

# A Sampling of Letters from the FORUM Mailbag

As the information-gathering aspect of AAFSW's Forum project draws to a close, it seems appropriate at this time to share with our members some of the contributions we have received from Foreign Service women.

AAFSW is grateful for the many excellent letters in response to *Newsletter* articles and the Forum flyer mailed in October and November. We have received many four, five and six-page letters offering valuable insights and suggestions.

AAFSW will use the comments and suggestions it receives in formulating its final report to the Director General of the Foreign Service and in determining how the Association itself can better serve the needs of Foreign Service Women. The Forum will continue to welcome communication from women throughout the year. (Forum, c/o AAFSW, P.O. Box 8068, Washington, D.C. 20524)

AAFSW holds all the information it has received in the strictest confidence, but we have printed in this *Newsletter* three letters of moderate length, with the permission of the contributors. These are representative of the type of correspondence we have been receiving.

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Forum:

1. *What do you feel are the most crucial problems of the Foreign Service woman and the family today?*

Meaningful continuity. I am always struck by the consistent thread of the job, for the man, which almost immediately makes its scheduled demand felt, and the contrast of the new cultural, social, educational and often economic transitions and choices the wife and children must make largely by themselves and on their own initiative. I believe that a certain kind of continuity is essential to the well being of most people who lead a basically rootless and nomadic way of life. For myself, finally, I have learned to track down art/library volunteer opportunities as soon as possible... However, I still have trouble with the leave takings: "Why does Daddy have this kind of job?" "Why do we have to leave a school and friends we love?" and simply, "Why do we have to move all the time?" Replacing the things the children miss in one place with something else of equal value — in short, rearranging the pieces in a new and satisfying pattern — can be painful, bewildering and frustrating.

Making the transition between the almost limitless choices and freedom of choice available in the United States and the often extremely limiting and limited choices abroad (and vice versa)... This whole problem area would encompass

education and medical care as well as cultural, social, recreational opportunities and certainly, in the case of many women now, careers, full time and part time jobs and serious volunteer work.

2. *Was life abroad what you expected? Any suggestions as to how it could be improved?*

Life in a new post is rarely what one "expects" since there are too many unknowns. Personally, seeking one of the threads of continuity I mentioned in question 1 becomes an important part of my pre-thinking about a post, and starting as soon as possible to do something about it once I get there is an important aspect in my period of adjustment. I do think self-help is a vital part of life abroad, but a community of helpful and kindred spirits who are willing to talk about mutual problems can be of immense help.

3. *Do you feel there is a breakdown in Foreign Service family life and in the Foreign Service community abroad?*

As a family, we have always managed picnics and swimming together both at home and abroad. The breakdowns have occurred during enforced separations and extraordinarily long working hours. However, I don't resent these things as much as I would countless social demands which would bite too deeply into family life.

(Continued on page 5)

Dear Committee:

Since you ask for input I feel that I may say, as the wife of a retired F.S.O., that I fail to comprehend the reason for so much dissatisfaction in the life of those whose husbands are pursuing a career in the Foreign Service — surely those who have special skills can find enrichment by voluntarily offering their services.

It may sound "old hat" but I, who had done graduate work in Psychiatric Nursing, found a need at each post for working with emotionally disturbed and retarded children and, as a result, developed many firm friendships.

Also, with a family of three it was a busy household and we enjoyed entertaining. I never for a minute felt put down by such phrases as *Madame la Consul*. Was there something wrong with me because I felt satisfied and, if I were a young wife of today, would I be full of irritations — these are imponderables.

I wish the Forum much success and hope you get to the root of some of the problems.

Flora M. Christensen  
(Mrs. William H.)

Dear Mrs. Vance,

I attended the meeting yesterday for the policy on wives of foreign service employees and was very stimulated with the discussion and problems presented. I didn't add any comments of my own at that time because there just was not time for all of us to speak.

I want to say that I agreed with everyone's ideas, criticisms and praises. Needless to say, we have our work cut out for us.

I always feel frustrated when I attend meetings like this, find that there is so much work to do, find that I am interested in helping and also realize that I just cannot commit myself to any committee to work on it. My family situation is still demanding all my time and until that changes, I will have to give it first priority. Meanwhile, I want to continue to attend meetings of this kind to keep informed and to give any suggestions that I feel may be of help.

I feel very strongly that the AAFSW should indeed get busy and find out what we want and then go about doing what is necessary for needed legislation. I have already been a foreign service widow and can tell you that it is a very frightening experience. We do need more protection.

On the idea of pay for wives abroad, I have thought up two ideas for part time jobs which could be easily established and keep at least two wives busy at post. I'm sure others could be found that are similar to these. One would be a part time Special Services Programmer. A person trained to set up and arrange for special activities for families and other members of the community. This could be in the form of tours, plays, cultural activities, creative workshops for adults and children and even mini courses of any kind. A course could be set up at FSI to train interested people in what resources could be expected from the Department and possible limitations.

The second position could be a person trained to be the Official Visitor Controller. Again, a person trained in the language, customs and culture of the country and someone who knows the area well. Many wives do this all the time but why not have someone getting paid for the amount of hours they put in and I'm sure the person could make the job very rewarding to themselves as well as to the visitors.

If I come across any other ideas that I think could help, I will send them in. Meanwhile, I do want to be informed about future meetings. Good luck in this work and thank you for getting us started.

Betty Coxson Dols