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Like everyone else, each member of our team also tapped into their inner resourcefulness to cope with the ambiguities and challenges of the pandemic.
2,079 Issues

- Affected peer and colleague relationships: 13%
- Linked to supervision-related concerns: 18%
- Pertained to ADB’s organizational climate: 25%
- Related to safety, health, and physical environment: 25%

Note: The remaining 19% of issues related to services and administrative matters, compensation and benefits, career progression and development, legal and integrity, values and ethics, and concerns from external parties.

540 Cases

- 44% Raised by international staff
- 83% Originated from ADB headquarters
- 63% Initiated by women

Note: A case may involve multiple individuals and issues.

2021 YEAR AT A GLANCE

95 Activities and Events

- Internal and external knowledge sharing sessions: 45
- Outreach activities: 20
- Participation in organizational initiatives: 18
- OOMP staff learning activities: 12

MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDSPERSON

It is hard to believe that it has been 2 years since we transitioned to working from home. I have to admit, I have missed the in-person contact with colleagues. I also missed informal interactions, while walking through the hallways of the ADB headquarters, that allowed insights into concerns. I did not appreciate then how important and useful these encounters were, or the profound impact they had on our work. Moreover, I did not realize the degree of “hallway dispute resolution and conflict management” I was engaged in.
At the beginning of the pandemic, our biggest concern was adjusting to the sudden and difficult shift of working from home. Even though uncertainties and fears around the pandemic initially affected us, the ADB community managed to adapt. We all found myriad ways to cope and make the situation work for us, though the fear continued. Amid the fears and concerns about health and mental well-being, there was also time to self-reflect.

The members of the Ombuds team lived through the same range of fears, uncertainties, and well-being concerns and experiences as other members of the ADB community. Some individuals who contacted our office shared how the pandemic put them back in touch with favorite hobbies or they started new ones, spurred on by isolation or to get away from the cycle of negative thoughts. Many found that newly adopted “COVID pets” brought immense joy and comfort through the trying times. Like everyone else, each member of our team also tapped into their inner resourcefulness to cope with the ambiguities and challenges of the pandemic. As the year went by, we spent more and more time engaging in relaxing and mindful activities like
baking, cooking, and other crafts to distract ourselves from the virus and all the sad news; two of our team members evolved from budding gardeners to certified plantitas! 

Our pandemic-related experience was humbling in many ways. More importantly, it gave us a deeper perspective while also allowing us time, particularly in early 2021, to reconsider our approach and reflect on how to better position the Office of the Ombudsperson to support the ADB community.

The first external review of the Office of the Ombudsperson was completed during the early part of the year with the support of colleagues in the Budget, People, and Management Services Department. I was delighted with the results of the review and was very pleased with how well the office is perceived within the organization. I was especially heartened by the underlying confidence that members of the ADB community have in our office. The external review revealed that 16.1% of the ADB population sought assistance from our office in 2019, “a proportion of staff usage significantly higher than anticipated levels... based on international practice.

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1 A new Philippine social media jargon that combines the words “plant” and “TITA” (auntie) to describe a person who enjoys taking care of plants. Read more here: https://www.uniquephilippines.com/the-plantito-plantita-wanna-be-plant-parenting/.
Message from the Ombudsperson

We received encouraging reviews—none of which would have been possible without the continued support of the ADB community.

In 2021, we handled 540 cases, which were analyzed through a new database and case management system that we developed with support from the Information Technology Department. Our data for the year reflect the impacts of another year of remote work.

Although those who sought help from our office make up a small percentage of the wider ADB community, I am confident that the trends and patterns discussed in this report are representative of issues faced at large.

Almost half of our cases in 2021 dealt with work-related stress and work–life balance concerns. Communication problems among team members, especially in a virtual work environment, posed a major hurdle to group dynamics. These may also have contributed to the increase in interpersonal conflicts among peers and colleagues. Many of those who raised these and other concerns expressed frustration at failing to receive sufficient support from their supervisors to manage their work-related conflicts.

Before the year ended, we launched the external web page of the Office of the Ombudsperson, in coordination with the Department of Communications. We also conceptualized knowledge-sharing initiatives, which we plan to implement beginning 2022.

The question now is “how do we transition back to working in person?”

---

Many are eager to return to some form of normalcy. However, some remain skeptical about going back to the workplace and acclimating to yet another “new normal” after finally adjusting to the flexibility of working from home and adapting to meeting teams on the other side of a screen. The return to in-person meetings and interpersonal interactions may initially feel overwhelming and could lead to additional anxiety.

There are also lingering fears around COVID-19. The pandemic is not over yet, and it is difficult to predict if new variants will emerge or how much workplace disruption they may still potentially cause. So, for many of our colleagues, the decision to go back to the office is not an easy one to make.

Despite all the problems and disruptions throughout the year, there is a lot to be grateful for. I am extremely proud of how the ADB community has persevered and how ADB has supported its staff throughout the pandemic. Many of those who came to us for help also acknowledged how ADB has demonstrated its commitment to the people it employs. The organization has continued trying to balance staff expectations, support their needs, and offer flexible approaches to facilitate working from home. Some also

New normal. As ADB prepares to return to the office, some members of the ADB community raise mixed reactions about going back (photo from ADB Photo Library).

We are excited to transform some of our concepts into reality and we look forward to applying the recommendations from our external review as we prepare for a gradual return to the office in the new year. The question now is “how do we transition back to working in person?”
spoke to us about how their work in response to COVID-19 reaffirmed their commitment to development and to ADB’s mission. I believe that, as a community and as an organization, we have navigated many unprecedented challenges together and emerged stronger.

In closing, I would like to express my sincere appreciation of the way each member of the Ombuds Office team has continued to support the ADB community while dealing with their own pandemic-related stresses and difficulties. I also want to express my gratitude for the opportunity to serve the ADB community and for the continued trust in our team. I remain thankful for the support given to the Office of the Ombudsperson and to me personally. I will continue to do my best to be worthy of such support and collaboration.

Wayne Blair
Ombudsperson

Wayne Blair
BACKGROUND

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) established the Office of the Ombudsperson (OOMP or the Ombuds Office) on 27 April 2011 through Administrative Order 2.14. In doing so, ADB joined an increasing number of organizations that find considerable benefits in providing staff with informal resources to help prevent and manage workplace conflicts.

The Office of the Ombudsperson is a confidential, informal, and neutral resource with a unique level of autonomy due to its independence from other parts of the organizational structure. We adhere to the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of the International Ombuds Association (IOA). The ombudsperson provides analysis, relevant and timely advice, and upward feedback to the President and
the Management team and, as needed, to members of the Board of Directors. Observations about trends and patterns of conflict and conflict management practices within the organization are also shared with managers, supervisors, and the entire ADB community.

**OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

The IOA Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics are the values that guide us; still, the Ombuds team and ADB’s organizational culture define the way we practice.

Our guiding principles are deeply personal to the Ombuds Office (Figure 1). We are strongly committed to treating everyone with the same level of dignity and respect. We believe that honesty and candid feedback inculcate trust, thereby making our office more approachable. We aim to empower colleagues by assisting them reframe issues and giving voice to those who

We are strongly committed to treating everyone with the same level of dignity and respect.
Figure 1: Guiding Principles of the Office of the Ombudsperson

- Treat everyone with the same level of dignity and respect
- Help find creative solutions to complex problems
- Turn no one away
- Give honest feedback

feel they have none. We help people develop creative solutions to complex problems. Thus, some members of the ADB community have expressed their willingness and confidence to consult us even with sensitive matters. They feel assured that they will not be turned away and that they will be listened to with empathy and without judgment. They expect honest discussions, unbiased advice, and strategic solutions.

For the Ombuds Office, no concern is too insignificant. However, it is important to note that there are occasions or cases where we cannot be an individual’s ombudsperson.4

As ADB’s only confidential and informal resource, our office does not have a duty to report any information we obtain from conversations with members of the ADB community. Consequently, a conversation with us does not put the organization on notice. Still, we benefit from each exchange and consider each consultation a learning opportunity for us and the organization.

The Ombuds Office can arrange confidential meetings at a time, venue, or virtual platform convenient and safe for concerned members of the ADB community. Appointments can be scheduled over the phone, through Viber or WhatsApp, or via text messages. Sharing confidential or sensitive issues over email and/or via Microsoft Teams is strongly discouraged as OOMP cannot guarantee the confidentiality of information relayed electronically.

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4 The OOMP jurisdiction, in some instances, does not extend to all members of the ADB community, e.g., in the case of ADB affiliates or the employer of contractors, to name a few.
**WHAT WE CAN DO**

- Practice active listening without judgement.
- Conduct conflict analysis and mapping.
- Provide guidance on problem solving and assist in strategizing the next steps.
- Conduct informal information gathering or fact finding.
- Conduct informal mediation.
- Facilitate difficult conversations.
- Shuttle diplomacy.
- Move information between parties who may not know who the other party is.
- Offer coaching options, including conflict management coaching, executive coaching, negotiation coaching, and team coaching.
- Provide training on conflict management, when requested.
- Help build a risk-aware culture and recommend changes to address systemic organizational issues.

**WHAT WE CANNOT DO**

- Create policies.
- Conduct formal investigations.
- Offer legal advice.
- Provide psychological counseling.
- Participate in formal processes.
- Overrule decisions of those who have the authority to make them.
- Serve as an advocate.
The Office of the Ombudsperson 2021 Annual Report is available online! Scan the QR code or visit https://ombudsperson.adb.org.*

*Available for ADB internal use only.
DATA SPEAK:
AN ANALYSIS
OF CASES IN 2021

The Office of the Ombudsperson (OOMP or the Ombuds Office) compiles aggregate data and other findings to identify and analyze trends and problem areas that may require attention. The Ombuds Office shares this information with the ADB Management and other decision-makers to resolve systemic issues and recommend institutional changes without disclosing its sources.

Since the office’s review of its database and case management methodology, OOMP improved how it gathers, interprets, and evaluates data and other findings to reflect the scope of its activities more comprehensively. This has been further refined in 2021.
Following these enhancements, comparative analysis of some data will be limited to a 2-year trend, covering 2020 and 2021 only.

Together with the Information Technology Department, OOMP developed a new database and case management system to strengthen case tracking and trends analysis. Furthermore, a new interactive presentation of our data can be found on our SharePoint site.

THE TRENDS

In 2021, OOMP handled 540 cases and met with approximately 695 members of the ADB community regarding approximately 2,079 concerns. This is an increase from the previous year (Figure 2).

However, 2021 was still a challenging year and the increase in caseload reflects the continuing impacts of the pandemic. Furthermore, it illustrates that issues and concerns may have evolved and changed with the shifts in the general context, but fundamentals remained the same. People continued to struggle with mental health and well-being concerns. They fretted over communication glitches and stresses associated with the pandemic. They also found it consistently challenging to maintain virtual relationships with colleagues. With most of the work still being done virtually, team relations began to feel transactional.
There was an additional shift in context as members of the ADB community began trickling back into the headquarters and the field offices. The anxieties around COVID variants were now combined with concerns about going back to the office. This evolving context also required certain adjustments in relations and interactions between staff, consultants, and contractors as they now had to refamiliarize themselves with working with colleagues in person.

Consequently, in 2021, there was an increase in cases involving multiple people, indicating that several cases began to shift away from a focus on individual concerns and on to group issues.

During the earlier part of the year, individuals contacted the ombudsperson’s team by appointment only. However, many spontaneous and unplanned virtual conversations were initiated through different platforms, such as Viber and WhatsApp. As always, these data do not fully capture numerous impromptu conversations that took place, especially towards the end of 2021 when staff began frequenting the ADB headquarters more.

It is relevant to consider that individuals may consult the office several times, and there could be multiple concerns linked to each case.

Issues raised become trends when multiple individuals seek help from the office about the same or a similar concern. The highlighted trends, however, should not detract from the fact that ADB staff generally feel the organization has been highly responsive to their needs during the pandemic. They support ADB’s mission and vision and are proud to be associated with an organization with a long history of leadership in development work in Asia and the Pacific.
ISSUES AND CONCERNS RAISED

Almost half of all issues our office addressed dealt with the general issue categories of Safety, Health, and Physical Environment, and Organizational Climate combined. These were followed by Concerns Regarding Supervision, which remained high but saw a 13% decrease from 2020, and Peer and Colleague Relationships, which increased by 57% since the previous year (Figure 3). This trend further supports the gradual shift from individual to group issues in 2021.

Figure 3: Top Issues Raised, 2019–2021

No. of Issues Raised

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Safety, health, and physical environment</th>
<th>Organizational climate</th>
<th>Concerns regarding supervision</th>
<th>Peer and colleague relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Other issues raised related to services and administrative matters, compensation and benefits, career progression and development, legal and integrity, values and ethics, and concerns from external parties. Source: Asian Development Bank (Office of the Ombudsperson).
The number of issues raised related to Services/Administrative Concerns, Concerns from External Parties, and Compensation and Benefits remained within the same range as in previous years. On the other hand, the number of issues around Career Progression and Development, Legal and Integrity, and Values and Ethics saw a downward trend. These six general issue categories comprised 19% of all the issues raised in 2021.

Safety, Health, and Physical Environment was one of the most significant general issue categories in 2021, and cases were most frequently raised by ADB headquarters personnel, particularly women. This category has seen a steady increase since 2019.

As presented in Figure 4, several concerns under this category revolved around work-related stress and work–life balance (47%), mental well-being (18%), and physical working and/or living conditions (13%). These trends may indicate that the erosion of personal boundaries related to working from home remained significantly stressful in 2021. The 63% rise in issues regarding physical working and/or living conditions may also reflect that, for some, working from home continues to threaten personal security.

Most members of the ADB community are working from home, wherever that may be. This highlights the fact that some (or many) in ADB feel “insecure.” Consistent with our experience last year, OOMP once again disturbingly received domestic abuse cases in 2021. The number of cases may seem negligible from year to year, but the progressive increase is especially concerning for several reasons. First, we must consider that we did not receive any such cases a few years ago. Second, we must also take into account that each individual case is delicate and complex. It may take a very long time to resolve, if at all. Third, the emotional toll each case takes on staff cannot be denied.

While we have chosen to emphasize other issues and concerns in 2021, the fact remains that issues surrounding mental health and well-being remain a major concern for the ADB community.

Interestingly, the category of Safety, Health, and Physical Environment was also the top concern for administrative staff, national staff, consultants, and contractors. Some were concerned about the stability of their contracts, while others may have struggled with a perceived lack of psychosocial support from peers and supervisors.
Like the years preceding the pandemic, Organizational Climate, which generally refers to how the work environment affects morale, again became one of the largest categories in 2021. Sub-issues under this category involve group dynamics (25%), integration or transition into organizational culture (14%), and communication (14%), among others, and they affected mostly international staff (Figure 5). Once again, most concerns were initiated by women.
Earlier in 2020, we observed a general trend of individuals focusing more on their personal situations and well-being and less on organizational issues. However, with the gradual transition to hybrid work and greater interactions with colleagues, the issues we observed reflect a shift back to interpersonal challenges.

Issues Pertaining Supervision represented 18% of all issues in 2021. Because managers, who had to deal with heavy workloads and ongoing challenges due to the pandemic while providing support to their staff, had to do so without much support themselves, the subcategory manager seeking help (19%) remained consistently significant in 2021 (Figure 6).
Some of the concerns raised with our office under this category also reflect the reservations of staff with respect to the manner in which their supervisors or managers dealt with them during the year.

International staff raised 59% of the concerns regarding supervision. Our data shows that a majority of these concerns originated from the headquarters and were raised by women. Other subcategories were respect and/or treatment (18%) and communication (17%).
The **Peer and Colleague Relationships** category increased by 57% from the previous year, further reinforcing the trend that issues in 2021 focused away from individuals to a diversity of interrelated group issues. Subcategories respect and/or treatment (36%), communication (26%), and trust and integrity (23%) indicated the comparative rise in interpersonal conflicts as well as concerns from colleagues about their peer’s absence from work or overall work ethics in 2021 (Figure 7).

Most of the issues under this category came from those who have been with ADB for 5 years or less. We observed that people new to the organization might have had a harder
time transitioning to the organizational culture. Newly recruited staff (particularly those hired before the pandemic) have struggled to “connect” with their teams and to relate with ADB’s organizational culture. Their struggles are a consequence of supervisory issues, interpersonal dynamics, workload, and poor communication, to name a few. In the context of 2021, the percentage increase may also imply an additional layer to the integration process and the challenges of adjusting to a virtual work environment. They increasingly seek our help as they try to adapt to ADB’s complex organizational culture in a virtual workspace.

Additionally, there is statistical evidence that gender has a strong association with issues related to peer and colleague relationships since 78% of the cases were initiated by women.

**ORIGIN OF CASES**

As an informal and confidential resource, OOMP provides a safe space for the members of the ADB community. Individuals at the headquarters and the field offices felt encouraged to voice out how challenges, anxieties, and uncertainties around the pandemic affected their work performance.

As in previous years, most cases were initiated by those based in the headquarters. Aggregated data show that 83% of concerns in 2021 originated from the ADB headquarters, representing a slight increase from the previous year (Figure 8). The Ombuds Office was concerned about the sharp decline in cases from the field offices in 2020. This number slightly
increased in 2021, but it should be noted that the rise in cases is not significant since they were concentrated only in certain resident missions and were context-specific. Cases in the field offices were mostly initiated by men.

**GENDER AND EMPLOYMENT CATEGORY**

Our data from previous years indicate that women usually initiate more cases regarding workplace concerns than men. Likewise, for this year, 63% of cases were initiated by women, or 339 cases out of 540. It is also worth noting, however, that in 2021, the number of cases initiated by women decreased by 10%, whereas the number of cases initiated by men increased by 51% (Figure 9).

The decline in cases initiated by women has taken the respective number of cases back to pre-pandemic numbers. These numbers may suggest women’s comfort with approaching OOMP for help. The decline in cases in 2021 may also indicate that women might have found coping mechanisms around their earlier predicament of balancing work with additional obligations at home early in the pandemic. Still, as in previous years, female international staff at the headquarters were the most highly represented group at 28% (Figure 10).
Figure 10: Cases Initiated in the ADB Headquarters by Gender and Employment Categories, 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International staff</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National staff</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative staff</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultants</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contractors</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirees</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown (anonymous)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External parties</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11: Cases Initiated in the Field Offices by Gender and Employment Categories, 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Category</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International staff</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National staff</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative staff</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirees</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown (anonymous)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The increase in cases by men may be attributable to the overall robust case load in 2021 and the fact that men were increasingly feeling the challenges of the work that we do during the pandemic. As the pandemic continued, and they were struggling with the challenges, it seemed that OOMP was more approachable than before.

In the field offices, male staff (international, national, and administrative staff) raised the largest number of cases, consistent with previous years (Figure 11).

International staff at both the headquarters and the field offices initiated almost half (43%) of the cases we managed. This trend is not new for OOMP and may indicate the relative comfort that international staff feel approaching our office compared to other groups. Similarly, before the pandemic, international staff consistently initiated the largest number of cases we managed, but the nature of concerns has evolved over the 2 previous years. Top concerns for the group include group dynamics, communication and integration, organizational culture, as well as concerns regarding supervision.

National staff and administrative staff at both the headquarters and the field offices initiated 37% of our cases. Most of their concerns related to safety, health, and physical environment as well as organizational climate.

Those who have been with ADB for less than 5 years initiated 34% of the Ombuds Office's total cases in 2021. It is also important to highlight that staff who have been with ADB for over 20 years initiated 40% fewer cases in 2021 than in 2020. However, this number of cases is consistent with pre-pandemic levels.
CASE STUDIES

The case studies discussed in this section reflect some trends and patterns of conflicts raised with the Office of the Ombudsperson (OOMP or the Ombuds Office) in 2021. They also exhibit the application of OOMP’s standards when performing its functions to the ADB community.

Case studies are informed by trends observed during our data analysis and are meant for illustrative purposes only. They are a combination of different cases brought to the Ombuds Office during the year and do not necessarily represent any individual, department, or specific situation. Each case study concludes with the ombudsperson’s perspective—a deconstruction of the situation to identify underlying problems—and highlights the benefits of accessing OOMP’s services when managing work-related conflicts.
IN SAFE HANDS

THE SITUATION

Essy is a staff member at ADB. On the surface, her life seems perfect. She always talks about her family and how much she loves spending quality time with her children and husband. She is happy with her career and enjoys working at the headquarters where she is very popular among colleagues. She has made many friends at work and has a very active social life. Essy always seems to be on the go.

Beneath the surface, though, she is deeply unhappy. Essy feels trapped in a relentless nightmare, and there is no one she can tell. She never really thought of herself as being in an abusive relationship. She did not even realize that some forms of abuse can be invisible. True enough, there are no marks for anyone to notice and, through her demeanor, no one can detect her pain.

It is nothing new for Essy. The ups and downs have gone on for years. They neither stopped nor slowed down. When she tried confiding to a few trusted people, they seemed unconvinced that her spouse could be capable of any form of meanness. They would often find excuses for him, leaving Essy on her own to deal with her spiraling thoughts.
Typical of all toxic relationships, Essy would live through wonderful and happy phases with her abuser, but these days would suddenly become overcast with threatening and intimidating behaviors. She believed him when he said his reactions were somehow all her fault.

The pattern was consistent and recurring, like a merry-go-round: instances of abuse; followed by remorse and great times as a family; small triggers, which unpredictably lead back to the abuse; and then profound and profuse apologies. Essy has lived repeatedly through this cycle of denial, shame, anger, fear, and self-doubt while presenting a facade of normalcy. It began taking a toll on her.

And then came the pandemic. Stuck at home with her abuser, the instances of concern became more frequent and intense. Essy feels all the joy has been sucked out of her life. She is increasingly distressed and does not know how to deal with her situation anymore. Going to the office used to give her the necessary space to help cool things down. Early in the pandemic, even this outlet was gone. Essy can now go to the office occasionally; but the harder she tries to create space between herself and her husband, the more manipulative and troublesome he becomes. Even going to work has turned into a bone of contention.

Essy is afraid that she will become ill from the stress of her situation. She is worried about the effects of this toxic home environment on her children. Essy can no longer focus on work and keep up with tasks. She feels disconnected from everything she once enjoyed and the people she enjoyed doing those things with. She is trapped in her own safe space.

People notice the change in Essy but assume that it is because of the stresses and anxieties associated with the pandemic and in finding work–life balance.

Essy is trying her best to keep everything bottled up. While she is distressed, she is not seeking professional or other help to gain perspective and clarity on dealing with her situation. She hangs on to the instances of normalcy and good times in between: ducking and surviving the bad times, and forgiving destructive behaviors. Except, the bad times are getting consistently worse and happening more frequently, triggered by new realities.

Essy realizes she is more frightened than happy—but she no longer knows when that happened.
WHAT ESSY COULD DO

- Speak to people she trusts. Suffering quietly enables the abuser and reinforces isolation.
- Take a step back and engage in deep self-reflection, weighing in all the factors, experiences, and circumstances that have contributed to her present situation. Extraordinarily difficult decisions might have to be made.
- Get accurate information on her rights and options. This is exceedingly important. To begin with, she can refer to the informational brochure developed by the ADB Security and Emergency Services Unit in the Corporate Services Department, which has an abundance of relevant information and contact details in different ADB resident missions and offices.
- Seek professional counseling to help her unpack the situation and receive guidance on how best to deal with it and what to do next. Not speaking about this issue is disempowering.
- Speak to members of the Office of the Ombudsperson who may be able to connect her informally, confidentially, and creatively with appropriate resources in the ADB support system.

Essy should realize that she has choices and is not as powerless as others may try to make her feel.

THE OMBUDSPERSON’S PERSPECTIVE

A question the Ombuds team is often asked is why the Office of the Ombudsperson addresses concerns around domestic abuse and violence when this is a “private matter” that has nothing to do with the workplace.

However, these issues do, in fact, affect the workplace in many ways. And we have an obligation to provide support to staff who come to us for help, the least of which is to listen, empower, and educate.

The cases brought to our attention have been raised by individuals in the ADB headquarters, field offices, as well as other locations—and these cases are surprisingly greater in number than many imagine. This issue cuts across status and background, affecting all nationalities, genders, religions, socioeconomic conditions, and ages.

More often than not, the alleged victims we spoke to were staff members. However, there were also cases where the staff members were the initiators of abuse. In other instances, employees of ADB staff were victimized by other members of the staff’s extended family.

Before the pandemic, the Ombuds Office only heard “whispers” of this issue through second and third parties seeking advice on how to assist friends, colleagues, or family members. Individuals rarely came to the OOMP to disclose such personal challenges.

However, since the onset of the pandemic, the Ombuds Office has received and responded to an increasing number of requests for help from people experiencing some form of domestic abuse. This disturbing trend has continued into 2021.

While the actual numbers may seem minor from year to year, there are a few reasons why we consider these concerning.

To reiterate, there were no such cases received by the Ombuds team in previous years.

Moreover, these cases are some of the most disturbing and emotionally taxing ones that our team has to deal with. They are extraordinarily complex and often continue over a prolonged period of time.

Steps towards resolution can require the involvement of trained professionals; but, even so, there is no clear path to resolution. In fact, solutions can simply be fleeting illusions because the issue may remain difficult to resolve.

In every case we managed, the pandemic was not the direct cause. But it did worsen an underlying issue and increased the frequency and intensity of incidents.

This is not an issue that is unique to ADB. Globally, there has been a reported rise in disclosed cases of domestic abuse and violence. In 2020, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, also known as UN Women, called domestic abuse “the shadow pandemic.”

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In many of the cases the Ombuds Office received, victims lacked awareness of their rights, especially in terms of country-specific contexts. They were unaware of legislative or other support systems, which held them back from seeking help. They only mustered enough courage to access help or give it serious consideration after an exceptionally violent or disturbing incident.

To be clear, domestic abuse is not limited to spousal or partner abuse. It can involve the abuse of children, persons with disabilities, older people, and other household members.

Additionally, domestic abuse is not just physical. It can also be a psychological, financial, or emotional form of coercion and abuse.
In our experience, the pattern has been such that a staff member or spouse will go to great lengths to keep this issue a secret and will often deny it when approached by someone who shows concern. Their denial can lead to further isolation and continued abuse. Cultural and religious values or other societal norms may stand in the way of people seeking meaningful help with regard to the issue of domestic abuse.
Tamina is new to ADB. She started her position just before the global pandemic began and upended life for everyone, everywhere. Starting a new job during “the new normal” was the hardest thing that Tamina has ever done.

Joining a new organization and acclimating to a new workplace culture can be stressful at the best of times, especially if it involves relocating to a new country. Tamina expected all that, but she could not foresee some of the added challenges of starting a new job remotely that caught her off guard.

After getting through the formality of the “onboarding” experience, with all the paperwork and reading through various documents that were expected to familiarize her with the organization during her first weeks, Tamina was overwhelmed with information overload. She knew that, for the time being, she would not be able to meet her team and supervisor in person, but she was expecting to actively communicate with them to get some clarity on her workplan and answers to questions she had about the organization. She also wanted to get to know her team members, just like she would have if they shared a workspace. However, beyond a flurry of initial introductions, she did not have that level of conversation with her supervisor or anybody else on the team.
When her supervisor did finally reach out to her, the exchange came across as very transactional. Presently, Tamina is already familiar with all the things her supervisor had seemingly checked off a list, but there was no further engagement with anyone on her team. Tamina empathized that the early stages of the pandemic were a stressful time for everyone. The supervisors, for example, were still learning to navigate the sudden shift in their management style. So, she tried to take things one day at a time.

After a few weeks, though, Tamina wondered if people even knew she was there. She felt like a stranger in the organization. Tamina attended a lot of team meetings remotely and saw her colleagues regularly, but everything was centered mostly around work. There was little opportunity to engage beyond that. No chats over coffee or lunch, as the case would have been pre-pandemic. It was very challenging to make connections when Tamina could not actually get a real sense of who the people on her team were, to read their body language, or figure out their work styles.

Few of her colleagues took the time to even simply ask, “how are things going for you?” Tamina believed they probably assumed that she already had a complete understanding of the jargon, acronyms, and other complexities at ADB. They also seemed to take for granted that she had an immediate grasp of her new role. However, many things are still unclear to her, and she is constantly left wondering if she is doing things right.

With communication limited to e-mails and Teams messages, Tamina sensed that a few colleagues did not appreciate the number of questions she asked. They subtly, and sometimes directly, conveyed they were too busy to respond to her or that her inquiries were disrupting their workflow. It seemed clear to Tamina that her colleagues did not have patience or empathy for her learning curve. She felt discouraged, in addition to feeling stressed about meeting performance expectations. It reached a point where Tamina began having increasingly tense exchanges with a few team members.

She felt progressively unmoored, disconnected, unsupported, and overwhelmed. Her existing skills and job expertise seemed to have vanished, and she did not know how to apply them in this remote and complex environment. Eventually, she reached out to her sponsor hoping for some mentorship. This did not quell her frustration. The sponsor similarly appeared to have as little patience and time as everyone else and even insinuated they did not enjoy or welcome their role as sponsor.

Disheartened and dejected, Tamina is now seriously considering leaving the organization.
WHAT TAMINA COULD DO

- Make a commitment to manage the issue earlier rather than later. Remaining quiet and not addressing such concerns promptly may worsen the feelings of isolation and disconnection. The longer she takes to address the problem, the more complicated it may become, increasing the sense of hopelessness.
- Gather information from multiple sources, be willing to think outside the box, and be proactive in finding or creating opportunities for herself.
- Do not passively wait on her supervisors to reach out to her. Be assertive and seek help or guidance (in writing).
- Speak to the appropriate people about the challenges she is experiencing. Remember that communication is important. Others may not appreciate what she is going through or feeling unless she expresses herself. They may be able to offer advice or help her through her predicament.
- Seek professional help to manage the stress, anxiety, and sense of isolation and marginalization.
- Accept that organizational culture may sometimes undergo changes. It is important to remain flexible, to remember the reason for joining in the first place, and to remain focused on the overall mission of the organization.

THE OMBUDSPERSON’S PERSPECTIVE

Most of the people who sought assistance from the Office of the Ombudsperson regarding this issue were based in the ADB headquarters. One would think that this is a challenge that only affects newcomers to the organization, but interestingly, these cases also involved staff members who have been with ADB for a while. Either these staff members have taken on new positions in the organization, or they have moved from one department or division to another. Those whose new roles involved such big shifts were particularly challenged as opposed to those joining a different team within their own division or department.

It is hard enough for seasoned staff to adjust to changes; much more so for new staff members who face the additional predicament of fitting into entirely new contexts. Because they are physically removed from their new teams and are not familiar with the new organization’s culture, they might feel isolated, excluded, and a little invisible. They might also second-guess themselves each time they wanted to approach colleagues with questions or clarifications for fear of becoming a nuisance—but this might not be the case. It is, however, easy for people to assume it is when communication within teams is ineffective.
Not being physically in the workplace dramatically reduces the opportunity for new staff to develop meaningful support networks with others inside and outside their departments or build any rapport with their team members. Pre-pandemic, new members of the ADB community could form connections through orientations, inductions, and other social opportunities in the organization. In fact, many “orientation batchmate” friendships turn into strong bonds that go on for years. Unfortunately, for those who joined the organization around the pandemic, especially during lockdowns, there were no such possibilities to create an “ADB safety net.”

To us, this lack of connection to the organization seems to reflect why people may be contemplating whether to remain with ADB. This may well be true for new staff currently working from other countries or from provinces outside of the ADB headquarters.

We would like to draw a distinction between onboarding and integration into an organization. They are not the same.

**Onboarding is the essential, initial, stepping stone that familiarizes newly hired staff with the organization.** It is usually a short process that helps to quickly orient and settle them into their new job. It can be perceived as mechanical and transactional.

Integration, on the other hand, can take several weeks or months and is transitional in nature. It requires a shift in perspective as newly hired staff begin to understand and adapt to the organization’s culture, embody its values, and learn to collaborate with others in pursuit of the organization’s common goals. It can be particularly challenging to integrate into the culture of a large and complex organization such as ADB.

From the conversations the Ombuds team had with affected people, it seemed they were less anxious about successfully navigating their probation. Instead, they were more concerned about their integration into the organization’s culture and their sense of inclusion in the workplace.

Early in the pandemic, those who sought our help talked about the transactional nature of their onboarding experience. The lack of meaningful communication, or poor communication at best, seems to stand in the way of staff feeling welcome or connected to the organization, especially the new recruits and young professionals.

The year 2021 saw more young professionals accessing OOMP’s services than ever before. Our conversations with them revealed that those who joined ADB during the pandemic had a very difficult time feeling connected to the organization.
**KEY POINTS**

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<th>The lack of a seamless integration into ADB’s work culture has far-reaching implications for the organization both in the short and long term.</th>
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<td>Prior to the pandemic, our office observed the challenges that new staff faced in navigating ADB’s organizational culture. The pandemic has aggravated these challenges. Many who sought our help talk of feeling unwelcome or excluded.</td>
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<td>The remote way of working makes it more difficult to develop a more meaningful connection with teammates and others in the organization. As a result, supplementary social support networks, which were more widely available and accessible in the past, are now less so.</td>
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<td>The feelings of isolation and marginalization leave some staff questioning their decision to join the organization as well as contributing to the stress and anxiety around returning or coming to their duty station.</td>
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<td>Supervisors play a critical role, particularly around communication and facilitation of meaningful inclusion of new staff to support their transition into the organization.</td>
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<td>If ever there was a need for a comprehensive and effective mentor program, it is now.</td>
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They spoke of not being able to form relationships with their teams and feeling almost unwelcome in a virtual workspace where colleagues had neither a lot of time to spare for them nor patience with their learning curve. These challenges have found some young professionals questioning their decision to join ADB. A number of them expressed a lack of clarity around their new roles while stating they could have benefited from some real mentorship.

All of these may be, by and large, supervisory issues. The lack of meaningful communication, or ineffective communication at best, can be a large factor influencing how welcome a staff member feels or how well they connect to the organization.

If communication within teams, and particularly from supervisors, is too transactional, it can have several repercussions, ranging from disengaged employees to lack of motivation and low morale, among others. In the context of working from home during the pandemic, these repercussions may have been amplified because the requirements of isolated workers were also higher. As an organization, we are obliged to do better.

While there are many great examples of sponsors and mentors at ADB who embrace their roles, take them seriously, and “go beyond the call of duty,” it is a regrettable fact that those not integrating well into the organization also have a poor or nonexistent sponsor experience. Unfortunately, the sponsor program does not seem to be implemented consistently across the organization.
DO I WANT TO GO BACK?

THE SITUATION

As the COVID-19 vaccines have been successfully rolled out across the globe, offices everywhere have started considering a “hybrid” return to work.

Mon, an ADB staff member, is not ready to go back to the office. At the beginning of the pandemic, she moved to the suburbs so she could be closer to her elderly parents and take care of them. Her mother has had recurring health problems for a few years now. Her siblings live far away, so Mon is happy to take on the responsibility of looking after their parents. It gives her greater peace of mind to know that she is nearby and can be there for her family immediately, should they need her. Only a few days ago, her father called her during the day because her mother had heart palpitations and needed to see a doctor right away. Mon knows that if she were in the office, it would have been very difficult to first get out of the office and then navigate the traffic before finally reaching them. What if something truly terrible were to happen? And what if she brings the virus home to them? She is not ready to give up her family responsibilities when it has been established that she can easily manage her work from home.
Rolf is another ADB staff member who is exceedingly stressed at the thought of going back to the office. He has worked from home since the beginning of the pandemic. He cannot relate to friends or colleagues who constantly complain about making the transition to working from home. Rolf loves it! In the last 2 years, he realized that he has been perfectly productive and innovative while working from home. He also enjoyed the autonomy he has had over his work life—working in concentrated and flexible pockets of time instead of the presenteeism of pre-pandemic days. Moreover, after spending over a year in his apartment, and limiting outside interactions, he is barely used to being around people. Now, with the easing of restrictions, Rolf finds himself feeling very anxious around crowds. He is worried about the increasing number of COVID-19 cases and the emergence of variants. Last week, he suffered an anxiety attack when he went to the mall and saw droves of people walking about, shopping, and acting as if everything is back to normal. He had to turn around and rush back to the security and safety of his apartment. He wonders, is it even safe to go back to work?

Sasha is not vaccinated. She has personal reasons for her decision. Several of her acquaintances, in fact, have also opted out of receiving the vaccine. Their reasons range from medical factors to religious beliefs and other personal reasons. She is ready to come back to the office but dreads being confronted with the inevitable question, “What vaccine did you get?” Sasha can already sense the weight of judgments from her colleagues and is uncomfortable when asked to explain herself. Additionally, she is worried it may not be possible to access the headquarters building unless vaccinated. Sasha wants to go back to work! She feels like a pariah. Doesn’t she have the right to her own choices?

Pinto moved away from his duty station and took his family with him. His family finally feels settled into their new location. His children have begun in-person learning and his wife, who has been a trailing spouse for years, has now found a job she enjoys and is hesitant to uproot the family again. They have reluctantly decided to separate the family, with Pinto moving back to Manila for work. This agonizing decision was not made lightly and came after profound self-reflection and exploration of all possible options. Pinto is reluctant to push his family to return with him to Manila until there is less uncertainty and more definitive answers concerning schooling, health security, and improved quality of life, among others. Pinto will “downsize” in Manila, while his family puts down deeper roots where they are located. He anticipates to regularly travel back and forth between the two locations. He worries about the stresses this will cause him and his family, and agonizes at the thought of missing important milestones in his children’s growth and development. He already misses them greatly and wonders how long he will be able to keep it up.
WHAT THEY COULD DO

The Office of the Ombudsperson finds it difficult to make recommendations on how concerned staff members might navigate this dilemma. It is intricate, private, and unique to each individual and their family. We think it would be more appropriate if they

- Seek constructive advice from reliable and trustworthy family members and friends. In the end, they should make a decision that is most beneficial for themselves and their respective families.
- Engage in open and honest dialogue with their respective supervisors and colleagues about their predicament. Supervisors and team members should respect the decisions ultimately made by their colleagues.

THE OMBUDSPERSON’S PERSPECTIVE

This is a dilemma that seems to affect everyone at ADB, at all levels of the organization. Many of the pressures, fears, and uncertainties associated with transitioning to working from home at the beginning of the pandemic have evolved into worries around the realities of returning to the office. Furthermore, this issue is somewhat complex. It is very personal to every individual and subjective to their unique situation.

To elaborate, it seems the pandemic has caused many shifts in familial responsibilities and roles. Consequently, some ADB staff may have taken on additional duties for elder care and/or care of other members of their extended families. This has profound implications for these staff members and their families and affects how they approach the idea of returning to the office.

There are also many ADB community members who are eagerly looking forward to coming back to work but are unsure where they stand because they are unvaccinated. Their reasons for not getting the vaccine range from medical to religious or personal choices. They are anxious that future work policy may not take their unique situations into consideration.

Furthermore, some of those we spoke to struggle with the excruciating decision of whether to split their family. A staff member may decide to return to duty station, for example, but might have to leave the family behind in another place. All while knowing fully well that such an arrangement may not be sustainable in the long run.
We all might assume that this predicament applies primarily to international staff. However, some local staff were forced to move closer to their families or to their familial homes during the pandemic. Since then, they continue to work from locations outside of the cities where our field offices are located as well as from provinces outside of Manila. They have made significant adjustments to their lifestyles and are, therefore, hesitant to return.

Honestly speaking, many staff members might not like to admit it, but they have become very comfortable with their work–from–home arrangements. For some, little things like working from the comforts of home are a huge deal. Others have found it fulfilling to work in quiet, concentrated pockets of time while attending to family responsibilities. Some have enjoyed simple things such as being able to turn to their partners any time of the workday and enjoy a quick coffee break together, or take a pause to talk or play with a child. Such activities have deepened family bonding and relationships, and some may not be ready or willing to give them up.

People prioritize their quality of life and quality of work–life since the pandemic. In some instances, this may conflict with how they used to work pre–pandemic.
We would be remiss if we did not also mention the perspectives of an increasing number of supervisors and managers who struggle to encourage key staff members to return to the office. Almost all are of the opinion that certain work functions can only be best performed in person. Many quietly speak about the disconnect between the general perception and reality: contrary to the general belief that we are performing at pre-pandemic levels while away from the office, project sites and in-person meetings with key stakeholders, for instance, and the quality of work, in general, has declined significantly in some areas.

Others we have spoken to appreciate the quiet and cool oasis of their office, away from the distractions and noises at home. These staff members prefer to draw greater boundaries between their work and family lives that the office provides. Some want to be able to “unplug” at the end of a workday and maintain a healthy work–life balance; whereas, others may struggle with discord at home or problematic family lives and appreciate putting a distance between themselves and personal challenges during the day.

That said, we must acknowledge and accept that people may have become accustomed to how they have had to work since the pandemic and value the greater flexibility or balance that remote work offers.

There are certainly some good things to be said about coming back to work. We have witnessed joyful reunions of colleagues meeting each other after months of lockdowns, and we have observed that those who come back to the office seem happy to reconnect with teammates and rebuild professional networks—bringing an end to the “echo pandemic.”

We must appreciate that, ultimately, ADB will implement its return-to-work policy in 2022. We understand that some members of our community may have had difficult choices to make in this respect. Eventually, we hope they all decided what is best for themselves and their families. In addition, we hope that supervisors will recognize and respect Management directives on flexibilities provided to staff and ensure these are practiced in their respective areas.

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7 The “echo pandemic” is a new term that health professionals are using to describe the possibility of widespread mental health issues that resemble COVID-19 in scale (S. Ahmed. 2020. What Is an Echo Pandemic? WellNest Psychotherapy Services Blog. 30 April. https://blog.well-nest.ca/2020/04/30/what-is-an-echo-pandemic/).
NOTES TO MANAGEMENT

LOOKING BACK: A YEAR OF DISRUPTIVE CHANGE

The year 2021 continued the disruptive changes that began in 2020. We will always look back at these 2 years as the period that transformed work practices. During this time, organizations also took a long and serious look at mental health challenges and work practice-related stresses and began prioritizing employee well-being. In our Notes to Management last year, OOMP recommended that ADB review its existing health and well-being services to identify gaps and harness potential for a more cohesive

support system to help foster a culture of inclusivity. We are heartened by the management’s consideration of our advice and their follow-up actions based on our recommendations.

Furthermore, in our 2020 Annual Report, we highlighted the disturbingly increasing concerns we received regarding domestic violence, and ADB listened. We applaud the Budget, People, and Management Systems Department (BPMSD) for defining ADB's Domestic Violence Response Protocol; creating the report, The Hidden Pandemic: Domestic Violence (footnote 5); explaining the forms of abuse; and comprehensively listing resources where members of the ADB community can seek help or guidance. In addition, the ADB community can refer to the NO MORE Global Directory9 for further resources.

Gender-based violence was “already a global crisis before the pandemic;”10 COVID-19 compounded it. A new UN Women report, Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during COVID-19,11 draws on survey data

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Domestic violence may only occur at home, but the effects follow its victims into the workplace.

from over a dozen countries. It shows that almost one in two women reported that either themselves or someone they knew had experienced a form of violence since the onset of the pandemic. Furthermore, seven in 10 women reported that verbal or physical abuse by a partner became more common. In addition, women who disclosed this were reportedly 1.3 times more likely to have experienced increased mental and emotional stress.

Domestic violence may only occur at home, but the effects follow its victims into the workplace. Impacts may appear in the form of an employee’s anxiety or psychological distress, interfering with their ability to function or work, absenteeism, impaired concentration, lack of motivation, and reduced productivity. Victims may even receive threats of violence from their perpetrators while at work, further sabotaging their performance. It may also ultimately affect a victim’s career progress. According to a UN Women report, the effects of gender-based violence and its tangible employment-related costs make it a workplace issue that cannot be ignored. The report suggests that a proactive and comprehensive strategy focused on assisting victims would facilitate employee safety and reduce any cost to employers.

BPMSD has set the right tone through its initiative, which aims to remove potential barriers that make it difficult for staff to seek support. Going forward, more safeguards and preventative measures need to be put in place by the ADB Management to ensure employees’ continued well-being and productive employment.

Coworkers may notice a colleague in distress, or victims might want to disclose their situation to a supervisor or coworker. The first step toward supporting victims is to create a safe and nonjudgmental environment where victims feel they can confidentially disclose their circumstances to approachable and trusted resources within the organization and, in turn, help them manage their situation sensitively. Employers may not have any legal obligation to address domestic violence that occurs outside the workplace. However, effects do spill over. Therefore, it would be in the best interest of any organization to remain alert to their ethical obligation toward their employees’ safety needs.

The costs of domestic violence, including lost productivity, may be calculable in monetary terms for organizations, but one cannot measure the psychological cost to victims and their families or friends in dollar terms.

The Office of the Ombudsperson would encourage the ADB Management to keep the momentum going, embrace recommendations by BPMSD, and work toward developing an institutional policy to address the workplace effects of domestic violence.

Furthermore, we would encourage senior management to continue viewing domestic violence from an ethical perspective, endorse related programs, and remain willing to allocate resources to initiatives that support victims and their perpetrators (where needed).

As such, senior management should provide moral support and legitimacy to victims by openly acknowledging that domestic violence, in all its forms, is unacceptable and contrary to the values of ADB.

LOOKING FORWARD: TOWARD A NEW NORMAL

While things seemed to improve significantly, 2021 was not very different from the previous year, and the pandemic remained a concern for us all. Throughout the year, people continued to work from home even as workplaces began opening back and encouraging a gradual return to the office in light of improved conditions. However, between vaccination, health concerns, and divergent views regarding working from home, a return to the office does not seem to
impact everyone equally. Hence, a one-size-fits-all solution is not possible.

It goes without saying that the pandemic has transformed the workplace, or that it will no longer be possible to work as we did in the past. That said, despite the merits of work-from-home, certain activities and jobs cannot be carried out effectively—or at all—entirely remotely. Furthermore, there is undeniable value in building interpersonal connections through face-to-face interaction that is not easily achievable in remote meetings. For now, the hybrid model will be “the new norm” at ADB.

To create a sustainable hybrid future, organizations face the challenge of deciding what their “new normal” will look like after the pandemic. Under ADB’s proposed approach to a hybrid work model, staff will perform their work at the workplace part of the time, and remotely part of the time. They will be allowed to alternate between working from home for about 2 days a week and report to their duty station during the rest of the week. The approach is centered on employee wellness. It is expected that this level of flexibility will allow staff to achieve work–life balance, experience reduced stress, and maintain performance expectations. The policy’s objective is to instill a work environment that supports the ADB community in balancing the demands of their professional and personal lives.

Our 2021 case data show that the most significant number of concerns raised revolved around work-related stress and work–life balance. While remote work was challenging at varying degrees for everyone, it was especially so for managers and supervisors. This tier of management may continue to face a steep learning curve as they now begin to steer through a hybrid environment. It is hard to be prescriptive, given the many different and complex dynamics at play. So, our only further recommendations for supervisors and managers in this new context are to take stock of the changes created by the pandemic, reflect on practices that worked best, and decide what to modify and what to do away with.

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Depending on the nature of work and the context, managers and supervisors may also find it necessary to review the understanding of “productivity” to include allowing team members the flexibility to work from wherever they are most productive. For some, this may mean remaining in their home.

The ADB hybrid policy provides a structured foundation to guide our future approach. However, it may need to adapt in the face of unforeseen hiccups as we move toward full office reoccupancy. The key to a successful return to the office will be flexibility, increased agility to respond to any new challenges as employees navigate the new hybrid environment, and taking it slow.

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OTHER ACTIVITIES

The Office of the Ombudsperson, like in previous years, held individual and group meetings to help manage work-related concerns. OOMP also conducted several activities in 2021 aimed at (i) raising awareness within the ADB community about emerging trends of conflict and conflict management practices in the organization, (ii) enhancing the skill sets of OOMP staff to enable them to provide better services to the ADB community, and (iii) keeping the office abreast of international best practices.

OUTREACH SESSIONS

(531 participants)

OOMP introduced its services to different groups within the ADB community.
Other Activities

**PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL INITIATIVES**
(12 sessions)

OOMP staff participated in workshops and meetings hosted by other ADB departments. These activities aimed to improve the work environment and the organizational culture in ADB.

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**INTERNAL KNOWLEDGE SHARING ACTIVITIES**
(2,340 participants)

Shared observations and analyses on various topics, such as challenges of remote work arrangements, mental health and well-being, and team communication. Also conducted several briefing sessions on the 2020 annual report, including raising awareness of the ADB community on conflict management.

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**EXTERNAL KNOWLEDGE-SHARING ACTIVITIES**
(756 participants)

Conducted virtual presentations to different organizations globally to share how OOMP reimagined its annual report. Also actively participated in regular meetings with ombuds colleagues in Asia and the Pacific region for support and sharing of best practices.

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**REIMAGINING THE OMBUDS ANNUAL REPORT**

By Wayne Blair
Asian Development Bank

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**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE FIRST RESPONDERS TRAINING**

22 and 24 November 2021
9:00am – 12:00pm (Manila time)

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**OOMP STAFF LEARNING ACTIVITIES**
(18 events)

Participated in 10 in-house trainings and 8 virtual external learning events. Topics included mediation, continuing professional development on professional coaching, leadership training, and responding to domestic violence, among others.

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**16**

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**33**

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WHAT’S NEXT

The Office of the Ombudsperson continues to be an integral part of ADB’s organizational culture, with an earned reputation for fairness, integrity, and responsiveness, and for its principle of treating all individuals with the same level of dignity and respect. As a result, the office anticipates that the Board, Management, staff, and other members of the ADB community will continue to utilize its services.
To better provide for the evolving needs of the ADB community, OOMP will carry out the following activities beginning 2022:

- Continue to implement appropriate recommendations from the comprehensive external review of our office and its relevant administrative order (AO 2.14).
- Explore and strengthen our innovative application of data analysis and data storytelling to better support ADB Management, keeping consistent with leadership directives and organizational change.
- Continually improve our capacity for innovative use of communication products, information technologies, and service provision.
- Introduce informational products centered around conflict prevention, resolution, and management.
- Review and enhance our new database and case tracking system.
- Resume resident mission travel and in-person presentations, as travel recommences.
- Continue to support the ADB community during times of uncertainty and organizational change.
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Our communication channels are open to all members of the ADB community.

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Office of the Ombudsperson 2021 Annual Report

Continuing the disruptive changes brought about by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in 2020, the year 2021 witnessed another period of remote work practices. This year’s annual report highlights the new approaches the Office of the Ombudsperson (OOMP) has taken to better support the ADB community. These include the development of a new database and case management system and launching OOMP’s external web page. Almost half of the 540 cases handled by OOMP in 2021 dealt with work-related stress and work-life balance concerns stemming from the virtual work environment. This report presents case studies of some of these concerns and provides recommendations for addressing them.

About the Asian Development Bank

ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members —49 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.