

Foreign service spouses during the COVID-19 pandemic: Results from two studies on burnout, resilience, and MFA support

Brief summary of research results

EUFASA's Research Department conducted two anonymous online surveys of foreign service partners and spouses¹ in December 2020 – February 2021 and in March – April 2022 to examine resilience, personal burnout, and organizational support during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A total of 421 and 328 respondents completed the first and second surveys, respectively. The demographic characteristics of both samples were similar and appear to be representative of European foreign service spouses. Most respondents were partners of diplomats representing a European country or the EU (EEAS), and the majority were women (75% in 2021 and 70% in 2022). Most respondents were over 40 years old and age groups were represented relatively evenly. About half (54% in 2021 and 50% in 2022) of respondents had at least one child under the age of 16 living with them in the same household. A significant proportion of respondents (35% in 2021 and 39% in 2022) was born in a different country than the foreign service officer. Over 40% of respondents in both samples reported that they had moved internationally 5–9 times in their adult life, and more than one quarter (28.6%) reported making an official move during the first ten months of the pandemic.

Findings

Resilience among diplomatic partners was low in the first year of the pandemic, but had improved by early 2022. The average resilience score among foreign service spouses in late 2020 – early 2021 was 69.2 out of 100² as measured with Connor-Davidson's 10-item resilience scale, about 14% lower than the 80 that other studies have found in the general population in western societies. In early 2022, average resilience had increased to 74, close to what we assume to be a normal value for this group.

Rates of personal burnout remained high in early 2022. In late 2020 – early 2021, the average personal burnout score as measured with the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory was 41.5 out of 100, which is slightly higher than among many high-stress professions which have been previously studied, including social workers, prison wardens, hospital doctors and nurses. Nearly a third of respondents (31%) had indications of moderate personal burnout, and 4.5% had indications of high or severe personal burnout. In March 2022, the average burnout score had dropped by a few points, but still remained high, at 38 out of 100.

Sources of stress shifted between the end of 2020 and early 2022. In the first study, a large majority of respondents (71%) reported that the pandemic significantly affected their ability to work and/or the way they spend their time. Nearly 70% of respondents reported that their household chores had increased. Among respondents with children under age 16 at home, 55% reported home schooling as a stress factor; this stress increased with the number of children. Separation from family members was a significant source of stress; about a third of all respondents (31%) in 2021 reported that, because of the pandemic, they had been separated for a period of time from a family member(s) who usually live(s) in the same household. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents reported that the health and safety of family and loved ones living somewhere else was the most stressful aspect of the pandemic.

The availability of vaccinations, the ending of most lockdowns and the easing of travel restrictions likely reduced stress considerably in 2021. In March – April 2022, 85% of respondents reported having been fully vaccinated, and respondents reported feeling much more stressed about the situation in Ukraine than about COVID-19. Over 60% of respondents said they felt affected by the war, although only 15% reported having family or close friends in the region.

Organizational support and communication from MFAs remained insufficient in 2022. In late 2020 – early 2021, a quarter (26%) of respondents was not aware of any assistance provided by their Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) at all, and only one quarter (24%) felt they received enough support and information

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

² We normed the results from the CD-RISC 10 to allow comparison with other studies.

from their MFA. The form of support the respondents knew about most (41%) was clear policy measures from the MFA to reduce risks of contracting COVID-19.

In spring of 2022, the majority of respondents (68%) reported they did not have a contact at the MFA, or did not know if there was a contact person at their MFA. More than a fifth of respondents (22%) wished for better information/communication from their MFA. Of the respondents who received assistance from their MFA in getting vaccinated, only slightly more than half (56%) reported having a positive experience with the process.

Foreign service spouses have a range of coping strategies. The follow-up study in spring 2022 asked respondents to share any coping mechanisms which had helped them to manage pandemic-related stress. By far the most common coping mechanism (51%) was social support – spending time with family and friends. This was followed by forms of positive distraction such as keeping busy with work, hobbies or volunteer work (19.2%); exercise and sports (17.9%); and getting outside/spending time in nature (13.2%). Many other coping mechanisms were mentioned, including using mindfulness techniques (5.6%), having good information (5.3%), keeping a positive attitude (4.6%), or walking the dog/spending time with pets (3.3%).

The strategies partners reported using agree with expert recommendations on stress management. However, MFA policies sometimes make it harder for partners/spouses to employ these strategies (for example, separation of families during a crisis; inability of partners to get work permits at some posts; and MFA housing policies in some systems that do not allow MFA families to choose housing with more space / outdoor space).

Some forms of organizational support appear to support resilience and reduce the chance of personal burnout. Respondents who knew that they could be evacuated if needed had significantly greater resilience than those who believed their MFA would not evacuate them. Personal burnout scores were significantly lower among partners who knew they had a designated contact person at their MFA, and in those who said that their MFA had a clear policy and/or measures abroad to reduce risk. 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, while the content of resilience workshops is typically more preventive in nature (in other words, such workshops may be helpful, but must be offered *before* a crisis occurs). As expected, partners/spouses with higher resilience were found to be less likely to have indications of personal burnout.

Implications for Ministries of Foreign Affairs

MFAs cannot replace the social support that family and friends give, nor can they directly provide many opportunities for positive distraction for partners and spouses. However, our results suggest that **MFAs can bolster mental health and support partners' and spouses' own coping skills during a crisis by:**

- **Communicating timely and trustworthy information directly to partners and spouses via a Family Office** or designated contact person for partners and spouses at the MFA.
- **Committing to evacuation of employees and families if necessary**, and informing transferable families accordingly, as simply knowing about this support may improve resilience. The possible risks and potential benefits should be carefully weighed before separating family members who usually live together. While ensuring physical safety of employees and families is essential, decision makers should be mindful of the importance of social support in a crisis, and that separating loved ones may negatively impact the mental health of employees and family members.
- **Enabling partners/spouses to follow their own careers.** Employment can not only provide a positive distraction to help manage stress, but can also increase employees' willingness to accept postings abroad, support couples' financial stability, and improve retention of transferable employees.
- **Providing housing/supporting housing options that meet families' needs** which provides, for example, enough space to accommodate working from home and the chance to go outside.
- **Ensuring the availability of adequate and accessible psychological support** for MFA employees and their family members.

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