more support measures offered by their MFA than those who said they had no contact person, suggesting that a designated contact person/Family Office can play a key role in communicating information and policy to partners. Several respondents commented that they did not receive information in a language they could understand.

We assume that most MFAs would evacuate family members if necessary, but only 27.3% of partners were aware of this, suggesting that communication with partners/spouses needs significant improvement. Only 15% of partners felt that their contributions and the challenges they face during the pandemic are appreciated by their MFAs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MFAs

While the current pandemic will eventually end, crises and emergencies can (and do) arise all the time. This study provides valuable information to understand resilience and burnout among MFA partners and spouses during a long-term global crisis. We hope that MFAs will apply the lessons from the pandemic to improve support of partners and spouses during this and future crises.

Concerns about the health of family members, uncertainty about the future, and worries about managing potentially significant illness while abroad where the health system may be poor or where the spouse does not speak the local language were just some of the issues faced by partners and spouses. Lockdowns made the situation significantly more challenging, as parents often had to manage full-time childcare/schooling in the home while also trying to meet increased demands on their time. The pandemic appears to have also increased workloads for MFA employees. This had spillover effects on partners/spouses, who had to pick up more of the household tasks and childcare, and may have had to reduce or stop their own professional activity, as well.

MFAs therefore should not be surprised that personal burnout among foreign service partners was found to be very high during the pandemic. This high level of burnout should also be expected to result in real costs for MFAs in lost efficiency of employees when they must take care of family members; health care costs for treatment and recovery from burnout; higher costs for repatriation when employees are no longer willing or able to stay at post; etc.

What lessons should MFAs take from this?

Even in the absence of a crisis, expatriation is stressful and can negatively affect health¹. Several studies have found higher levels of burnout among expatriate workers. The challenges for spouses accompanying expats on post abroad and their importance to the expat's ability to work effectively have been well documented. **Spouses are critical to MFA officers' ability to work well while posted abroad,** and research has shown the importance of various types of support for spouses and families of expatriates.

¹ See references at the end of this document.

It therefore makes economic and management sense for MFAs to take good care of employees' and their family members' physical and mental health to ensure business continuity, especially during a crisis.

Previous research has found that, **during a crisis, good communication and trusted information are essential**; a lack of information can create anxiety. The current study supported this, finding that partners and spouses were less likely to have signs of burnout when clear policies to manage risk had been communicated, and when they had a Family Office or other designated contact person at their MFA. However, communication from MFAs to partners and spouses appears to need improvement. Partners who knew that they could be evacuated if necessary had higher resilience than those who did not. However, as most if not all MFAs would likely evacuate their people if needed, it appears that this finding is more about the effect of good communication and trust in the MFA, rather than the measure itself.

Previous research indicates that good **support for mental health** is also important for coping in an emergency. Given the high personal burnout scores found in this research, access to adequate professional psychological services should be made universally available to partners and spouses. While most MFAs of EUFASA member countries offer some psychological support for partners and spouses, both the amount of support as well as knowledge of that support appear to be insufficient in many systems. Actively acknowledging the current challenges that partners face and thanking them for their contributions may also be helpful.

Preparing partners/spouses for crisis situations before they happen may be helpful. Workshops and information on resilience, stress management, disaster preparedness, and crisis management may be more effective if offered regularly as a preventive measure, so that partners and spouses can develop skills in acting effectively in an emergency and in mental health self-care before a crisis happens.

As moving abroad during the pandemic was not associated with more burnout than staying put, this suggests that MFAs can move foreign service families abroad during a crisis. However, it is essential that the associated risks and local health care infrastructure are carefully considered first, and that adequate support for families is ensured.

In summary, crises can arise at any time, and MFAs can help ensure that their transferable staff remain resilient and able to work effectively in a crisis if their staff – and the family members – are appropriately supported. Smart policy approaches can help ensure that these MFA officers are able to act with the necessary efficacy and focus during future crises.

RECOMMENDATIONS

EUFAA recommends that MFAs...

- Provide MFA families with a Family Office or another direct point of contact within the MFA to give basic information and support directly to partners and spouses. This can remove much of this pressure from MFA officers, allowing them to focus more fully on their tasks at post.
- Actively communicate directly to partners and spouses about all measures of support, as just knowing about support measures already appears to improve mental well-being. Communication should be in the language(s) most accessible for spouses.
- Commit to evacuating employees and their family members if necessary, and communicate this to employees and families.
- Quickly develop and clearly communicate appropriate policy or measures during a crisis to keep not only employees, but also their family members safe.
- Ensure that MFA family members have adequate psychological support, including access to professional psychological counselling.
- Provide training in disaster preparedness / crisis management to employees and family members before crises arise, for example as part of a predeparture course.
- Be open to discussing creative solutions with MFA families to meet their needs.

Although providing supports to foreign service families has a cost, MFAs should be mindful that there are many costs and risks when adequate supports are not provided, such as:

- lower employee efficiency when employees are concerned about the health and safety of their families, and/or must spend time passing information between the MFA and the partner/spouse;
- lost work time if employees become ill, injured, or burned out; similarly, employees may need time off to care for family members who become ill, injured, or develop burnout or other mental health issues;
- significant financial costs of early repatriation if an employee leaves post early;
- lost know-how if employees leave the system because their foreign service career is not compatible with their family life;
- lost reputation as a desirable employer; and
- a reduced ability to attract and retain talent in the system.

Providing adequate support for foreign service families during crisis situations is therefore good policy for MFAs.

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