

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on foreign service partners: stress, burnout and MFA support

Brief summary of research results

EUFASA's Research Department conducted an international study in December 2020 – February 2021 to examine resilience, personal burnout, and organizational support among foreign service partners¹ during the Covid-19 pandemic. 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.

Findings

Most partners have 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 has significantly increased not only partners'/spouses' workloads, but also that of foreign service officers. 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.

The pandemic has 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 than the general population was before the pandemic as measured with the 10-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale. This is likely at least partly due to the continued stress and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. More experienced diplomatic partners/spouses were not found to be more resilient than those with less experience.

Personal burnout scores indicate a high level of distress among foreign service partners. Personal burnout (burnout 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 high-stress professions which have been previously studied, including 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. Nearly 10% said that they often or always feel that they "can't take it anymore". 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.

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

¹ "Partners" in this summary includes all married and unmarried partners and spouses.

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.

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. 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 Ministries of Foreign Affairs

The pandemic has increased workloads of partners and added significant stressors. The high personal burnout scores among foreign service partners indicate a great need for MFAs to provide better support during the pandemic.

Having a designated contact person at the MFA, communication of a clear policy, and the ability to be evacuated if necessary appeared to protect partners' and spouses' mental health in this study. Given the high personal burnout scores and need for this support, access to professional psychological services should also be made available to partners and spouses. Actively acknowledging the current challenges that partners face and thanking them for their contributions may be helpful. Measures such as stress management workshops may be more effective if offered regularly, before a crisis occurs, so that partners and spouses have already developed some skills in mental health self-care when a crisis happens.

As moving abroad was not associated with more burnout than staying put, this suggests that MFAs should continue to move foreign service families as planned, as long as risks and local health care infrastructure are carefully considered, and adequate support can be provided to families by the MFA.

Finally, support measures must be communicated more effectively. We recommend that MFAs improve active communication to partners and spouses about the measures they offer, as just knowing about support measures already appears to improve mental well-being. Having a designated contact person or Family Office at the MFA for partners and spouses appears to be very effective in improving this communication, and can allow foreign service officers to focus more on their work.

For more information about the study, contact the EUFASA Research Department: research@eufasa.org