

(BETTER) STORIES FROM THE PANDEMIC

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Published in:
(BETTER) STORIES FROM THE PANDEMIC

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
[10.5281/zenodo.8061703](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8061703)

Publication date:
2023

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Rolandsen Agustín, L., Faber, S. T., & Nielsen, L. T. (2023). (BETTER) STORIES FROM THE PANDEMIC. In C. Aglietti, C. Delaney, P. Ensari, E. Ghidoni, A. Harroche, A. Still, & N. Türker (Eds.), *(BETTER) STORIES FROM THE PANDEMIC* Örebro University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8061703>

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(BETTER) STORIES FROM THE PANDEMIC



RESISTIRÉ

Reducing gendered inequalities
caused by COVID-19 policies

(BETTER) STORIES FROM THE PANDEMIC

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Örebro University Press, 2023

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Örebro University Press

First edition, Örebro University Press, 2023

ISBN 978-91-87789-83-0

CFS Report Series No. 27:2023

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 101015990.

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About RESISTIRÉ

RESISTIRÉ is an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project the aim of which is to 1) understand the impact of COVID-19 policy responses on behavioural, social and economic inequalities in the EU27, Serbia, Turkey, Iceland, and the UK on the basis of a conceptual gender+ framework, and 2) design, devise and pilot policy solutions and social innovations to be deployed by policymakers, stakeholders and actors in different policy domains. RESISTIRÉ research is based on an intersectional approach to gender which acknowledges the mutual shaping of multiple complex inequalities. The project is comprised of an 11 partner-multidisciplinary and multisectoral European consortium, and a well-established network of national researchers in 30 countries.



Find out more about the project at resistire-project.eu

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Acknowledgements

This book was developed as a way for us to share the rich and diverse experiences of people during the pandemic and allow readers to engage with the many ways in which structural and social inequalities affect the lives of people from all walks of life during crises. We would like to sincerely thank all the participants in this project who generously shared their experiences with us. Your openness has allowed us to create this book. We hope that this book will raise greater awareness regarding the pervasive inequalities suffered by individuals during the difficult years of the pandemic. We also hope that the readers will be inspired, as we were, by the stories of solidarity, love, friendship, resilience, community, and strength that exude from the narratives.

We would also like to thank key members of the RESISTIRÉ Consortium who advised on the direction and content of this book. In particular, we would like to thank Sofia Strid for her guidance and leadership in the creation of the book. We also would not have been able to produce this work without the wisdom and expertise of Ayşe Gül Altınay, Marina Cacace, Maria López Belloso, and Charikleia Tzanakou. Thank you all for your kind and considerate advice.

We are grateful to Dina Georgis both for having inspired the RESISTIRÉ project with her generative concept, “the better story,” and for the deeply perceptive and insightful Foreword she wrote at such short notice. We feel privileged to have worked with two creative artists and queer feminist activists from Turkey in this book. We sincerely thank Özge Özgüner for the beautiful book design and Aslı Alpar for her inspiring illustrations (some of which were created specifically for RESISTIRÉ).

The contents of this book have been drawn directly from the narratives collected by the RESISTIRÉ partners and network of national experts. We would like to sincerely thank all the National Researchers and the consortium partners researchers who collected these stories during the RESISTIRÉ project, and who thoughtfully engaged with often difficult and sensitive content. We would also like to thank our colleagues at the University of Gothenburg and Örebro University and at Knowledge and Innovation who organised the collection of the narrative interviews and led the analysis.

List of acronyms

ADHD	attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	civil society organisation
EU	European Union
FFP	filtering face piece
GP	general practitioner
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PCR	polymerase chain reaction
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder

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Foreword

By Dina Georgis

The “better story” concept that is put forward in my book *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East* offers an understanding of the narrative strategies of those most impacted by the legacies of colonialism, war and conflict through the lens of cultural trauma and its affects. My intervention aimed at identifying the limits of our feminist and postcolonial epistemologies which leaned too heavily on constructivist theories, all the while reifying responses to injustices in static identities and accounts of resistance and empowered agency. In this story of postcolonial survival, pain is foreclosed, and vulnerability is sidestepped in favour of representing marginalized people as strong and resilient. Though the experience of injury is implied in these discourses, the impact of loss on the subjectivities of people it affects is not a consideration. At the time I was developing the book, it felt risky to challenge what had become a cornerstone of postcolonial studies. Ironically, my training in the field compelled me to be suspect one of its major tenets. As such, *The Better Story* begins with a curiosity about the centrality of resistance in our postcolonial and feminist stories and argues that it is an emotionally compelling narrative. Examined through a psychoanalytical lens, the faith in resistance, I suggested, helps defend against harder, more ugly feelings, of pain and suffering. As the best possible story, or the better story, it arms us with language to challenge power and fight for justice and representation.

As a story of our generation, resistance (or fighting power) has served us well and will continue to serve us well. But we have outgrown its aversions to suffering and pain. We see this in movements such as Black Lives Matter. Although the death of George Floyd sparked rage and protests against police brutality, the pain and suffering of a community has been palpable. The incident brought awareness to trans-generational trauma of Black people. In Canada, the discovery of unmarked graves of Indigenous residential school children has had a similar impact. As I see it, these communities are not just asking for more rights, they want to be seen as having grievable lives, deserving of meaningful reparations. The fact that these events occurred during the global pandemic might have been a coincidence, but what they triggered in people—an outpouring of grief and protest—had very much to do with the context in which they

occurred and who had been affected the most. Black, Indigenous and other discriminated groups saw a disproportionate amount of suffering. That is because they were essential workers often performing high risk jobs without protections, paid sick leave or equitable healthcare. Those communities also had the highest fatalities from COVID-19. All this added stress and trauma to already ill-treated communities. While no one wants to suffer, the pandemic may have helped people make grievances by way of expressing grief, which is to say to tell the story differently.

The stories collected in (Better) Stories From the Pandemic is an archive of the intimacies of pain and struggle. It privileges the stories of those who may not have suffered the most but whose social location rendered them the most vulnerable. Unique about the pandemic is that it brought all of us to face to face with uncertainty, angling us toward a future no one could control or predict. People talked about how “we’re all in this together” and in many ways, that was indeed true. The pandemic certainly brought up difficult feelings for just about everyone, and perhaps this made us more attentive to care for one another. But the refrain conceals all the ways that we are not in it together in the same way. (Better) Stories From the Pandemic makes this abundantly clear. The voices chronicled are here are diverse, varied, and almost always exposing systemic and intersectional injustices. Women generally suffered more, especially if they had children to care for while holding down a job. Story after story described the tensions of home-life behaved like a pressure cooker making women more vulnerable to domestic violence. The stories of health workers really brought to life just how burdened they were and what risks they took under terrible labour conditions. And because healthcare privileged COVID-19 patients, trans people had even less access to trans-specific services. The undocumented were in limbo, often with no access to healthcare or vaccines. These are just highlights of themes that emerged from my reading of the heart wrenching accounts. In sum, the stories in (Better) Stories From the Pandemic attest to how the pandemic gave rise to new issues while existing injustices got amplified. But these stories do more than attest to how people were challenged, it also accounts for how they lived with hardship. Though it is tempting to generalize how they survived difficult experiences (which I am guilty of doing briefly below), these stories are better witnessed than represented. Indeed, this may not even be the final word on their experiences as not enough time has passed to metabolize the last three years. There are likely wounds that remain silent, unable at this moment to find a voice.

(Better) Stories of the Pandemic suggests that we do not read these stories as final accounts on pandemic experiences. As people change, so do their accounts about the past. This is a book that resists conclusions and neatly packaged summaries. I want to end this foreword with a note on the method utilized, which is deceptively simple in its basic technique of inviting people to tell their stories. The best way to describe the method is to talk about what the editors did not do. There were no interview questions, no lengthy analysis, and no discussion of "findings." A network of researchers across 29 countries were tasked to find and select stories that best exemplified the challenges and inspiring revelations in people's experiences. A straightforward and unwrought research agenda gave birth to stories that took the reader to the emotional worlds of 80 individuals. Many of the stories expressed resilience under extraordinary pressures. Many found creative coping strategies. And some even felt that the pandemic, though hard, steered them in new directions. A number of stories however described feelings of defeat. In other words, these stories were not what we would typically describe as "inspiring" but they were not excluded from the collection. The inclusion of these stories is very important because it makes for good research. Also significant is that the "better story," as I have defined it, is simply about the capacity to narrativize pain, to give it language, through which otherwise ways of being and knowing might emerge. Consistent across all the pages of this collection are the unfettered voices of the 80 contributors. As readers, one gets the impression that the researchers merely listened and did not interfere with the direction of the narrative. This book makes space for people to be witnessed, not scrutinized or fixed. Their stories are not gleaned for data, nor is any single narrative interpreted. It is radical in its refusal to do so. The subjects of this archive are the authors of their better stories, sharing their experiences in their own way framed through how they see themselves and the world around them.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic

On 11th March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 a global pandemic. The virus has a high transmission rate that can rapidly lead to respiratory deaths. Within a few weeks, cases of affected persons were reported worldwide, and hospitals registered a dramatic increase in admissions and deaths. From then on, governments in the most affected countries were faced with radical uncertainty on how to handle the situation, dealing with severe health, economic, and social challenges. To slow down the infection and prevent deaths, emergency measures were introduced everywhere to restrict freedom of movement and contact between people. By spring 2020, more than half of the world's population has been forced to stay indoors, under 'lockdown'.

In most nations, only the economic sectors and services deemed 'essential' were kept open, for example, grocery stores, health care providers, utilities, transportation providers, and gas stations. Moreover, in many areas of the world, schools were closing, offices were closing, and borders were closing. The use of face masks and social distancing became mandatory almost everywhere. Despite this, COVID-19 continued to spread, affecting almost all countries and more than 50 million people in 2020. By January 2021, COVID-19 had caused approximately 2.5 million deaths worldwide.

In Europe, since March 2020, the severity and timing of policy measures to combat the infection have differed and have led to an upheaval in the organisation of society in the EU and beyond: physical and social estrangement, quarantine and self-isolation, working from home, home schooling, and an intensified online presence became the new norm.

Emergency measures to mitigate the virus transmission caused the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs through business and school closures, leading to economic hardship and health problems, both physical and mental, and delays in routine healthcare for many. People experienced fear and anxiety in relation to contracting COVID-19 and the risk of dying, for both them and their loved ones.

Individual, social, and economic challenges continued throughout the duration of the pandemic, until a mass vaccination programme started globally in late 2020. The COVID-19 vaccine made real advances in saving lives and slowing the infection down. However, anti-vaccine groups started to spread in the EU and worldwide, claiming negative side effects of collective immunisation.

Societies around the world have been shaken by this health, economic, and social crisis. Moreover, from its onset, it was evident that its impact was likely to be most intense for already vulnerable groups. The pandemic and subsequent policy responses have in fact led to increased risks and inequalities for already vulnerable groups such as women, children, people with disabilities, the elderly, migrants, and disadvantaged and marginalised individuals.

A journey through the stories from the pandemic

The stories collected in this book represent the voices of people from all walks of life and provide visibility to the lived experiences of different individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, this book allows us to explore how this crisis – and the policies enacted to address it – shed light on pervasive inequalities in European societies. Each story goes beyond the individual experience and becomes an opportunity to look at broader, systemic inequities and at how the pandemic amplified these issues. On the other hand, this book allows for the identification of different ways in which agency is exercised in a context of profound challenges.

The 80 stories presented in this book are taken from a selection of about 800 narrative interviews¹ conducted by a network of national researchers (one or more experts based in each country) across the three cycles of RESISTIRÉ research: July 2021, February 2022, and November 2022. For the realisation of this book, national researchers were asked to identify a selection of challenging and inspiring narratives that they believed best exemplified the complex lived experiences of the pandemic from among the interviews they had conducted. In terms of selection, researchers were especially encouraged to identify narratives from vulnerable communities and from those with intersecting inequalities, in line with the aims of the broader RESISTIRÉ project.

The narratives encapsulate the struggles of vulnerable and marginalised communities, as well as (better) stories of inspiring actions during the crisis. The book therefore illuminates the consequences that the measures taken to contain COVID-19 have had on pre-existing gender and intersectional inequalities.

Stories in this book are a kaleidoscope of emotion, some carrying the weight of challenge, others brimming with inspiration, and yet others carrying both light and shadow, all arranged in a wave-like sequence. As you wander through the pages of this book, you are invited on an intimate journey into the lives of 80 individuals from 29 countries during the pandemic period, to bear witness to their struggles, resilience, and hope.

¹ Narrative interview methodology detailed in Appendix 1

The better story concept

"There is always a better story than the better story"

Dina Georgis (2013)

This collection of narratives is built on the concept of the "better story" developed by Dina Georgis in her book *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East* (2013). At the individual level, the author uses narratives to understand both the struggles and the agency of marginalised communities in the Middle East, with a particular focus on queer artists and communities. The term 'better' does not suggest a moral hierarchy but acts as an invitation for deep listening to stories, acknowledging pain as well as resilience, and imagining the possibility of alternative futures and actions. Georgis highlights the transformative potential nature of painful stories, particularly when they are collectively acknowledged and shared. Indeed, this book invites the reader to engage in deep listening to acknowledge the personal and collective challenges posed by the pandemic, mourn the layers of loss and trauma, and explore the possibility of imagining better futures shaped by greater equality, inclusion, and healing. As Georgis (2013) argues "there is always a better story than the better story".

Drawing on this approach and through the collection of narratives from the pandemic across Europe, this book aims to provide insights into how people from different backgrounds made sense of this period and how they faced COVID-19-related difficulties. Each narrative therefore represents a (better) story that explores individual and collective resources and constraints.

The better stories told in the following pages, especially those belonging to vulnerable individuals and groups, include contextual elements, subjective experiences, and coping mechanisms. They represent emotional resources that at the same time allow for reflection on better political futures. By articulating collective and individual factors leading to resistance, better stories constitute valuable resources to envision desirable changes at a larger scale and in other contexts.

Structure of the book

Intersectionality and a gender+ approach² has shaped the overall methodology and analytical perspective of the RESISTIRÉ project. Therefore, all the narratives have been collected with careful attention to the intersectional inequalities affecting different aspects of life, such as education, work & labour market, care, gender-based violence (GBV), and healthcare. The individual narratives demonstrate that not only intersections of inequalities, but also how the interconnections between different aspects of people's lives have shaped the intricate nature of individual experiences. For instance, the challenges of pandemic lockdowns and the shift to online education converge in the experiences of a single mother having to balance work, caregiving, and home schooling her child. Taking inspiration from the ebb and flow of waves, this book embraces a fluid structure, sequencing narratives across diverse themes and countries. Instead of compartmentalising experiences according to specific themes, the book captures the organic interconnectedness of individuals' stories during the COVID-19 pandemic. The waves are a continuum that invite the reader to observe the complexity of reality, where extremely painful experiences and stories of individual and collective resilience coexist. This structure allows the reader to engage with the complex, multifaceted lives of people during the pandemic and to notice the commonalities and differences among the experiences of individuals from all sections of society across Europe.

While the narratives are not grouped under certain themes, the readers can select the narratives according to specific keywords (e.g., sexual orientation, migration, gender care gap, access to healthcare, older people, remote work, poverty, etc.) that might be of particular interest to them by using the thematic index list at the end of the book. The index brings together narratives under thematic keywords, and therefore provides a navigational tool to the reader with specific interests relating to stories of the pandemic.

² The RESISTIRÉ project is informed by a gender+ approach, recognising intersections of gender with age, race/ethnicity, class, disability, and sexuality as likely to be particularly significant in the analysis of the impact on inequalities of policy responses to COVID-19.

Lessons from this book

Narrative after narrative, this book advances our understanding of the pandemic in, at least, three ways.

Firstly, the stories illustrate the diverse challenges that people have been subjected to during the pandemic, facilitating cross-country comparisons and highlighting the effects of various policies and measures adopted in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Secondly, this book shows how people went through this period taking into consideration intersecting characteristics and challenging situations. Bringing together narratives from single mothers, young migrants, sex workers, women with disability, trans students, queer artists, and many others, the book shows how a similar set of events can be endured in different ways. More precisely, it shows the importance of inequalities and how some people's characteristics and identities shape experiences of global phenomena such as the COVID-19 outbreak.

Thirdly, this book showcases the coping mechanisms of marginalised individuals during the crisis, highlighting the strategies they employed and the contextual factors that enabled or hindered them. Ultimately, the compilation of better stories from the pandemic provides concrete examples of how global events translate into specific contexts of intersecting inequalities, affecting individuals in unique and often unjust ways. These intersectional inequalities, however, also provide a view into structural issues, and the ways in which individual experience is shaped by government policies, institutional capabilities and local, regional and national priorities.

These narratives are unique and offer valuable insights into how people can cope with similar events at the individual and collective levels. More importantly, they represent better stories that constitute cumulative experiences which can help us to resist and build back better for the future.

NARRATIVES

SERBIA

July 2021

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**The real heroes
of this pandemic
are caregivers
and nurses.**



Sloboda | 40 years old

The pandemic has positively changed my attitude towards work, colleagues and service users.

I am Sloboda. I work as an occupational therapist in a nursing home, which means that I work directly with service users in creative workshops: painting, social games, and creative work. When we discovered that we had COVID-19 infection both among beneficiaries and employees, our hell began. We stayed in quarantine for 15 days. We had to wear complete protective equipment. After only half an hour in that equipment, you were drenched in sweat. It is physically tough to perform our usual tasks in that equipment, but it was also necessary. If service users become infected, it is directly our responsibility. We worked, slept, and lived in the red zone for 15 days with service users and colleagues, and then we spent 15 days at home in isolation so that we could return to work again. We slept in the offices, in the dining room, and in the common rooms. We had a place to take a shower; the nurses had their rooms and bathrooms, but it was not possible for all employees. It was tough, but no one quit.

Some service users, especially those with severe dementia, were unaware of the situation. We found ways to help them maintain the same quality of life as before the quarantine. For example, the management cancelled our subscription to newspapers, so we downloaded all kinds of news from the internet for them to read. We had the

support of our manager and a psychological service available 24 hours a day for both the service users and the employees. Many began to forget their loved ones.

The real heroes of this pandemic are caregivers and nurses. They bore the heaviest burden. I remember when relatives were allowed to come; one son visited his mother in her room. He had to wear protective equipment and could not take it longer than five minutes. He said, "This is hell." And our nurses were in the same protective gear for eight hours at a time!

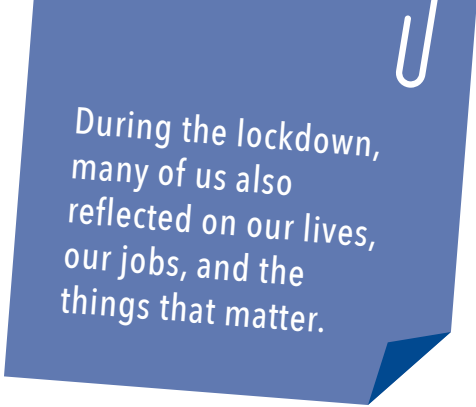
We celebrated Easter 2020 and Labor Day in isolation. The first group in isolation went out and played music and danced in front of the quarantine fence, and the second group under complete protective equipment danced on the other side of the fence - their quarantine had just begun. Great connections and solidarity was created between the workers and the beneficiaries, who could not see their loved ones for almost nine months. I was especially glad to get to know my colleagues who do other, harder jobs than me, such as bathing users, changing their clothes, cutting their hair, shaving, and feeding them. The pandemic has positively changed my attitude towards work, colleagues, and service users. I would never change my team.

SLOVENIA

November 2022

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**I used to work 14-15
hours a day, but
during the pandemic
I realised that a job is
not all there is in life.**



*During the lockdown,
many of us also
reflected on our lives,
our jobs, and the
things that matter.*

Joy

43 years old

I am 43 years old, and I live in a city with my partner, child, and dog. I have a regular job. During the pandemic, I began to grow plants to keep myself sane. I think plants are really good, taking care of them relaxes me. I joined different online groups to sell, buy and exchange plants, and to get advice on how to take care of specific plants. As a result of the pandemic, I now have a real jungle of around 50 plants that I really enjoy.

During the lockdown, many of us also reflected on our lives, our jobs, and the things that matter. I used to work 14-15 hours a day, but during the pandemic, I realised that I had had enough, that a job is not all there is in life. I used to be available 24/7, which resulted in a lot of anxiety, stress, and impatience, which also impacted my private life. I was nervous and my mind was not present. During the lockdown, I worked from home and took care of my three-year-old. I had to feed and entertain my child, as the kindergartens were closed. In fact, kindergarten was available but only for certain parents who did certain jobs;

this was not the case for me. My job didn't save lives, so my kid was at home. My partner was working, so I had to juggle my job and taking care of my child. And when my partner came home, I would then work until 9 or 10 pm to complete my work. It was at this point that I realised it was not worth it, and maybe I am too old for that.

Many companies don't understand that workers are an asset, and that they need good work-life balance. Maybe this will change with the younger generations who understand the importance of free time. I started looking for a new job, and now I know it was the best decision. I am now more at peace, my brain functions better, and I have more energy to take care of my child. Now, I have an eight-hour working day, free weekends and holidays, and I don't even bring the computer home, because I don't have to. This is a very positive outcome of the pandemic, because without it, maybe I would have continued to live like I did before COVID-19.

DENMARK

November 2022

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**I can be who I am
and be LGBTQIA+.
I feel like I have found
a home in my own
skin and body.**

Carina

30 years old

I live in a small city in Denmark, and I'm about to turn 30. I live alone in a small house close to nature, which is good because I like to hike. I am a substitute teacher at two schools, a public school and a private school. Also, I am a substitute teacher at a home for disabled people. I spend a lot of time with my family. Currently, I am studying Danish and German to become a teacher in elementary schools.

I did not deal well with everyday life during the pandemic. I was close to becoming depressed. I was in a relationship where I did not feel comfortable. I had to re-discover myself and realised that I am gay. I moved back with my family because the relationship I was in felt toxic. When I moved home with my family, I spent a lot of time taking walks with my mom. My system had to slow down, and I had to find myself again. My family have challenges with their health and as the only child I felt pressure to take care of them. COVID-19 also did some good things for me, because I realised that I was where I should be. I am

grateful for all the challenges because reality kicked me and told me that some things were more important - even though it was really hard. It was, in a way, like the Phoenix bird - burning completely to the ground, only to rise up again.

I see the pandemic as a turning point in my life. I spent my time figuring out if I was gay and met with women and non-binary people. It was a period where I had to figure out what I wanted. I spoke to my parents about it a lot and told them I didn't believe in myself when it came to being attracted to women. My parents said that I should do whatever makes me happy, they would love me either way. Before I felt that I had to prove something, that I had to fit some stereotype. It's hard to explain, but I have now just let go. I don't have to look a certain way to be LGBTQIA+. I don't have to act a certain way to be LGBTQIA+. I can be who I am and be LGBTQIA+. If someone feels differently, that is okay as well. I feel like I have found a home in my own skin and body.

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AUSTRIA

November 2022

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**Getting this legal suit
underway was quite
a lot of work, but very
satisfactory.**

Florence

47 years old

I am Florence, a union activist and a self-employed journalist. When the pandemic started, I was alarmed. I was not concerned by the lockdown, as I work from home by myself most of the time anyway. But I saw how other people struggled. I was also worried because of the increasing polarisation of our society. At the beginning of the pandemic, the government did not pay enough attention to the long-term effects for society. People got disappointed, month after month, as every time we were told it was over, it was not. I feel it would have been better if communication had been more honest and open. They could have told people that there are different forms of therapy available, instead of leaving a kind of information vacuum which was filled by fears and insecurities. I began looking for ways to do something about this increase in fear and insecurity. I reached out to the regional government and produced a podcast for them. In this podcast, I aimed to capture the overall mood, to provide something for the mental health of people as well as realistically assess what was going on. This podcast provided a platform for people, from children to senior citizens, to voice their feelings.

I also organised a class action suit so that self-employed individuals and small enterprises would not have to pay rent for prem-

I also organised a class action suit so that self-employed individuals and small enterprises would not have to pay rent for premises if they were unable to use them due to lockdowns.

ises if they were unable to use them due to lockdowns. I realised that this was a significant issue for small enterprises and self-employed individuals, as they were still required to pay rent despite being unable to conduct any business. I looked up the tenancy laws, which state that the rented object belongs to the landlord and a tenant is only obligated to pay rent if they can use the object for its intended purpose. Therefore, if the tenant is unable to use the premises for its intended purpose, they do not have to pay the rent, and the risk lies with the landlord. I then organised the class action suit in front of the constitutional court. I began by conducting media outreach, informing newspapers and media outlets about our initiative. I distributed handouts by walking through shopping streets, placing a leaflet under the door of each closed shop. The leaflets contained basic information, a phone number, and an email address. We were inundated with hundreds of calls, which were answered by three individuals over several days. In the end, the court ruled in our favour, affirming that landlords have no right to collect rent if the premises cannot be used as intended in the renting contract. Getting this legal suit underway was quite a lot of work, but very satisfactory. We helped many people.

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LITHUANIA

November 2022

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Situations like this show what a powerful force CSOs are. They react here and now, not waiting for yet another meeting to take action.

Agne

41 years old

I live in a city in Lithuania and lead a CSO founded by my mother who passed away six years ago. I live with my partner, and I have a severe disability. At home or at work, I walk with crutches, and when I need to go further, I use a wheelchair.

The biggest challenges I experienced during the pandemic were in relation to my work. Our organisation has a range of activities: a women's crisis centre, charity canteen, day care for children, and specialised help for victims of domestic violence and other people in need. During the pandemic, we continued to assist victims of violence, providing psychological and legal help remotely. The biggest challenge was with our charitable canteen as, especially during the first quarantine, all catering activities had to stop. For a few weeks, we could not resume our activities and people called me every day, asking "when are you going to give us food?". I just raised my hands in despair. I appealed to the municipality for help, asking them to provide us with protective gear so that we could resume activities. The municipality's first response was that CSOs should purchase protective equipment themselves, but how could we? These were unexpected expenses, and we did not have the funds. Little by little we pushed through, people sewed cloth masks and brought them to us. As soon as we collected protective gear, we resumed our activities. We gathered in a small team and decided how to proceed. It felt like we were sitting at the barricades,

strategising how to help others while keeping the volunteers safe. We started distributing food ensuring that there was as little contact as possible.

Other people stayed at home during quarantine and rested, but my workload increased. I sent hundreds of letters to local companies requesting help so that we could continue helping people, but only a couple responded to my call. We made a fuss about the lack of support from the municipality. I called politicians complaining about the attitude of the municipality and publicised the situation on Facebook. Eventually, the municipality coordinated procurement of protective equipment for various organisations. They gave us disinfectant liquid and masks. Situations like this show what a powerful force CSO can be. They react here and now, not waiting for yet another meeting to take action.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I worried about my own health. Not only do I have a disability, but my lungs are sensitive. The slightest draught is enough for me to cough and suffocate and, as we know, lungs are exactly what COVID-19 targets. I had anxiety that if I got sick, it could end badly. On the other hand, the quarantines brought some positive developments. Remote work has its advantages, and quarantine showed me that you can connect and discuss problems despite distance.

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TURKEY

February 2022

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It was so difficult and exhausting to do all the household chores while also trying to follow online classes, submit papers, and take exams.

Müjde

23 years old

I am Müjde. I have five sisters and three brothers. My father is a construction foreman; my mother is a housewife. I am a senior university student, and I stay in a student dormitory during the school term.

After the first COVID-19 case in Turkey in March 2020, we switched to online education. I went back to stay with my parents and three brothers. It was a very difficult period. Attending classes online while staying with my family affected me badly in every sense. My mother has brittle bone disease, so it can be difficult and painful for her to do house chores. When I went back home, the burden fell on me since my sisters are all married, and I am the only female child left in the household. My youngest brother is a senior high school student. I forced him to contribute to household chores, but he used his schoolwork as an excuse to avoid it. My father does not do domestic chores unless the rest of the household is all sick. So, I had to do almost all the housework, preparing meals, cleaning dishes, cleaning the house, doing laundry, serving tea in the evenings, serving guests, and so on. It was difficult and exhausting to do all the household chores while also trying to follow online classes, submit papers, and take exams. I remember times when I was making coffee for guests while also trying to respond to exam questions. Due to all that stress, I ended up having physical and

psychological health issues. I lost a lot of weight, my ulcer got worse, my glasses prescription changed from 2 to 3.75, and I had panic attacks. As I was trying to catch up with everything, I had to go to bed late at night and get up early in the morning and I started to have sleep problems. I still cannot sleep properly. I received psychiatric treatment before the pandemic and I was doing okay, but the pandemic exacerbated my psychological problems and I had to start seeing a psychiatrist again. Although I used to have good relations with my family and had almost no arguments, I started to have quarrels with my parents and brothers.

Online education was another problem. I did not have a computer, only a cell phone for the first few months. Our house does not have an internet infrastructure or network, so I had to use my phone and its data to follow online classes, write my papers and exams. My phone was old and broken and I could not download the applications or readings our professors shared with us. Before the pandemic, I never failed a course. Even under these circumstances, I attended all the classes; yet my grades dropped considerably during the pandemic. I even considered dropping out. Then I motivated myself to continue, thinking that I should complete my education and have my economic independence.

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SPAIN

February 2022

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The pandemic has made it very difficult for those of us who work without a fixed and stable contract.

Olivia | 40 years old

I missed the help of different organisations that should have been more involved with vulnerable groups such as mothers in charge of minors. External help would have helped me with my daughter.

My name is Olivia, and I am a mother of a six-year-old girl. I am also a victim of gender-based violence. I have always worked as a waitress, a profession that I loved, but since giving birth to my daughter, I had to quit because my work schedule was incompatible with her care. I separated from my daughter's father when she was around three years old and since then, my life has consisted of fighting, getting by, and surviving for my daughter.

I have worked in many jobs, like cleaning and taking care of older people, but with the pandemic, these opportunities vanished. Finding a job where I live has been quite difficult. I have to work because I must earn money to pay the bills and buy everything my daughter needs. I try to look for jobs that I can combine with my daughter's school schedule. My parents are elderly with health problems. Besides, they do not live nearby, so I cannot count on their support. I don't have much help. The pandemic has made it very difficult for those of us who work without a fixed and stable contract. This type of work was my only source of income, and with the pandemic, I have found myself in precarious situations, without money for necessities. There is an association where I live that helps people like me and we have survived thanks to their

constant help. They gave us non-perishable food and something fresh once a week, so we could have some basics to survive.

The lockdown period was an uncertain and lonely time, where the only thing that kept me alive was my daughter. I had a very hard time because suddenly, I found myself with a child without being able to go out. My apartment had no terrace or balcony, which made it exasperating. My daughter spent the whole day restlessly looking out of the window. When we could go shopping, I had to take her with me, but how could I take such a little girl to do the shopping? Because of her age, she is very active, moves a lot, and touches everything. I felt I could not handle going to the supermarket with her. I asked my neighbour upstairs for help, and she was nice. When I needed food, I asked her to take care of my child while I went to do shopping. I felt terribly lonely. I missed the help of different organisations that should have been more involved with vulnerable groups such as mothers in charge of minors. External help would have helped me with my daughter. She still experiences difficulties because of the lockdown, such as behavioural problems and changes in her sleep schedule. I don't know what to do to calm her down and normalise her days.

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ITALY

February 2022

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**With the lockdown,
all his attention was
on me. It was
continuous violence.**

Maria

35 years old

When you live in violence
you resign yourself, you
think there are no
alternatives, but it is
not so.

My name is Maria. I am 35 years old, and I have two children aged five and almost three. I was with my ex-husband for 13 years. In the last two years, the psychological violence started, followed by the physical violence. With the lockdown, all his attention was on me. It was continuous violence. Before it had been intermittent violence.

Once, secretly, I asked my mother to get information from the counselling centre on how to deal with violence. They told her that I should contact 1522, the national hotline for violence against women and girls. However, he forbade me to use the phone. In July 2020, a neighbour of mine heard me shouting when my husband had gone out, and he knocked on my door and asked me how I was. I asked him to make a phone call to 1522. The social workers on the phone told me to get myself to a safe place as soon as possible and then to contact them again for help.

Two days later, I was able to call 1522 again. They explained about possible ways to escape the violence. It was an emergency situation, so they took me to the shelter. In the shelter I had legal, psychological, and practical assistance. The ten months in the shelter were a break from life, to understand and become aware of what had happened to me

so I could start again. I started receiving citizenship income. I found a house and now I am looking for a job. The Juvenile Court ruled that the father of my children has no parental authority. He cannot come near us.

When you live in violence you resign yourself, you think there are no alternatives, but it is not so. There are the fears and the threats, and you ask yourself: "Where do I go alone with two children?". You have to ask for help from institutions and anti-violence centres, like the one that helped me. Relatives and friends are not enough. When you call 1522, they explain what they do; they don't put obligations or limits on you. They show you the different possibilities to get out of the violence. However, we need to intensify the presence of shelters, raise awareness in schools, and increase funding.

The children adapted very easily to the new situation. In the shelter there were other women's children and they understood that they were not the only ones in that situation. They did not feel like they were second-class children. They had witnessed, both directly and indirectly, the violence, they had seen their mother crying, or they had seen me with bruises. Now I am a free person.

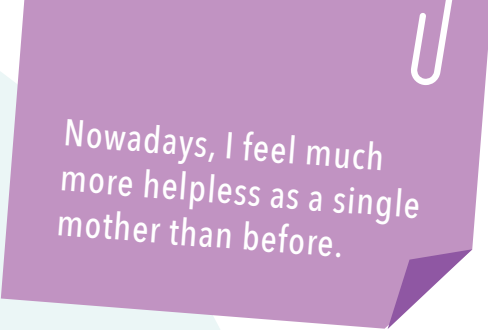
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GERMANY

November 2022

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Since I work in a hospital, I never had the option of working from home during the pandemic.



Nowadays, I feel much more helpless as a single mother than before.

Olga

39 years old

My name is Olga, I am originally from Russia and came to Germany when I was 13 years old. I am 39 years old and a single mother. I live with my daughter who is eight years old. I work part-time in a hospital and as a self-employed personal fitness trainer and nutrition counsellor. My job is 40 km away from my home, so I commute four times a week. Since I work in a hospital, I never had the option of working from home during the pandemic. Also, for employees in the medical sector, it is mandatory to be vaccinated. I had to be vaccinated even though I had several concerns regarding the vaccination and the campaign around it because I have a blood disease. I was put under a lot of pressure at work to have it so I finally decided to take the vaccine, otherwise I would have risked my job.

My impression is that this situation led to a bad image of mothers. Women were the ones who were missing at the workplace and who really were affected. At my work, I was able to see in our internal system who fell sick, when and how people complained about childcare conditions, and I realised that they were always women. I also know from male colleagues who are fathers that they hardly missed work and were mostly present at the hospital. Men just continued working as usual.

I also had a fight with my daughter's father because he refused to take care of her during the pandemic and to make a firm commitment to split the work equally between us. Nowadays, I feel much more helpless as a single mother than before. Partially, I was able to rely on the school's emergency childcare for children of 'system-relevant' people since I work in a hospital. However, this only helped a little because the care was only available until 2 pm and therefore someone else had to pick up my daughter, sometimes her friends' mothers.

Regarding my private life, I was lucky to have a network of friends and family in the city where I live and who I could rely on for help. When the pandemic started, my daughter was still in kindergarten, but shortly afterwards, her school enrolment took place. My parents helped me during this time when my daughter had to stay at home, but this was not always reliable since they still work full-time. A good friend of mine who was on maternity leave during the pandemic helped me a lot. Once, I told my supervisor that I simply did not know what to do and he just answered, "this is your responsibility!". At work, they once talked about an option of offering childcare for the employees' children, but this idea was given up.


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BELGIUM

November 2022

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My husband is self-employed and kept working full-time, so I largely cared for both of my sons. I thought this was an unfair arrangement.



I basically had to become a speech and physical therapist quickly.

Jasmine

36 years old

I am a 36-year-old graphic designer, photographer, and art educator living in a large city in Belgium with my husband and my two young children, aged five and three years old. Before COVID-19, I worked for the local photography museum (organising workshops and providing promotional materials) but this job fell apart during COVID-19, since the museum was only open digitally. I currently work for a cooperative. My husband is self-employed and kept working full-time, so I largely cared for both of my sons. I thought this was an unfair arrangement. My youngest son usually goes to a rehabilitation centre because he is underdeveloped for his age due to suffering from meningitis when he was younger.

When the pandemic first hit, he initially kept going to the centre, but there were very limited opportunities for us to visit, and his group was quickly put under quarantine and therapeutic practices came to a halt. There was no point in keeping him there, so we brought him home for about three months. It was tricky figuring out how to compensate for the centre's therapies and, at the same time, juggle the work I had left and the care for my other son. I basically had to become a speech

and physical therapist quickly. I managed to do it through trial and error. I also reached out to the rehabilitation centre, informing them about the things I was trying out, and they gave me some tips. I'd say it worked, and my son actually learned how to walk up the stairs during this time.

My husband and I try to split the care/domestic work more evenly, though I still do more than him. When my kids could go to school and the centre again and the grandparents could babysit weekly again, I found a job at the cooperative through my personal network. The cooperative engages in activism which is important to me. We participate in not-for-profit projects with local organisations. For example, we have created a safe space in the local library for women, mostly women from a migration background and/or have limited knowledge of the language. They can access a dedicated space in the library's garden to mingle with each other and to collectively work on a spice and vegetable garden. We have some ideas for expanding to other public spaces as well and have an ultimate goal of making the city a more woman-friendly place.

ROMANIA

February 2022

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The pandemic was a hard blow for the gay community in Romania. We were confronted with a medical crisis and a community crisis.

Andrei

29 years old

There is a 40% vaccination rate among the HIV-positive population in Romania, a very low rate for immunocompromised patients.

I am a 29-year-old gay man and gay-rights activist. I am HIV-positive. As I am aware of my privileges as a white, non-Roma person, I try to make good use of them. I live publicly as HIV-positive in order to advocate for the rights of HIV-positive persons. The pandemic was a hard blow for the gay community in Romania. We were confronted with a medical crisis and a community crisis.

In September 2021, there was a terrible nationwide medication crisis for HIV, cancer, and auto-immune diseases. This drug crisis happens annually, usually in January-February, because the state stalls the approval of the annual budget. However, this crisis deepened with the pandemic, because the state cut the funds for drug subsidies and diverted them for the medical emergencies associated with COVID-19. During the pandemic we were cut off from our doctors and from HIV drugs. Once I came out as gay, I reached out to a larger gay community and learned that there are HIV patients in the country who have not started treatment even five months after the diagnosis. The pandemic increased patients' mistrust in the authorities and it is really difficult for patients without moral support or access to information to keep faith and continue treatment. They stopped seeing their doctor, they stop trying to secure the necessary medicine, they are in denial. Some of them do

it out of mistrust and others even did it as a gesture of revenge against the system. These reactions were always present, but now they have exploded into a full-blown crisis. Hardly a day passes that we do not receive a message or a phone call from someone threatening to commit suicide or to stop taking their medication. The drugs are critical, but they are just one piece of the puzzle. There is also a need for psychological counselling and monitoring.

There is a lot of misunderstanding of HIV among medical personnel. I experienced it when I got my first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. I ticked HIV-positive on the medical form and the nurse panicked and asked me whether it is safe for me to receive the vaccine, instead of encouraging me to opt for it. She spoke to the coordinating doctor, and he told me that there was a risk that my retroviral medication will neutralise the vaccine's effect and recommended that I stop the antiretroviral medication for around a week, for the vaccine to take effect. To add insult to injury, he warned me that if the vaccine is not effective, I would be wasting a precious dose. I confronted him and went ahead with the vaccination and then I created a scandal on social media to make a point. There is a 40% vaccination rate among the HIV-positive population in Romania, a very low rate for immunocompromised patients.


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HUNGARY

November 2022

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The pandemic came and suddenly Roma children had a lot of problems: no internet at home, no tablets, no electricity in the houses, no desks, no separate rooms.



We saved the children
from dropping out of
school.

Gabi

43 years old

I live in a midsize city in South Hungary, I am 43 years old, and I still live in the same house where I grew up. My mother was 16 when I was born. I was not planned and my father, who was 17 at that time, never accepted me. I was raised by my grandparents, because my mum moved out early and she didn't take care of me. I was the first to graduate from high school. My grandparents were illiterate. I wanted to go to college and live in a dormitory, so I found a teacher training university in a midsize city. Nobody supported me, my grandparents didn't want to let me go, they were afraid, and the Roma looked down at me because I wasn't married at 19 and I would be too educated. But I wanted to be free, and I wanted to leave. I wouldn't have stayed here for anyone.

In 2018, I joined the Child Welfare Service, first working as a mentor helping Roma women and families. Now I work as a social worker in kindergartens and schools. People used to bring their Roma children to me when I was in college so I could help them, and the Roma got used to me helping them. Then the pandemic came and suddenly Roma children had

a lot of problems: no internet at home, no tablets, no electricity in the houses, no desks, no separate rooms. I joined forces with another Roma activist, and we decided we had to do something. I got three laptops from my workplace, I had two tablets and a computer, and then the Roma children came to study with me. The Roma were not afraid to meet each other, there was no fear of each other or of catching the virus. But at home we wore masks when the children were here. In April 2020, 18-20 children came to our house to study, I kept in touch with the schools about how and what we were learning. A small church also helped us so we could give the children food when they were here. We saved the children from dropping out of school. In January 2021, I decided to turn this into a civil association. Several Roma and non-Roma educational and social professionals and parents joined us. We founded this organisation to receive donations and grants. But in the meantime, I had my own child who was in first grade when we were home schooling. I had to study with my own child in the morning and in the afternoon the kids would come, and I had to help them. It was a tough period.

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CROATIA

July 2021

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**My life suddenly
turned into
a horror story.**

Vera

72 years old

I decided to move to a house at the coast. Now I know that it was the best decision I have made in my whole life.

My name is Vera. I am 72. When I was 24, I was diagnosed with paraplegia, a type of paralysis which affected both of my legs. At the beginning, I just needed a cane for support, but then I needed a wheelchair, which has remained my companion ever since. After I retired and my partner died, I decided to move to a residential home for the elderly. For a while, it met part of my expectations, but they are not used to having very active tenants. They expect to deal with tired and helpless people. I was very energetic and organised many workshops. I founded an CSO with people with disabilities. Thanks to funding from the municipality, several beehives were placed in a huge park opposite our building. The bees live there and produce honey.

My stay in the residence home was endurable up to a certain point, but COVID-19 changed everything. My life suddenly turned into a horror story. They locked us in our rooms, put a chair in front of the door, brought meals, knocked on the door, and left it on the chair. Later, they would collect empty plates, without knocking, of course. For 130 days, I was treated as a prisoner sentenced to solitary confinement. A special part of this story is about my beloved 15-year-old dog. They did not let him stay with me, but before lockdown I arranged

my car as his living space. During the day, we went out together, during the night, he would sleep in my car. Lockdown changed our routine, and I had to ask my friend to take my dog to his home. Also, if people came and talked to me over the balcony, the staff screamed at them and demanded that they leave. They would say they were endangering the poor old people. But the truth was that COVID-19 was already inside, with us from the beginning - out of 300 permanent tenants, 170 were infected.

I decided to move to a house at the coast. Now I know that it was the best decision I have made in my whole life. One year has passed since I have been living in this house. A month after my arrival, I found out that the abandoned village above the town has a perfect space for my bees. I put hives in the courtyard, and bees immediately settled there. My daily routine has become to ride six kilometers to that village every day in my wheelchair scooter, work with the bees and prepare different healthy products for several hours, and then ride back. Tourist guides have put the area on their route to visit. I do not sell products, but I ask people to donate money to the NGO that I founded.

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UNITED KINGDOM

November 2022

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**I think that COVID-19
has really strengthened
people's sense of
community and their
desire to support
others.**

Mark 36 years old

My name is Mark, and I am a 36-year-old man living in Oxfordshire. I have worked at my local supermarket for six years. At the beginning of lockdown, I was living with my mother, who had just finished cancer treatment, and my father. However, my father sadly passed away in April 2020 due to sepsis. During lockdown, I saw on a local Facebook page that a woman with two young children, one of which had a muscle-wasting disease, was struggling to get food and essentials. I decided to support her and delivered two bags of food for free to her door. The woman was appreciative and told others of my good deed, which started me off volunteering. I've always been the sort of person who fixes a problem when I see it, and I saw a gap in how people were being supported during the pandemic. I'm fit and healthy and was leaving the house as I was a key worker, so I decided that I was well placed to support vulnerable people. I started posting on local Facebook groups offering my services for delivering essentials and began delivering around 20 prescriptions daily. I think that I have supported over 2000 people since I started volunteering and have made lots of friends in the community, both people I have supported and other volunteers in the area. I feel that doing this work has given me a sense of purpose and direction in my life that I did

not have before. I am proud of what I've done and have found that supporting others has helped my mental health and with the grief of losing my father.

I was hit by a taxi when delivering blood to a doctor's surgery in February 2021, which forced me to take a break. My bike had to be scrapped, but a charity heard about my volunteering work and gifted me a new bike to carry on once I recovered. The great thing about volunteering is that anyone can do it. I didn't need any resources, just my bike, Facebook, and people's willingness. I also utilised one of the apps which was developed by the government to connect people in need with volunteers. I have been also nominated for an award to honour volunteers by one of the prestigious institutions. I have also been asked to speak at local schools to inspire children to support others. None of these things would have happened without COVID-19, and I will forever be thankful for the ways my life has changed. The pandemic completely changed my life. I think that COVID-19 has really strengthened people's sense of community and their desire to support others, which is great. One day I hope to start a charity, as volunteering will now always be a part of my life.

One day I hope to start a charity, as volunteering will now always be a part of my life.

FRANCE

February 2022

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**The institutions
took advantage of
COVID-19 and
lockdowns to deny
us foreigners
our rights.**

Andrea 45 years old

I saw people who didn't care about skin colour or nationality. They just wanted to help a mother and her children.

I am a 49-year-old Brazilian dancer and costume maker and I have two daughters in their twenties. I left my violent husband and sought refuge in France about ten years ago. In Brazil, I was a homeowner making a good living. After I arrived here, I could not do my job as a specialised educator since my diploma was not recognised. I had to work to support my daughters, so I became a capoeira and dance teacher. I gave classes Monday to Friday and did shows on Saturday and Sunday. With pandemic restrictions and my illness, I couldn't work like I did before. I have polyarthromyalgia, a degenerative disease. I can't do anything about it, nor can the doctors.

Initially, I was afraid of the COVID-19 situation. My daughters spent the lockdown with me. They were worried about catching it, especially because I have respiratory problems. Without the vaccine, it would be fatal for me to contract COVID-19. I was also afraid because my older daughter is studying to be a nurse. I saw doctors and nurses dropping dead like flies because of the virus. She was forced to go and work in the hospital.

During the lockdowns, the Family Allowance Fund suddenly stopped paying my benefits. I spent two months in the doldrums, I was desperate. I had to prove that I had a residence permit to validate my rights. I had the papers that prove my legal status, but I needed a cer-

tificate from the prefecture, and it was closed. Orders for costumes were cancelled, and my savings were gone. I had rent to pay. I asked a social worker for help. She gave me food vouchers but that's all we had, and not all supermarkets take vouchers! What saved me was a man who paid for masks that I made because he knew I was struggling financially. I am grateful to him. He brought me milk, bread, and vegetables because I had nothing. A Brazilian friend contacted someone about my difficulties and how I was afraid of ending up on the street. This person went shopping for me too. I saw people who didn't care about skin colour or nationality. They just wanted to help a mother and her children. I will never forget that. Some, on the other hand, treated us as if we foreigners had brought COVID-19 here. I imagine it must have been worse for Asians. I received an answer from the prefecture in May 2020. Fortunately, the estate agency understood my rights and did not kick me out.

The institutions took advantage of COVID-19 and lockdowns to deny us foreigners our rights. We know that there is COVID-19, but that doesn't mean that we don't have rights, or that we have fewer rights than others. I need the Disability Agency to accept my file so that I can work with a disabled status. Even now, we are still fighting against the system which makes it complicated to get aid.

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SLOVAKIA

February 2022

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**I have to deal with
the court, the police,
and everything.
COVID-19 is on top
of all of that.**

Silvia

36 years old

The shelters were closed, and having four children with me meant it wasn't easy to find one.

My name is Sylvia. I am 36 years old, and I have four children. I was with a partner during the first wave of the pandemic. I experienced violence, both psychological and physical. He also stole my money, and at that time a lot of money was needed. The children had to do online schooling, I had to buy equipment and increase the internet data. I still breastfeed the youngest, and with online school for older kids it was very difficult. My children and I were in a terrible state. When I came to the shelter, I weighed 49 kilos. When my partner hit my daughter so badly that she needed to see a doctor, I knew that I had to leave. But I had nowhere to go. I'm from an orphanage, I don't have a family. My brother helps me with money sometimes, but he doesn't always have any.

The shelters were closed, and having four children with me meant it wasn't easy to find one. When they told me in June that I could come here to the shelter, it was unbelievable. But I had to figure out how to leave the house, how to pack. In the end, I managed to flee from the house. It was difficult in the beginning. We were scared that he would find us. Then we got a restraining order, so we felt much safer. They help us a lot here with the authorities and with psychological counselling. We

also get some groceries and some cosmetics when I need it. This is a big help, because I only have parental allowance and I need to pay for everything, things for the school, kids' courses, food, and diapers for the baby. The allowance is not enough. Now I at least know how much I have. Before, I did not know how much I had in my bank account since he took my bank card. It is much better now. But then another disaster came. The father of my child, (my ex-partner, not the one I left) got an interim measure to take custody of my daughter. Now I am waiting for the court trial to get her back. But even in court everything is delayed by the pandemic. We don't even have a hearing date yet. Her father makes all sorts of problems so I can't see her. He invents things about the pandemic, he wants me to be tested for COVID-19 all the time. Testing requires additional expenses.

There's a lot going on. Sometimes I feel like I can't take it anymore, but I have to. We approach COVID-19 differently. I am not saying it is not serious, we also had it. But it doesn't stress us the way that it stresses other people. People stress about the shops being closed, but I have to deal with the court, the police, and everything. COVID-19 is on top of all of that.

LITHUANIA

July 2021

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With just two weeks left before the end of the season, we were informed that we would be laid off because the hotel would not be operating.

Kristina 25 years old

I am 25 years old. I studied logistics and trade, and I worked in a hotel as the chief administrator for over two years. I currently live with my fiancée in an apartment we bought with the help of a bank loan. My life and work were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In March last year, we started hearing rumours that many businesses would have to close. The hotel manager and owners calculated that it was no longer financially viable to operate the hotel. We had to stop all activities at the hotel within two days, cancel bookings or move people to other hotels. The fate of the staff was unclear. At first, it was said that we must use our available leave days. But I didn't have any days left, so I was forced to request indefinite unpaid leave.

Later, information spread through the media that companies could receive subsidies from the government, but only if employees were paid during their downtime. The company director contacted us and said that we would be put on downtime and receive minimal pay. I stayed on downtime from March till the end of May. The hotel still couldn't open, so I was offered a job by the same owners at the seaside in a holiday home. I was told that either I take this offer, or I'd be fired. I agreed. By the end of July, rumours started spreading

They forced us to sign voluntary resignations. We parted with the employer and owners not on very nice terms, because our personal situations were not considered.

that we were going to be laid off and no one wanted to let us know beforehand so that we could at least try to find a new job. Finally, with just two weeks left before the end of the season, we were informed that we would be laid off because the hotel would not be operating. They forced us to sign voluntary resignations. We parted with the employer and owners not on very nice terms, because our personal situations were not considered.

I was registered as unemployed at the Employment Service for eight months. At first, I thought I would rest, not look for a job. When I started looking for a job, I realised that the situation was bad. I couldn't find a job that I would like with a similar salary. Finally, I got tired of sitting at home and needed money, so I started working at a grocery store. The salary is almost the same as I got at the hotel and working conditions are good. Luckily my fiancée kept his job during the quarantine and could pay our loan for the apartment. If I were alone, I probably would have had to move back in with my parents. My fiancée proposed last August, and we were planning to save money for the wedding. Our wedding will take place one way or another this autumn, but it is much harder to save the needed amount. We had to tighten our belts so much more.

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ICELAND

November 2022

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**People had been
stuck at home for
over a year,
contemplating who
they were and why
they felt bad in
their own body.**

Max

24 years old

I'm 24 years old and I am a high school teacher. I'm non-binary and I go by they/them. I spend most of my spare time on activism and fighting for human rights, especially for non-binary people. I realise that it is a great privilege to have the time and financial security to be able to do this. Spending my time educating and fighting for a better world gives me purpose and peace of mind amidst adversity. I thought that adversity and aggression against non-binary would have gone down with the pandemic, but this did not happen. Society moved away from discussing queer people to health-related topics. Government actions in the pandemic were executed based on gender binary. For example, everything regarding vaccinations was based on the two genders and all data published also.

The gender backlash is bad for trans people and non-binary in general. The most marginalised groups like queer/disabled immigrants and sex workers were mainly affected by the backlash. The backlash isn't affecting people with more privileges like cis queer people as much. The government is aware of this issue and are trying to act, however when we were in the middle of the pandemic nothing was being done. It is often difficult for trans people to go into the healthcare system knowing that the staff may not be aware of or educated in these matters. This was especially

evident during the pandemic. There is stress associated with walking into an organisation where you know people are going to misunderstand you, where you can't use the appropriate bathroom or get the service that you need. I understand that during these unprecedented times that health care staff do not have the time to educate themselves in these matters such as using the right pronouns, but it still sucks.

During the pandemic, only necessary surgeries were performed, meaning that no gender affirmation surgeries were undertaken as they are categorised as optional. There was a huge surge of requests for the trans team at the hospitals right after COVID-19. People had been stuck at home for over a year, contemplating who they were and why they felt bad in their own body. As a result of COVID-19 people who would normally take longer to come out were able to do so quicker. The pandemic made them realise that life is short so it's better to live it in their truest form. We have also noticed this wave of people coming out at the organisation. Before the pandemic, we had support meetings for trans people and no one would show up, but now a lot of people want to join. Even though life is getting back to normal I don't think that trans and non-binary people can just go back to their lives like others do.

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AUSTRIA

February 2022

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COVID-19 has exacerbated the situation of sex workers and made the problems of women even more visible.

Seila

45 years old

My name is Seila. I work as a self-employed dominatrix with my own studio. Due to the lockdowns, I had to close my studio temporarily and my daily structure was disrupted. The first lockdown was a shock for me. I could no longer feel joy. The uncertainty about how long this phase would last, how to cope financially, and whether there'd be any support available got to me. In the second lockdown, I tried to cope with the uncertainty by determining the closing time of my studio myself. It was an emotional rollercoaster. Only in the last lockdown was I able to use the free time constructively. Financially, I was able to make ends meet because I had savings to fall back on.

Many of my colleagues had financial problems. Especially because we must register as self-employed and insure ourselves which is difficult for some because of bureaucratic issues. Many continued to work illegally because of financial pressure. However, this leads to dangerous situations in which the women can be blackmailed and cannot turn to the police. I got offers to work illegally during the lockdowns. I had the impression that some people exploited this situation. I also know that during the long lockdowns some of my colleagues piled up debt, especially the migrant sex workers, who were not allowed to formally earn money but also couldn't return to their home countries as the borders were closed. Later, they were able to work for four months and could reduce their debts but not really save up money for the

next lockdown. Some sex workers were in a hard place. They did not have money to buy winter clothes for their kids and some lost their homes. A lot of brothels closed during the pandemic and many women have not yet returned from illegality.

As sex workers, we go for a health check every six weeks. Before the pandemic, about 3000 women went for this check-up, now not even 2000 women attend. This means that many have reduced or cancelled their self-insurance and now work illegally or have taken other jobs to make ends meet. The vaccination was very important for me – it was kind of a gift. As a sex worker, it is not possible to comply with all hygiene measures. For example, neither I nor my colleagues wear FFP2 masks, it is simply not possible. But testing is very important for me. I test myself daily because I don't want to infect myself or my clients. I also clean and ventilate even more thoroughly than before.

During the pandemic, I founded an association, a kind of lobbying group because I was annoyed that sex work was always left out of press conferences. Through the association, we supported each other and shared information. We wrote letters to the ministries and went public. We also collected donations and bought shopping vouchers that were distributed. COVID-19 exacerbated the situation of sex workers and made the problems of women even more visible.

ROMANIA

November 2022

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The first months of the pandemic were traumatising for me and my children. I think this period had a negative impact on their psychological development.

Crina

42 years old

My nephew, who is about my age, has been living temporarily with us for a month. It was a revelation to see what it is like to have help with the childcare.

My name is Crina, I am a single mother of two boys who are nine and four years old. I suffer from depression and struggle with obesity. My children's fathers are not involved in their upbringing. My second son's father was violent with me, and I left him when I was pregnant and moved to a maternal shelter, where I stayed for two years, until early 2020. I gave birth while I was there. Right before the pandemic, I moved into my own place, because I had managed to save some money.

The first months of the pandemic were traumatising for me and my children. I think this period had a negative impact on their psychological development. We lived in fear, did not go out, and the apartment was underground and full of mould. In 2020, we jumped at the first opportunity to move out, even though we had to leave the capital for a small town 100 km away. Someone offered us a house there, to stay for free until it was sold. Two years later, we are still there. When we moved, I dropped out of university. I was in the third year studying Social Work. It should have been easy to follow courses, as they had moved online during the pandemic, but here we found a house which had been abandoned, there was no running water, it needed to be cleaned and painted. I was stressed

and ran out of psychological resources for my studies.

In the summer of 2020, when my youngest was two, I attended a foundation which supports women with professional reorientation. After a while, I decided to re-enrol in my Social Work studies. Luckily, the professors are supportive and allow me to follow their classes without attending in person. I plan to graduate next year. It is time to make a breakthrough. I do not feel comfortable in this vulnerable position anymore. I rely a lot on other people's help, especially financially. My youngest son is older now and has overcome some of his problems, so I have a bit more freedom. Now my focus is on securing a job. A neighbour recommended me for a job, and I am hoping to be called for an interview. My nephew, who is about my age, has been living temporarily with us for a month. It was a revelation to see what it is like to have help with the childcare. In four years, I have never experienced this relief; no one had taken my youngest son to kindergarten or the park, and no one has done homework with my eldest. I felt spoiled this month. It made me realise that my living conditions have exhausted me, and I was left completely out of breath and out of resources.

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LATVIA

February 2022

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**Quarantine gave
me a chance to
return to myself
and to understand
that I am gay.**

When a loved one does not accept you or says that your feelings are temporary, it is very unpleasant.

Vika

23 years old

I am 23 years old. I was born in Riga. I'm a master's student and I'm involved in social networks, photography, and volunteer work in various European projects. Quarantine gave me a chance to return to myself and to understand that I am gay.

I spent a lot of time alone reading, sitting on social media. The more information I consumed, the more I understood that my feelings are normal. There are some things in my life that I didn't pay attention to or didn't notice but the pandemic helped me to notice all of this, to have a revelation. I was able to discover my true orientation. Before the pandemic, I tried to build relationships, but nothing worked out for me. During the pandemic, I noticed that I had a lot of posters with female idols. And I somehow began to think about it: "Why did I have so many female idols?". When I began to delve into it, it dawned on me. It was hard for me to accept this because I considered myself homophobic. I had always liked female characters and women, but I had never connected with these feelings. I was always told that I should get married and have children.

Since November 2020, I began to accept my orientation rather than deny it. I didn't come out, but I started talking about it like it was something ordinary. Then I joined TikTok, and people began to subscribe to me, and I began to feel that I was starting to enter the local LGBTQIA+ community. Later, I even went to my first Erasmus meeting on the theme of LGBTQIA+. And yesterday, for the first time, I went to the Latvian LGBTQIA+ community office, which was the first to organise pride parades. It was my first public appearance, and it was like my coming out, because everyone around understands who you are and why you are there. I was received warmly, like family.

From the beginning of quarantine to this day, I have gained self-acceptance. Quarantine helped me in some ways, although this is strange. Before I started seeing a therapist, I had no one to talk to about it. I tried to talk to my friend, but she said it was a temporary thing. It was painful, we don't talk anymore. When a loved one does not accept you or says that your feelings are temporary, it is very unpleasant. This experience helped me to understand who my friends are. Thanks to social networks I have found support and a community.

SERBIA

November 2022

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**I noticed that violence
escalated during
COVID-19, and that
poverty has too.**



Maja | 60 years old

Before the pandemic, we had a group of women in every settlement who were contact points for violence against women. That all stopped when the pandemic started.

I am Maja, and I am 60 years old. I am a single mother of one son, and I am a Roma woman. I have been an activist for Roma women's rights for over 20 years. I don't know how many times I've had COVID-19 so far, probably four or five times. I'm constantly going around Roma settlements, visiting them, and bringing humanitarian aid. My life has changed because of COVID-19. For example, the health centre where I regularly go became a COVID-19 hospital, and now there are no more regular check-ups. You can only go there if you have the virus. After so many viruses, my breathing has weakened, and I have to use a pump for asthmatics. But I didn't stop working, my job is important.

I noticed that violence escalated during COVID-19, and that poverty has too. Those who used to work don't anymore; everything has stopped and has not returned to the way it was. From my experience, violence against women increases during holidays when everyone is at home, poor, and drinking leads to violence. That's how it was during COVID-19, as if those few months of lockdown were one long holiday that would never end. That was terrible. Mortality among the Roma increased, especially among the elderly, although young people also died. But we cannot say that the

cause was the COVID-19 because most were not tested before death. Few have gone to the doctor and doctors do not come to Roma settlements. Health centres near the settlement were closed. The Roma did not even get vaccinated. God alone knows how they survived. And instead of them coming to us, we went to them. And then, we went to the COVID-19 clinics and informed them where sick people were. Before the pandemic, we had a group of women in every settlement who were contact points for violence against women. That all stopped when the pandemic started. People could not gather, and we could not reach them. They began to use electronic means of communication, the telephone, and social networks, which was the only information source.

Thanks to COVID-19 I have had more time for myself - to work on me. One thing that changed is that I started thinking about my health more. Also, I have found some comfort in crochet as it helps me to disconnect from everything. Although I followed all the health instructions, it didn't help me avoid getting COVID-19 because I couldn't leave these women in the settlements that were waiting for me to come.

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TURKEY

February 2022

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**I have experienced
incredibly hard
situations since the
pandemic. On the
other hand, I am
saying to myself
how strong I am.**



Çiçek

26 years old

I am 26 years old. I just graduated from university in environmental engineering. Before the pandemic, I was staying in a dormitory. When lockdown measures were applied, I returned to my family house. Unfortunately, my experience with my family was not positive. One night, we were all together at the dinner table and listening to the news. There was news about the head of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs targeting LGBTQIA+ individuals and claiming that "homosexuality brings with it illnesses", specifically referring to COVID-19. When I heard this news, I made some pro-LGBTQIA+ comments. Then my brother started accusing me of having changed and told me that these ideas of LGBTQIA+ rights do not suit me. I got very angry and upset. We started to fight, and he beat me. Actually, something very 'funny' happened during this fight. Although he is a very tall and good-sized guy, when a fight broke between us, I accidentally broke his arm. In fact, it did not happen accidentally, it was self-defence. This was the first time that I was subjected to violence. I think the fact that I had nowhere else to go and it was obvious that this period of the pandemic would be long, made my family more ruthless. They thought that they could suppress me during this time.

As in politics, where there is a vulnerable person, there are more attacks towards them. I think that the pandemic was a period that en-

couraged those who are prone to violence. In addition to the pandemic-related feeling of being stuck, statements from political leaders against women have given strength and encouragement to men's use of violence. After the fight with my brother, I left the house and moved to Istanbul. As I was leaving, I said to my family "only call me for someone's death or wedding!".

In Istanbul, I could not find a job as an environmental engineer, so I started working in a café. Recently, I was also subjected to violence by my housemate. One day, I saw some scars on my dog and wanted to talk to my roommate about it. She battered me when I asked her about my dog. After this incident, I got a doctor's report for proof and filed a lawsuit against her. But she is comfortable knowing that in Turkey the legal system and justice mechanisms do not work. She was saying to our mutual friends "What can they do to me?! They even release the rapists. Are they going to do something to me?". I have experienced incredibly hard situations since the pandemic. On the other hand, I am saying to myself how strong I am. Now I have decided to leave the house. But rents have doubled. I will find a way. I do not want to be exposed to threats or passive-aggressive behaviours anymore. My peace of mind with my dog is more important than anything else.



SPAIN

November 2022

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**I had to rise like
the Phoenix
from the dust.**

Carla 60 years old

I heard a song that says, "I will resist and struggle to be alive". I repeated this to myself all the time.

My name is Carla, and I left South America five years ago with my son to live in Spain. I left my country because of extreme violence, and I had high expectations of a better life, but my life here has been hard since the beginning. I worked as a carer for elderly people, but the conditions were inhumane. I worked seven days a week, and the salary was below minimum wage. The lady I was taking care of treated me poorly, insulted me, belittled me, and made jokes about my weight. Basically, I was exploited. When the pandemic started, I was working as a live-out carer for a person with Alzheimer's. The lady constantly insulted my skin colour. Her son fired me for fear of contagion, and as I had no contract or regular residence, I could not do anything. I went to a church asking for food, because we had nothing to eat. Then, a local anti-racist organisation called me to learn about my situation and gave me some money. That day I had nothing, I almost cried, thinking "there are still good people out there, caring for others". Later, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had no money, no work. I felt the world was falling on my shoulders, but I thought that I had to rise like the Phoenix from the dust. I went to social services, and they gave me a small allowance that was enough to survive on at that time. I have trouble asking for help, because I am used to being autonomous, but I

had to. I don't feel shame, because it was a matter of survival.

While I was in bed recovering, my son looked for a job, but struggled due to our lack of residence. He sometimes worked without pay. I eventually found a cleaning job through a WhatsApp group. After the treatment, working became even harder. I work at night so I can go to the hospital during the day. Thanks to this job I could finally get a residence permit.

I experienced a lot of discrimination and humiliation. I did not want to tell my personal story to anybody, but then I looked for a support group on the internet, and I found a WhatsApp group. I read the stories of others who were living in difficult situations during the pandemic. The group was anonymous, and I took ideas from other people on how to endure my situation. For instance, I learned to look at myself in the mirror and give myself encouragement with positive words. Now when I feel overwhelmed, I write down everything in a diary. These things helped me. I also pray to God. One needs to have faith in something, otherwise you will break down. I heard a song that says, "I will resist and struggle to be alive". I repeated this to myself all the time. I am still fighting, and I have hope that everything will be alright.

SWEDEN

February 2022

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It is better now that we are no longer on asylum seekers' benefits and that we live in a larger town with cheaper options available, but money is still tight.

Sara

38 years old

I am a 38-year-old Iranian woman, I came to Sweden as an asylum seeker two years ago. I live with my husband and my son. We had a good life in Iran. I worked as an architect, we had a nice house, a nice car, everything. But because I voiced my opinions about religion, it wasn't safe for me to stay. I had to leave suddenly. I did not even get to say goodbye to my mother. Shortly after arriving in Sweden, the Migration Agency offered us accommodation in a small town where we lived for over a year. When we got our residence permits, we moved to a larger town. For me, COVID-19 has been a catastrophe. My son had to take the train to school every day and I was scared he would get sick. I stayed home all the time and prayed that there would be a vaccine soon. But before I got the vaccine, I caught COVID-19 when I went to the Migration Agency for an interview. I was very sick for three weeks and was taken to the hospital by ambulance. The town we lived in as asylum seekers was small and there was little to do there. Of course, COVID-19 made this more difficult. When we moved there, I was happy to hear an adult education association offered free Swedish classes for asylum seekers. But I only got to attend for one week before all classes were cancelled due to COVID-19. They said I could study using WhatsApp but that did not work for me. I think I understood

maybe 20% of the online classes. Not being able to learn Swedish was stressful.

Access to the internet was another obstacle. Every month we bought 200 minutes of phone credit and three gb of data each. That costs 300 SEK which is a big part of the 5000 SEK (approx. EUR 500) we get monthly. My son had to do online classes and once he ran out of data during a lesson. I called the Migration Agency for help. They put me on hold and after 15 minutes, my phone credit ran out. COVID-19 also made food more expensive. For instance, bread was expensive, so I bought flour and made my own. I tried to limit myself to two small meals a day. My son had to go without things. His shoes were old and broken, and he told me that he wanted new shoes as other kids were looking at him on the train. I had to tell him to wait.

It is better now that we are no longer on asylum seekers' benefits and that we live in a larger town with cheaper options available, but money is still tight. I am happy that we are back in the classroom now and I feel like I am learning Swedish. But it is difficult to focus with thoughts running through my head. I think about my mother, about Iran, and about money. I need to find a job so I can bring my mother here. I am scared that I will never get to hug my mother again.

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CZECH REPUBLIC

February 2022

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The pandemic experience, especially the issue of access to healthcare and being treated as second-class citizens here became a sort of deal-breaker for us.

Valeria

39 years old

The state denying us migrants' access to healthcare became even more apparent during the pandemic.

I am Valeria. I have three children. We moved to the Czech Republic four years ago when my husband got a job here as a software engineer. I am originally from Russia, where I got my medical degree. I could not finish the qualification recognition process to continue my aesthetic medical practice, so I opened a cosmetic studio. When the pandemic started, I had to close my salon for an extended period. I applied for some financial compensation programs, and I was able to pay the rent and buy some food with that, but that's it. Luckily, contrary to many other migrants in the Czech Republic, we are financially secure as my husband's job wasn't affected by the pandemic.

Even though we will be able to obtain permanent residency soon, we have decided to move to a different country. The pandemic experience, especially the issue of access to healthcare and being treated as second-class citizens here became a sort of deal-breaker for us. As non-EU migrants with long-term residency, we are not part of the public healthcare system and have to pay for private insurance. Also, the government passed a law last year changing the conditions of private insurance for third-country nationals. Now the prices have risen, and we are obliged to register with one state-owned insurance company. As we need to pay for the overall period upfront, this is a consider-

able amount of money, and many migrants struggle to pay it. The state denying us migrants' access to healthcare became even more apparent during the pandemic. While Czech nationals had several COVID-19 tests for free per month, we had to pay for a test every time we wanted to use services. I was among the first migrants to get vaccinated - the vaccination for migrants with long-term residency regardless of their age or health status opened at the beginning of June 2021 - long after the registration was open for all Czechs over 18 years old and EU citizens and migrants with permanent residency. I had to pay upfront, which was reimbursed to me by my private insurance after approximately one month.

Our family trusts science so we wanted to get vaccinated as soon as possible, and we have the money to pay upfront. But again, for migrants who work as low-skilled labourers, this might be money they cannot spare. That's why most migrants with long-term residency got vaccinated only after the Ministry lowered the price from 800 CZK to 400 CZK in November 2021. Imagine you came here with your grandma, or you have a disabled relative, and you could not get a priority spot for them. So, this was a decisive moment for me. We like living in the Czech Republic, but we will be moving to a different country.

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ITALY

July 2021

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**Before the pandemic
I was 63 but I felt like
I was 40. Now, I feel
that old age has crept
up on me all at once.**

Grazia

65 years old

Before the pandemic at least I could go for a walk, relieve tension at the gym, enjoy a meal out and have moments for myself. I am now a caregiver every day.

I am a woman, and a mother. As a woman, I face one set of problems. As the mother of a person with disabilities, I have another set of problems. Before the pandemic, my life revolved around routines and activities that helped me manage my son's mental and psychological disabilities while also taking care of myself. Before COVID-19, we would get up in the morning, have breakfast, and get ready for the day. I would go to work while my son went to the day-care centre. During my lunch break, I would go to the gym. On certain days of the week, I would do activities with him after the day-care centre. Other days, care assistants would look after him. This way, we managed to survive until dinner time, when the whole family came together. After dinner, my son would go to sleep under his father's supervision, and I would often go out with friends.

The pandemic disrupted my routine, I suddenly found myself solely responsible for my son's care. I faced the same challenges other women may have faced, but mine were aggravated by the fact that I could not escape, not even to work, which became nearly impossible. My remote working experience was constantly burdened by my son's demands for attention, he would yell and call

out to me all the time. Not to mention when the tension was sky high, and he became physically and emotionally unmanageable. Additionally, my husband, who never participated in our son's care before, was not prepared for his new role. This raised the tension between us, which spilled over onto our son. In fact, his disability worsened over the past year, leading to more unreasonable behaviour. This situation drained my energy, physically and intellectually. Before the pandemic at least I could go for a walk, relieve tension at the gym, enjoy a meal out and have moments for myself. I am now a caregiver every day, compared to just Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays before COVID-19. Before the pandemic I was 63 but I felt like I was 40. Now, I feel that old age has crept up on me all at once. The only alternative I have is to send my son to a centre for people with disabilities. But I feel that he is too young as he's only 27 years old. If everything had remained the same, I could have kept him at home until he turned 40. But this is no longer possible. He's sick and so am I. However, I fear that sending him away will coincide with my collapse. What would I do? How would I ever live with the guilt of sending him away?

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POLAND

November 2022

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**Today I have a
different approach
to teaching than
before the
pandemic.**

Kaja

40 years old

During the second wave of the pandemic, we received more tools to work with the children, but I felt more powerless than ever.

My name is Kaja, I am 40 years old. I am a language teacher and single mother of two boys who are eleven and 17 years old. We live in a three-room rented apartment in a small town in south Poland. During the pandemic, as a teacher, I was completely on my own. I did not have institutional support in terms of tools and competencies to communicate with the children. I bought myself a Zoom license and I learned how to use it in two days. Remote teaching was very demotivating for me. I was exhausted.

During the second wave of the pandemic, we received more tools to work with the children, but I felt more powerless than ever. I avoided meetings, only visiting my parents and meeting friends in the woods. At school, it was confusing to jump from physical to online teaching, not only for me but also for the children. So, I decided to organise illegal meetings for them in public spaces, with the agreement of their parents, so that they can spend some time together. They rode horses, made a fire, and played together in the playground. However, every lockdown was difficult for me, because the children became anti-social, and I had to constantly focus again on socialising them. At school it

was obvious that children became addicted to the internet and their phones. The same happened to me. It was the worst decision to keep children in their homes with 24-hour access to the internet, and the parents had difficulty controlling them as they were working from home.

The pandemic did have some positive sides for me too, I could re-evaluate my life. Now I only buy what I really need. During the first six months of the pandemic, I got organised with other teachers to support each other in the process of remote learning, especially from the technical side. I also organised online parties and meetings for children at school. However, today I have a different approach to teaching than before the pandemic. I decided not to overload myself with the emotional and economic costs that come with online teaching. I had professional burnout and paid for everything from my pocket. I decided to quit my job at the language school where I was teaching, and I established my own language school, totally online. I have students from Poland and abroad. I work a lot now, but I do not feel controlled by others. That is what I needed.

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CYPRUS

November 2022

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**Even if we got
COVID-19, we went
to work anyways
because we could
not afford to lose
the job.**

What would my family
and I eat if I lost the
jobs?

Ahmet

35 years old

I am 35 years old and married with two children. I am from Syria, and I came to Cyprus around 15 years ago, to work and live in better conditions. I am not a refugee or asylum seeker, but my family in Syria suffers from the war. I send them money and try to help as much as I can. My wife is a housewife and I'm a builder. I started as a worker in construction, which is the lowest paid-skilled job at construction sites, with a salary of up to EUR 800 per month. After some years of experience, I became a skilled worker, with a salary of up to EUR 1600 per month. Now I also have my own employees, ten in total. I have my own van and I supervise them. My usual life is to leave home at 6 am and get back at 7 pm. I also work on Saturdays and Sundays. My life is hard. To survive, I cannot register all my employees at Social Insurance Services. I know this is illegal, but I need to survive for my family and for my employees. If I apply the law and pay all the contributions, I will have to raise my prices and then I will lose jobs.

In this sector, things were very hard during COVID-19 lockdowns, and they are hard now too with the war in Ukraine creating an

economic crisis. During lockdowns when we were not allowed to get out and work, I could get the minimum state allowance, but I could not apply for the COVID-19 allowance for my non-registered employees. So, we illegally went out and worked. That was the only way we could survive because we had to feed our families and send money back to Syria as well.


During the first lockdown, it was difficult. We had to send SMS messages when going out and lie if we were caught. But during the following lockdowns, the police presence was reduced so we could just work after hours and get paid. Another setback during COVID-19 was when one of the crew contracted the virus. Even if one got sick, we all had to stay home and lose the job. So, we got by by lying. Even if we got COVID-19, we went to work anyways because we could not afford to lose the job. I know this is bad. But what could we do? What would my family and I eat if I lost the jobs? Fortunately, we never got caught. On the bright side, when I was in lockdown, I had the opportunity to see my children and wife, spend quality time with them, and get some rest.

AUSTRIA

November 2021

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**Emergency
management plans
need to take disabled
people more into
account.**



Access for all people to all information is important to ensure that people have agency over their own lives.

Kristin 37 years old

I am Kristin, and I am a woman with a disability. Since 2016, I've been working for an organisation that supports self-determined living for people with disabilities. I live in my own flat and have a personal assistant, who supports me with my daily routine.

In emergency situations, such as the pandemic, people with disabilities are not considered. This is evident, for example, with the distribution of vaccinations. Initially, people not living in care homes were overlooked and they gained access to vaccines much later. Once they were eligible for vaccination, the facilities were not all barrier-free. I was not able to use the facility close to my home, so I had to drive across town to use an accessible one. At the beginning, there was no information available in sign language or simple language. Private initiatives assisted by translating important information into simple language. However, this should be something that the state provides for everyone. Access for all people to all information is important to ensure that people have agency over their own lives.

People with disabilities who live by themselves have more self-determination and agency compared to their peers who live

in care facilities. They are employers, they choose and instruct their assistants themselves. However, we had a big problem during the pandemic, because we didn't know what to do in case our assistant got sick or didn't want to work due to fear of infection. For the past two years, it has been very difficult to find new assistants in this sector, and this is a major problem for us, as we depend on their work.

A positive effect of the pandemic is that I have more energy because I don't have to commute two hours every day to work. I've started writing again. I like writing horror stories. Online events have enabled me to attend conferences which I could not do otherwise, because of the travelling. I have the privilege of owning computers and being able to handle technology, but not everyone can afford this and not everyone has the necessary equipment, for example, for voice input software for people with visual impairment. This must be considered, as digital exclusion can also result in social exclusion. Emergency management plans need to take disabled people more into account. If the presence of people with disabilities was normalised, we would not have to remind policy makers over and over again.


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LITHUANIA

November 2022

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**The pandemic only
had advantages
for me.**



I feel like I participated in and listened to more online events than I would have if I needed to attend them physically.

Inga | 28 years old

My name is Inga, and I am 28 years old. I recently became unemployed and enlisted with the Lithuanian Employment Service. I have a severe disability, cerebral palsy, and I can hardly control my legs. I can stand up only with someone's help. I can move only independently with the help of a wheelchair and I'm in need of full care. I lost my job a few months ago, I used to work as a project coordinator in a project for children with disabilities. Sadly, when the crisis came, the fund went bankrupt, and the project finished. I hope to find a new job soon. For me nothing changed during the pandemic. I worked remotely before the pandemic and continued to do so during it. No changes whatsoever. I lived as I always had. I mean, we experience quarantine every winter, like now: snow everywhere, and that's it. I'm in quarantine because I cannot leave the house. It's not easy to plough through the snow with a wheelchair.

A lot of conferences, seminars, and discussions I was interested in went online during the pandemic. This was a huge plus for me, because it was much more convenient. I could just turn them on whenever I had time, I did not need to go anywhere. I feel like I

participated in and listened to more online events than I would have if I needed to attend them physically. Another area where the pandemic had a positive effect for me is healthcare. It became possible to take care of everything remotely, which was not the case previously. Now it's a matter of a phone call, all prescriptions and all consultations are being done remotely. This has helped a lot. Even though I felt pressured to get vaccinated, I did my research and decided I did not want to. This meant that I could not go shopping in certain shops as I did not have an 'opportunity passport'. I could not buy groceries online, as we live in a small town. So, our friends and acquaintances helped us out by shopping for us and leaving packages at our door.

Quarantine hastened things in my personal life. I live with my parents, but when the quarantine started and it was forbidden to see people from another household, my partner moved in with us. It would have happened anyway, but probably later. We had an excuse to hurry this step. The pandemic only had advantages for me.

FINLAND

February 2022

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**During the pandemic,
my relationship with
our home has changed,
and it began to feel like
a prison to me.**

Kristian

46 years old

I'm a 46-year-old man and an artist. I live with my husband and our cats. Home has always been an important place for me, a safe place that protects me from the world outside. However, during the pandemic, my relationship with our home changed, and it began to feel like a prison to me. I want to be anywhere else but home. I have an ADHD diagnosis, meaning that my mind is very active and it's sometimes difficult for me to get my mind to stop. When I was forced to stay at home all the time, this activity turned into a negative force. Nothing at home could inspire me anymore, and everything I did and thought at home blurred in my head, paralysing my brain. There were times when all I could do was to lay in bed.

I've worked from home all the time. However, my art exhibition in London was cancelled because of the pandemic. I organised it in Finland but there were only a few visitors. I also organised a commercial exhibition in Finland, but there were very few visitors to that too, and I only made one sale. I applied for pandemic-related funding for artists and got it. It's easy for me to write proposals, however, I don't think that it was fair to make us write proposals and compete for funding. Every professional artist should have simply received funding. Instead, money was provided for many big companies that did not need it.

I've been disappointed to see how our government handled the pandemic. It's been a very political process in which fierce illogical debates have been held publicly not only with the opposition but also among politicians in the same government. It's been sad to see, and it diminishes my trust in this government and in the Finnish state generally. There should have been more epidemiologists leading the situation. Some of the mistakes include the fact that Finland was unable to control its borders at crucial moments. Thousands of people arrived on ferries, for instance from Estonia, and they were not even forced to use face masks. Also, the new wave hit Finland sooner than expected when the Finns returned from the football match in St. Petersburg in 2021 without testing and quarantines. Another problem is that the government has provided many recommendations and 'strong recommendations' instead of clearly restricting people. There are always some people who don't follow recommendations. This has divided people and made us hate each other. I think this is also why we have so many people that oppose vaccinations. And there is a lot of propaganda and conspiracy theories out there; it's like a religion.

I hope that my feelings towards our home will be normalised at some point. I don't know how long that will take and what I need to do to accomplish that. Moving abroad for a while might help.

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DENMARK

February 2022

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**I had all the roles.
I was supposed
to be the teacher,
the mom, and an
employee at the
same time.**



I realised that I didn't want that. I'm not interested in being the mom who is just scolding her children.

Diana

44 years old

My name is Diana, I am 44 years old. I parent my two children alone; one is 13 and one is six years old.

I think COVID-19 restrictions have been hard. Both children were at home attending online schooling. If it wasn't one pulling on my arm, it was the other having trouble getting on with his school stuff and figuring out what he had to do. And then there was work with its own set of expectations. It has been difficult. I felt pressured to be enough in all areas.

At one point, I completely lost motivation. I sort of felt that nothing mattered, because I wasn't doing enough anywhere. The pandemic affected my mood, my energy, and my general feeling of being able to do things. I didn't feel like I had the energy to do anything; it was just a nightmare. I contacted my manager to tell him that I was not feeling well. I had suffered from stress before and was starting to experience the same symptoms again. I was then allowed to go to the office with another colleague, so

that there was something outside of these four walls. Sitting at home constantly took my peace away. Just getting out and being able to sit in my office made a difference. At one point when working from home, I had to throw everything that I was working on a way to help my son with his schoolwork. The teacher didn't reply when my son asked questions. So, I had to contact the school and tell them that if teachers were supposed to be available, they had to be there.

I had all the roles. I was supposed to be the teacher, the mom, and an employee at the same time. I thought it was hard juggling these roles. Eventually, I had to pull the brake and say, "I don't know what to do." I reached out to my dad and said "I don't have any more energy; I don't know how to act. I just get angry with the children all the time." I remember one episode in particular, when my son came and said to me: "Mom, you are angry all the time. You are just scolding us." That was the last straw. I realised that I didn't want that. I'm not interested in being the mom who is just scolding her children.

BELGIUM

February 2022

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**They want to impose
vaccination on nurses,
but we have been
exposed to the virus
for months without
any protection.**

Ray

40 years old

I am Ray. I'm Burundian by origin, and I've been in Belgium for 14 years. Like others, I started here in a reception centre, then got my papers and started studying. I am a radiotherapy nurse technologist in a hospital. I have been working for seven years in the same unit. At the beginning of the crisis, working conditions were very difficult in the hospitals. No masks were given and if you had one, you had to put your name on it, keep it on all day, or write down how many you had taken. We were sent to the battlefield without ammunition. We had no equipment and we had to treat all patients even if they had COVID-19. We work with immunocompromised patients, so it was also dangerous for them. I had colleagues who caught COVID-19 and contaminated others. As we were short-staffed, we were obliged to work even if we had COVID-19, unless we physically couldn't. When you love what you do, you 'sacrifice' yourself a little.

Today, the situation remains complicated. We can't afford to be tested every day. There is nothing organised by the hospital. A fortnight ago, I went to the pharmacy to buy a test and I had to pay for it myself, I was not reimbursed. As the test was positive, I was prescribed a PCR test, and this confirmed

We were sent to the battlefield without ammunition. We had no equipment and we had to treat all patients even if they had COVID-19.

that I had caught COVID-19. I had caught it in hospital, but still I had to pay for the test myself. The hospital's policy is to make you work; you must have really bad symptoms to stop working. Otherwise, the hospital would have to close due to lack of caregivers. Nobody dares complain to the management because they are afraid of the consequences. We have heard about extra money being given to hospitals by the authorities for nurses. But nothing has changed, we have not received extra to support our team. So, what has this money been used for? We are given less and less time to care for patients. Before we had 15 minutes, now we are given ten minutes. So, we do a minimum amount of cleaning, and we don't have time to provide information to patients on all the services available outside the hospital. I don't understand how patients don't rebel because they pay a lot for a bad service.

There are aspects of the crisis that are totally illogical. For example, we are told that we must be careful to protect ourselves and others, but when we go home by public transport, we are all on top of each other. Today, they want to impose vaccination on nurses, but we have been exposed to the virus for months without any protection.

GERMANY

February 2022

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**It was a difficult time
because we did not
receive any income
for several months.**

Aïssatou

33 years old

I am Aïssatou, and I live in Germany. I am a dancer, I am married, and have an almost two-year-old daughter. We are a migrant family and have been living in Germany for eight years. When I came to Germany, I was part of touring dance groups. Later, I worked as a freelance dancer, but it was difficult because dancing is not a reliable job. As I also support my family in Senegal and pay my expenses here, I did not earn enough. So, I started to do other work too. I was working in a kindergarten when I became pregnant. I then decided to train to work with elderly people, which I enjoy.

I became a mother during the first lockdown. After three months of my pregnancy, I wasn't allowed to work in an area with a lot of contact with other people. Additionally, I was sick throughout my pregnancy. I even spent months at the hospital. The pandemic affected us a lot since we were used to dancing at big shows, events, and workshops which were all cancelled. My husband was only working as a dancer and did not have an additional occupation. We had to apply for the general state subsidies, but I was in the hospital and my husband did not know enough German then to fill out the forms. How could a person take care of this paperwork while

in the hospital? I really could not take care of this; I couldn't even sleep when I was in hospital because I was worried about our situation. My husband was not allowed to apply for state aid as he has another nationality. It was a difficult time, because we did not receive any income for several months. I think that it affected my baby inside my belly. I really felt that the German administration did not care about the people behind the letters and phone calls. I then realised that life in Germany can be very hard, even sometimes harder than in Senegal. There, at least, you can ask the owners of your flat if you can pay your rent later because of financial difficulties. Here, don't even think about that!

I won't ever forget COVID-19; it was the hardest time. I came out of hospital in April, took care of the paperwork, and my daughter was born in May. I then began to look for a new job. I was really fed up and did not want to depend on the state. Since then, I feel free. I am a feminist, I like to work, and I don't want to depend on anybody. Also, my husband had to adapt. He learned German after our daughter's birth, looked for another occupation, and now has different jobs. COVID-19 changed everything in our lives.


I am a feminist, I like to work, and I don't want to depend on anybody.

UNITED KINGDOM

February 2022

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We had ten days where we were really scared that we wouldn't be able to get any food and our supplies had run down.



There was no support from the government, and it felt like we'd been forgotten.

Bethany

29 years old

I am Bethany, I'm a self-employed 29-year-old mother to a seven year old daughter and a 15-month-old son. My husband is also self-employed and during the pandemic we were living with his parents. The first lockdown was particularly difficult for us since my father-in-law was having chemotherapy and was advised to shield. This meant we had to completely isolate and make sure that we didn't leave the house. Because he was shielding, we had an extreme experience of being cut off and isolated. There was no support from the government, and it felt like we'd been forgotten. In theory there was a support line you could call to ask for someone to step in, but that felt a bit extreme. All we needed was access to supermarkets or deliveries. There was no vetting over who could access food deliveries and so slots went immediately when they were released. My mother-in-law and I were both tag-teaming, refreshing the internet, and trying to get a slot, but we didn't manage. We usually shop at a big supermarket chain, and they had a thing where you were supposed to call up if you were on the government shielding list to get priority, but the system

didn't work. People from this supermarket chain didn't call back and the website wasn't working. We had ten days where we were really scared that we wouldn't be able to get any food and our supplies had run down. In the end, friends had to bring food and things to us and looked after us. I had a list of friends that I would text.

Because of the need to protect my father-in-law, we also decided to take my daughter out of school earlier than the official closures. When her intake was invited back in the summer term, we had a lot of debate about whether that was a sensible thing to do or not. In the end we were shielding for about three months straight. It was really stressful. I was the one who was trying to do it all, that was the worst part of isolating for me. I was organising all the food shops, I was the sole one looking after my son at night due to feeds, I was looking after both children during the day while my husband who is a builder was on construction sites, I was helping with my in-laws, and I was shouldering a lot looking after my own business too.


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SLOVENIA

November 2022

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Two years were just taken away from us. It is different for the elderly than it is for the young people because we will not be able to make up for this lost time.



I am a person who cares a lot about a touch, or a hug. I missed that very much.

Ava

76 years old

I am 76 years old. My husband died, and I live alone. I retired four years ago. Retiring created a great void and sense of uselessness in my life. When the pandemic hit, I was already anxious and melancholic, and it just increased those feelings. But I was aware that everybody was in the same boat, and this helped a little. I tried to fill my days with different activities. For example, I read a lot. I tried to improve my cooking skills because I was never good at cooking. I tried a few times but soon I questioned myself, I saw no point in cooking just for me, so I dropped this idea. I also decided to improve my English, French, and German. I created a daily schedule to study languages, which I followed every day. I just needed to discipline myself, otherwise melancholy would set in. I would make coffee in the morning, and then I would think, "Now what?".

Doing tarot helped me a lot during lockdowns. I did it before the pandemic, so I continued doing it online. I am thankful that technology has advanced so that I was able to do it online, and I even made some new acquaintances. We don't meet in person, but we know each other online and we play together.

I am also happy to see that all my friendships survived the epidemic. We all have just a few friends in our lives and all those friendships continued. I even deepened my relationships with acquaintances. Nevertheless, I still felt lonely. I am a person who cares a lot about a touch, or a hug. I missed that very much.

Some measures made no sense to me, for example the police curfew and closed municipal borders. I also didn't like that the elderly were able to only visit stores for a few hours in the morning. Because I have a hearing problem, face masks were a great obstacle for me. I read from facial expressions and face masks don't allow that. The volume of the voice is also not the same. So, when I went to the store or to the pharmacy, I had difficulties communicating with other people.

Maybe I was in a specific situation, because I live by myself. If you have a family you take care of them, you do things around the household, but when you are alone all those activities don't exist. Two years were just taken away from us. It is different for the elderly than it is for the young people because we will not be able to make up for this lost time.

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GREECE

February 2022

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In Greece, there are many migrant domestic workers; yet nobody talks about us and what we have been through during COVID-19.

Tracey

45 years old

I am a live-out domestic worker from the Philippines working in Greece since 2000. I came to Greece because I needed to find a job to support my family. I have an adult son who lives in the Philippines. My husband raised him. I was not there for most of his childhood.

At first, I lived in a very rich house in the city. Recently I am independent, renting my own apartment and cleaning houses. I am glad that I was not working as a live-in during COVID-19 because the pressure was tremendous for domestic workers. They had to be there for their bosses working continuously, cleaning and taking care of the kids. Many of them were not allowed to have days off. At the same time, I am not happy with not having work and having no income during the lockdowns. Movement was restricted in the city, and we were only allowed to move if it was deemed necessary. For a while we were not allowed to move outside the area where we lived, so I ended up with no income because most of my jobs are in the north of the city in wealthy areas and I live in the city centre. My bosses never paid me during lockdowns because they pay for the service provided each time. This was the greatest problem I faced during the pandemic. When I started working again after the lockdowns were lifted, I was afraid that I would get the virus. I had to take the train and it was very crowded. Then I would go

into other people's houses to clean, they would often be there because they worked from home, but I could not do that.

I got the virus in November 2021. This was an additional blow because I had to stop working again and it cost me a lot, as it took me two weeks before I could go back to work. I also had to pay my national insurance contributions to get a residence permit while I was ill and had no income.

COVID-19 was a crisis for me and for people like me who are domestic workers. We lost a lot and must start over again and recover what we've lost. In Greece, there are many migrant domestic workers; yet nobody talks about us and what we have been through during COVID-19. We have an association, and we are in a better position than other domestic workers - we support each other and are stronger because of this. This was important during the lockdowns because even when we couldn't work, we had each other.

I now feel strong enough to work and regain what I lost, but I am thinking of looking for a live-in job again because rent and electricity are expensive. I have a good network and I hope I will find a family to move in with and make up for the income that I lost during the pandemic.

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ROMANIA

November 2022

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I am not the same person that I was before the pandemic. I am more confused, and my mind is hazier, but I am optimistic.

Virginia

51 years old

I am a 51-year-old woman living in Romania. I was diagnosed with schizophrenia in my twenties. I live a very isolated life and I rely on an NGO for connection and support, and on my former roommate, and my brother. I have no one else in my life. I receive a disability pension which I rely on currently. I used to live with my brother in our parents' apartment. In 2020, there were some special circumstances, and I could not live in the apartment with him and his family anymore. My brother contacted the social services, who directed my case to an NGO, who put me in a protected apartment, where I currently live. For over one year I had a flatmate in this apartment. She left this spring. Now I live by myself, and I have a dog. I am very happy that the NGO allowed me to bring the dog to their apartment. In addition to hosting me in the protected apartment, the NGO takes care of me in many other ways.

During the first state of emergency, I was still living with my brother, and he was taking care of me. When I became infected with COVID-19 twice, I was already living in the NGO's apartment. I had to stay at home for two weeks each time. The NGO helped me with shopping and medication. They also gave us masks. The NGO is central to my life.

They helped me survive the pandemic. I was not in the best state of mind. I am very isolated in general, but with the pandemic I became even more isolated. I have no friends except my former roommate, so I spent the pandemic watching TV. I sometimes talk on the phone with my former roommate, with my brother, and with a woman from the NGO; they all check up on me. When I go out of the house, it is for shopping, for walking the dog and for participating in the courses organised by the NGO. They employ lecturers and we can learn different skills. I chose painting, music therapy, personal introspection, and gymnastics. They also organise daytrips for us, to the mountains or to the seaside. They are the highlight of my year.

The NGO supported me to get a job. They helped me become employed with a social enterprise, for four hours a week, the maximum time that I am allowed to work. We sew decorations and accessories. I earn a little money this way. I am not the same person that I was before the pandemic. I am more confused, and my mind is hazier, but I am optimistic. I want to stay here, at the NGO house, for as long as it is possible. I feel good here. I have my courses and I go to work. I feel included.

I am very isolated in general, but with the pandemic I became even more isolated.

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GERMANY

November 2022

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**Taking care of
only myself felt
like freedom.**

Samira

29 years old

I was born and raised in Germany, but I have a multinational background. I studied Cultural Studies and Economics and after my studies, I did an internship from home. I have been working as a business consultant since last year. I would not say that the pandemic had an additional negative effect on my chances in the job market. I wear a hijab and I usually apply without sending a photo which helps. I would claim that, on average, I have to send more applications than others, but I would not say that this changed during the pandemic. This new job gave me the opportunity to finally move away from my family home. Now, I am living alone, and I work from home sometimes. My job is very stressful. I am supposed to travel a lot, and I have to do a lot of extra hours. Therefore, it really helped me to have a place where I can be on my own and take my time for everything I need. Especially in the first six months, this was an advantage. When I go back 'home' for a visit, I still have to take care of a lot of domestic work. My father is living on his own and he does not have support from anyone else.

When I started working at my current workplace, we always had video meetings which

My impression is that both our employer and also the employees paid attention to creating a team spirit through the virtual meetings.

helped me to get to know my new colleagues and to feel part of a team. My impression is that both our employer and also the employees paid attention to creating a team spirit through the virtual meetings. Our employer offered some seminars on mental health, mindfulness, etc. I can say that the pandemic brought many advantages to my professional life.

Even when I was still living with my father, I could use the time to go out for a walk instead of wasting my time commuting. I gained a lot of time and tranquillity while working from home. But being mostly at home meant having more domestic work. When I was still living with my father, I felt that he expected me to take care of the additional meal that had to be prepared because we all had lunch at home instead of eating at the office. I wouldn't say that it was a burden, but an additional annoying task. And at the time, I was doing my internship and we were both working full-time. This was also a reason why I was looking forward to moving to another place and starting my first full-time employment without having to think about my father's domestic issues. Taking care of only myself felt like freedom.

CZECH REPUBLIC

February 2022

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**I felt the weight of the
pandemic the most
while in the psychiatric
hospital.**

You are never truly alone in the psychiatric hospital, but still, at that time, it felt lonelier to me.

Lenka

22 years old

I am in my early 20s and I am homeless. Growing up, I lived in a children's home, and then I moved to a so-called halfway house for young adults when I turned 18, and finally to an asylum house for women. I ended up in a psychiatric hospital quite a few times between being in the halfway and asylum houses. I have an anxiety-depressive disorder, borderline personality disorder, and I started to drink excessively too.

I used to work in a company doing internet surveys and questionnaires. But I wasn't happy with the job, and I felt like I was not good enough for it. So then, I resigned, but soon realised that my income was not enough. I decided to terminate my lease and leave the mental health treatment cycle, and I 'moved-in' with my mom to her tent. Living together is challenging for both of us. We often get into arguments over petty things that can turn violent quickly, especially if alcohol is involved.

During the past few years, I was admitted to the psychiatric hospital at least once a year, and I used to quite like my stays there. I got to relax a little bit and meet new and inter-

esting people. But this time around, it was different. They limited visits between different units and the number of people allowed per activity so, overall, people were more apart. You are never truly alone in the psychiatric hospital, but still, at that time, it felt lonelier to me.

With the arrival of the pandemic, lots of activities, including therapy, group therapy, and art workshops, were suddenly limited. There was staff shortages and the whole hospital worked in a limited mode. They restricted and then entirely banned visits, which was pretty tough, especially around Christmas.


In the hospital, I was offered a free vaccination and I took it. But when I told my mom I'd been vaccinated, she almost slapped me. She is anti-vaccination and claims it burdens one's body. I'm happy I had the opportunity to get vaccinated, because the more we can defend ourselves, the better. But it's everyone's decision; no one should be forced. When I talk about this with my mom, I have a feeling that she is making fun of it, because my mother is older, and I don't think she will ever understand this whole situation.

PORTUGAL

November 2022

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**I decided to do
something good
for my local society.**



*I want to help
other people grow,
especially women.*

Mildred

54 years old

I am divorced from my husband since my younger son was two years old. Dealing with him was always difficult; I have had several problems. After our marriage ended, the kids were living with me. Then, in 2016, he decided to move to Portugal and take the kids with him. I agreed to that because we organised it in a way that I always talked with them, and I saw them during the summer holidays. With the pandemic, he said it was not safe for me to go and meet them in Portugal for a summer holiday as was planned. As trips became conditioned with the pandemic-related regulations, I needed a person to be responsible for my stay. He refused to do that. He even turned my younger son against me by saying terrible things about me. He continued to behave like this as long as he could. In the end, I understood that I would lose my kids. Therefore, I decided to move to Portugal. By that time, I was working in the advertising sector, and I had been working remotely. I sold a lot of things, and I emptied my entire house except for the kids' rooms as, when they first moved, they asked me to keep their room as they were because of the memories.

All my family supported my decision. In just 15 days I had to look for ways of becoming

a legal resident in Portugal. As a Brazilian, I was not able to stay in Portugal for more than three months without a job or being a student. So, I applied for a masters in Sociology and I moved to Portugal. I stayed working in the same job remotely as long as I could while studying for the masters. I went to Porto every weekend to meet my kids. However, some weekends, I could not meet them because of the difficulties created by their father. Some weekends my younger son did not want to meet me. He has not spoken to me since September. But I keep calling and texting him.

At my job, when the decision to move to remote working was cancelled, I had to quit the job. I decided to change my life. Meeting a lot of people and projects here played a big role in my decision as well. I decided to do something good for my local society. I want to help other people grow, especially women. I am now in contact with a local social incubator working together on a project to support women to change their lives and to be entrepreneurs. I am discovering a lot about myself and the world. Things are still not good, especially with my younger son, but I like better my life now.

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ITALY

February 2022

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**Now, it's even
harder to trust
standard healthcare
than it was before.**

Flore

59 years old

My life has been affected by the COVID-19 situation in several ways. Most importantly, my husband was going through the diagnostic phase of a serious illness when the pandemic began. He started having symptoms in Autumn 2019 and by January 2020 his symptoms were getting worse, and his sore throat wasn't going away. We thought this could be related to COVID-19 due to similar symptoms, however, we soon realised that, unlike COVID-19, his symptoms lasted much longer. At the time, we were also going through three months of lockdown in Italy. By the time he could see a throat specialist, it was six or seven months after the first symptoms.

Since the healthcare system was shaken by the pandemic, my husband has not received the level of attention he needed. The doctors were too focused on COVID-19. My husband was one of the first patients after the lockdown period to go to the local hospital. The doctor he saw seemed like she just wanted to be done with him as soon as possible and move on to the next patient. Even though she used the small camera apparatus to see down his throat, she missed the tumour on his tonsil, and diagnosed him with acid reflux. After that, he went to several different specialists, and was misdiagnosed repeatedly. Each time, to investigate further, he had to ask his GP for a referral to another doctor, then another, and so on. All in all, it took a year for the health system to realise

what was wrong and by then he had stage four throat cancer. This was very traumatic. I could only begin to imagine what he was feeling, as he tried to put on a brave face.

To compound matters, the cancer doctors kept mentioning the COVID-19 vaccine. And when my husband said "Look, I have no interest in getting the vaccine, I'm already dealing with my cancer, I don't want to add to that burden. It's my choice", the doctors said he would have to get weekly COVID-19 testing and that there were no vaccine exemptions- even for cancer patients. This was despite the fact that those with serious illnesses were never part of the initial vaccine trials, and they had no idea how the vaccine might react with the treatment they were recommending for his illness. This made us very uncomfortable, and in the weeks leading up to his treatment, we became increasingly anxious and uncertain about how to proceed. In the end, my husband decided not to continue with any kind of traditional treatment because he had lost confidence in the system.

I think they should have separated COVID-19 from the rest of the medical system, while keeping the other routine healthcare objectives separate and up to date. It seems to me as if the healthcare system has gone completely backward and gotten unscientific in so many ways. Now, it's even harder to trust standard healthcare than it was before.

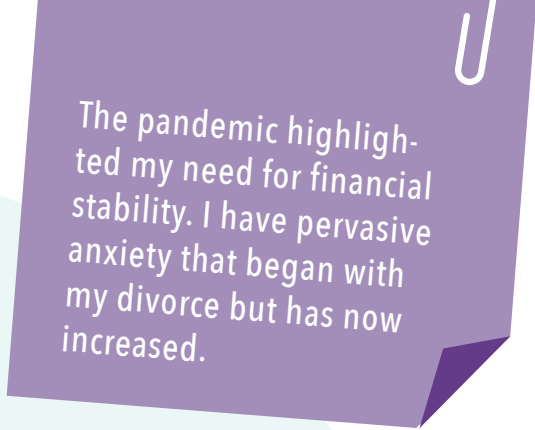
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UNITED KINGDOM

February 2022

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I suffered from a lot of anxiety. I constantly feared that if my friend or my daughter became ill, I would have serious difficulties.



The pandemic highlighted my need for financial stability. I have pervasive anxiety that began with my divorce but has now increased.

Lucy

36 years old

I am a divorced mother of one daughter, living in my former marital home with my best friend. I have been divorced for two and a half years and my daughter is five and a half years old. I work full time in an accounting firm and my best friend, Anne, who lives with us, helps to take care of my daughter.

Anne is a constant in my life and has been a godsend during the isolation, she undertook home schooling and was well positioned for it as she has worked in schools. I continued to work, but I felt constantly on edge because it only needed one thing to fail to put me into financial difficulty. I rely heavily on child support payments from my ex-husband, but he has no real parental involvement. However, at the beginning of the pandemic he tried to get his way and force me to take my daughter out of the nursery, which would have been impossible because of my job. When my ex had my daughter during the week, he refused to educate her at home. The rest of the time he never asked how she was doing, and he is very dismissive of my friend and devalues her role in our daughter's education.

I suffered from a lot of anxiety. I constantly feared that if my friend or my daughter became ill, I would have serious difficulties. My anxiety also began to have physical manifestations, which was worrying. I am fortunate because many of my friends are easy to contact and work in therapeutic fields, so we discussed how best to deal with our respective situations.

The pandemic highlighted my need for financial stability. I have pervasive anxiety that began with my divorce but has now increased. In some ways however, I welcomed the level of simplicity that came with lockdowns as my life was so complicated before. I was forced to shrink my world and it was a relief that dating would not be on the agenda after the divorce. In some ways I was bizarrely well positioned to face uncertainty again, as my divorce had been so unexpected that I had been forced to quickly change course and reorient my life.

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FRANCE

November 2022

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He didn't call our son during the entire lockdown and my son developed behavioural problems.

Zoe

46 years old

My name is Zoe, and I have a ten-year-old son. I'm an independently working reflexologist and we live in the south of France. Initially, COVID-19 just seemed like another announcement, like bird or swine flu. But with the first lockdown, a voice inside me said "This is serious".

Clearly the consequences of the lockdowns were not fully considered, particularly for families with strained relationships. How do you deal with children who are distressed in such families? My son was traumatised when he saw people wearing masks, sometimes covering their entire face. I encouraged him to draw pictures to express himself. His father didn't care. He came to pick up our son when we had already been in lockdown for a week while he was not confined and was living with a group. As a mother, I wanted to protect my son. His father didn't like the fact that his son didn't go to him, so he declared war on me. He told our son that I was holding him hostage. He didn't call our son during the entire lockdown and my son developed behavioural problems because his father abandoned him, and he started to physically abuse me. It was very hard.

I have asthma and weak lungs yet had no help whatsoever. Everything was closed, and we were not allowed to see anyone. Eventually, I called the local service for medical and psychological assistance. I confined

myself with another family after the isolation, so that my son could be with other children. I also had telephone conversations with a friend. He came to our house because I was really in bad shape. Then my son's father told me to stop because he didn't want me to have visitors. That was the last straw! I had difficulties with my professional life too. The recovery after the lockdown was complicated. People were unwell and it was difficult to take care of them. Every time there was a wave of COVID-19, you could no longer work. Appointments were cancelled at the last minute. I've been receiving minimum benefits since last spring which had never happened to me in 22 years of work. Luckily, the family benefits organisation got in touch with all the self-employed professionals in the area and I was eligible. It keeps my head above water, nothing more. My son's father thinks that's unfair. He wants to receive a portion of what I get!

Then I had surgery and was on sick leave for three months. Since the lockdowns, things have been precarious. It's a vicious cycle: you feel like things are picking up, and then there's a new wave of COVID-19, and it all starts again. It's the sword of Damocles. It's instability and permanent anxiety. For me, COVID-19 was a revelation, highlighting the failures at all levels. Before, we couldn't really see them. But now it's all too obvious.

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ITALY

November 2022

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Due to the restrictions and the lack of income, my partner and I had to turn to social services for assistance.

Boris

43 years old

*Since I could not go out,
I had no way of earning
money through petty jobs
or begging.*

My name is Boris, and I have been living in Italy since I was five years old. I was born in Macedonia, but I have no nationality, I am stateless.

When COVID-19 hit, I initially had confidence in the government's ability to manage the situation. The lockdown had some positive aspects for me, as I could spend more time with my partner. But it also had negative consequences for my work situation. Since I could not go out, I had no way of earning money through petty jobs or begging. Due to the restrictions and the lack of income, my partner and I had to turn to the social services of the municipality for assistance. I must say that we received a lot of help, such as vouchers for groceries or direct financial aid to pay for medicines. My brother and his family also received significant support. There were people who understood our difficulties and were willing to help us, without slamming the door in our faces. I was impressed by the attention and care provided by the director of social services. She welcomed us warmly and assisted us with various issues.

In 2021, the social services offered me a community service job as a gardener, paying me EUR 600 per month. I worked for almost a year until August when I fell ill with a stomach problem, an ongoing haemor-

rhage. I was transferred to hospital where I underwent transfusions and an operation. The doctors and nurses treated me well, helped and respected me throughout my stay. After my hospitalisation, I encountered other problems as I required ongoing medical treatment, medicines, and a GP. However, a regular residence permit, I lost the right to have a GP. I applied to renew my residence permit, but I have been waiting for a year and a half without a definitive answer. I have been sent from one office to another without any clear resolution. Therefore, I have to pay for private visits each time. I usually visit a doctor at the hospital, who helps me and provides me prescriptions as if she were my GP. But I cannot afford the medications at the pharmacy.

For me, the COVID-19 period has been quite positive. I have noticed an increase in community support for those in need. Through my work, I discovered a passion for gardening which I would like to continue doing. I keep asking friends to involve me in working with them. I don't want to beg or steal. I need to find a job, as obtaining a contract will allow me to apply for Italian citizenship and access many more services, including health services. I have reached out to a building company, and they have told me that once I obtain my residence permit, they will hire me. I, therefore, keep on waiting.

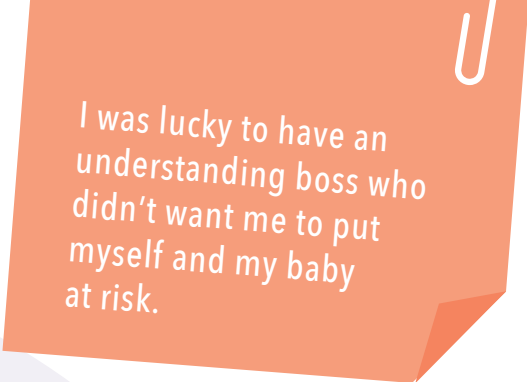
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BELGIUM

November 2022

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**My partner couldn't
come to the prenatal
appointments with me
because of the rules.**



I was lucky to have an understanding boss who didn't want me to put myself and my baby at risk.

Melanie

26 years old

My name is Melanie, and I am Belgian but Ivorian by origin. I'm 26 years old and I work as a housekeeper. At the beginning of the lockdown, I was in the early stages of my pregnancy. We all had to stop work and I stayed at home. When work slowly resumed in May, it was not clear whether COVID-19 was dangerous for pregnant women. Unfortunately, the husband of one of the elderly couples I worked for contracted COVID-19 and died. As I had worked for them the week before, my boss called me and told me to stay at home and get tested. I tested negative, but my boss decided to put me on COVID-19 unemployment benefits until the end of my pregnancy.

I was lucky to have an understanding boss who didn't want me to put myself and my baby at risk. After that, I went on maternity leave. It was challenging not to see anyone for the first three months, especially my father who lives alone and is not in good health. My partner worked all day and did the shopping, so I had no physical contact with people, which was hard. I went for a thirty minute walk every day because my

gynaecologist told me it was important as I have a bad back. At least I had that, although I hardly saw anyone on the street.

My only trips out of the house were to the hospital because my pregnancy had to be closely monitored. My partner couldn't come to the prenatal appointments with me because of the rules. I took pictures during the ultrasound and tried to record the baby's heartbeat so that he could participate in the experience. He would have liked to participate, but he was deprived of this opportunity. When it came time for the delivery, we were lucky because at that time dads were allowed to attend.

When I started working again, there was a system in place in case our clients contracted the virus, so that we didn't have to work but still got paid unemployment benefits. I contracted the virus at one point and immediately went on unemployment benefits and got paid. Overall, I don't have very good memories of this period, even though in the end, everything turned out well for me.

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TURKEY

November 2022

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**Overall, the pandemic
was a quite productive
period for me.**

Ozan

31 years old

"How can people outside of the labour market have income using their kitchen?"

I studied in the Education Faculty at university to become a primary school teacher, but my time in a small town of the Aegean region was a turning point in my life. As a scout, I was spending weekends in nature, and I saw the annihilation of nature. After that I knew that I was not going to work as a teacher, but I would do something about ecology.

When the pandemic started, I was working in a CSO, specifically on a renewable energy project, and they had to halt the project due to lack of funding. So, I became unemployed until June 2021 for 16 months. However, it did not affect me very badly, because I had already downsized my life and knew the value of consuming less. I was also in love and living with my girlfriend in her house and wasn't paying rent.

I had extra time to focus on a project that my friends and I had started working on before the pandemic. We wanted to promote neighbourhood-based solidarity. The idea emerged as an answer to this question: "How can people outside of the labour market have income using their kitchen?" We wanted to set up an online platform in which people could advertise the food they cook at home for sale and other people from the same neighbourhood could order. But due to the pandemic restrictions, we could not physically come together and realise this goal. So, we organised online cooking workshops every

weekend instead with somebody sharing their recipe with the participants and cooking together with them on Zoom. Those who shared their recipes made income thanks to the participation fee of the workshops. We also had world cuisine weeks. For example, two migrant siblings, who had difficulty economically surviving the pandemic, shared their recipes on several occasions and earned a decent amount of money. After our initiative became popular, we got offers from three CSOs who wanted sandwiches for their events. We found a woman in our neighbourhood, who is unable to work because of her husband. She prepared sandwiches for these events and earned income. Eventually, we turned this initiative into an association.

In June 2021, I went back to work with the same CSO again, but in July 2022, I became unemployed again since I was a conscientious objector (Military service is compulsory for all male citizens in Turkey). I had declared my conscientious objection and was a draft dodger. The CSO got a notice from the government about me being a draft dodger asking them to fire me so as not to face any punishment for having me as an employee. It was a terrible summer. I was very depressed. Then I connected with a new startup for an online platform for ordering only vegan-vegetarian food. I started working there in September. Overall, the pandemic was a quite productive period for me.

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IRELAND

February 2022

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**It has been a very
positive time for me
in terms of personal
growth.**

Emilia

26 years old

I felt like everyone was kind of just struggling in the house as well. You wanted to support each other but you didn't always have the capacity to do so.

My name is Emilia. I am 26 years old, and I moved to Ireland in summer of 2019. I was fortunate in a sense that when the pandemic really kicked off in Ireland, I was already done with most of my courses. I was also very lucky that I lived in a house with four other people back then. We were living in a big house in a nice neighbourhood in the south of the city, which has a very suburban feeling, and we had a garden. Not everything was easy though. I felt like everyone was kind of just struggling in the house as well. You wanted to support each other but you didn't always have the capacity to do so.

I am a very high achiever, I have always had very good grades, and I put a lot of pressure on myself to do that. I was under so much pressure during COVID. Even when things opened during the summer of 2020, before I handed in my thesis – I remember the night before I handed it in, I just started sobbing in the garden, and then had to wake up the next day feeling like absolute shit, and finish writing up the thesis. The winter of 2021 was particularly hard because we thought that after the summer everything will be better, but then it just got worse, and we were all stuck at home. My job was part-time, it was winter, and everything was closed. I would say it was my lowest during the pandemic, just in terms

of feeling very isolated. I had very few friends here, a lot of people who I would have gotten close to from my course had left the country, and you don't want to have only one person to rely on, because the other person is also obviously struggling.

I started therapy during this time, which really helped to have somewhere to go to and talk freely. But I didn't have a lot of money because I was on a part time contract, and while there were mental health support services for people on low income, they had long waiting lists and I needed to speak to someone immediately. I just needed to talk to somebody. I didn't need long-term support, I just needed immediate support.

And then things got much better, during last summer. I still have ups and downs, but I got much better. I listen to myself and my needs, and I am mindful of myself. For me I was kind of coming to terms with my gender identity as well, because I recently started to identify as non-binary. And that was a big step for me because I think I have a lot of 'internalised homophobia'. So, it has also been a very positive time for me in terms of personal growth. And it is something that I probably wouldn't have done as quickly if I hadn't had so much time to reflect on myself.


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GREECE

November 2022

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**I had to struggle in
these difficult
conditions without
being able to express
my true identity.**



The university classes were carried out online during the second year of the lockdown. This created problems for me because I couldn't meet my fellow students and I couldn't move to a new town to escape the situation at home and meet new people.

Manos

20 years old

My name is Manos and I am a trans man. I am 20 years old, and I am a student in a small town in Greece. I have spent the lockdown with my family, my mother and my twin brother in Athens. I have not physically transitioned yet and I have not come out to my family. The fact that my family doesn't know my gender identity was a problem for me because I could not be myself in the house where I was isolated. I had to struggle in these difficult conditions without being able to express my true identity. I couldn't bring my friends home and I couldn't speak openly to them on the phone as I was afraid that my mother and brother would listen to what I was saying and realise my true identity. Hiding was a struggle for me.

I spent the first year of the quarantine at home studying to pass the exams to go to university. It was a very stressful process. We were not allowed to go to school and all classes were moved online. The next year, I passed

my exams and was admitted to a university outside Athens, but I couldn't go because of COVID-19. The university classes were carried out online during the second year of the lockdown. This created problems for me because I couldn't meet my fellow students and I couldn't move to a new town to escape the situation at home and meet new people. I felt isolated and also, I could not express myself freely. I received no help from state agencies or from NGOs, for example there was no support from the school or from social services. I've managed to cope by going for frequent walks and meetings with my friends outside the house. We had to send automated messages explaining the reason for leaving our houses and we would put 'exercise' and go to the nearby parks and streets. I also started photography, which has helped me to express myself better. These activities helped me to keep in touch with those I consider as my true family, with people that know me and accept me for who I am.

THE NETHERLANDS

February 2022

“

I often had online meetings, and during breaks I tried to help the kids and coordinate the assistants' work.

Elsa

43 years old

I have built a small wooden house in the garden to have a place where I can retreat from this overcrowded life.

My name is Elsa. I live with my two children aged eleven and 15 in a village. My youngest son has an unknown mental disability syndrome and has the intellectual capacity of a three year old. His health is fragile. For his care, I have always relied on home-based caregivers in the mornings, after school and until he goes to bed. I work as a consultant for a large social science research company.

The COVID-19 pandemic suddenly left me and my two children at home. I immediately created a workspace in the living room. My oldest son had to stay in his room all day to take online classes. My youngest son was jumping and bouncing all over the house, so I needed home assistants before and after lunch so that I could work. I often had online meetings, and during breaks I tried to help the kids and coordinate the assistants' work. However, I feel I failed in all of this. My oldest son developed an addiction to online games and even stole money from my account to pay for them. When I found out, I did my best to help him. As for my younger son's health condition, it depended a lot on the ability of healthcare providers. However, with the pandemic, some were unwilling to come for fear

of being infected, partly because I am not vaccinated.

My mother played an important role in raising my children. Before the pandemic, she travelled from Belgium every Thursday to take care of them. During the pandemic, this was no longer possible. My children did not see her for six months, which was like losing a parent for them. I missed her both as a mother and as a caregiver. She does so much for us. On the contrary, my father, who is a doctor, was very angry with me because I did not want to vaccinate. He even called me a murderer, which was very painful. Even today, our contact is limited. The multitude of painful situations like this caused me to burn out. For the past year, I have been exhausted and developed heart problems. When I am overstressed, my heart vibrates, and rhythm disturbances occur. I still have a long way to go to recover. I am on the mend, but it only takes something small to make me take steps backward. I don't know if I will ever fully recover. I have built a small wooden house in the garden to have a place where I can retreat from this overcrowded life.

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ROMANIA

November 2022

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When everything crumbled during the pandemic, it left me with a sense of uselessness and the feeling that no one needs artists.

Mira

38 years old

I am a 38-year-old independent theatre actor and director, and a single mother of a six year old child. I have been in this field for fifteen years, working mainly in a collective or with theatre artists who conceive and stage politically themed plays in independent spaces.

The pandemic was a terrible turning point for me, professionally and personally. The restrictions forbade most live performances for most of 2020 and 2021. My child was four years old when it started. I was alone at home with my child, no job and no prospects. In April 2020, the authorities announced that they would offer unemployment support for independent artists. Initially, I saw it as a relief, then I learned that the money was in fact a lump sum out of which we were responsible for paying taxes and contributions amounting to half the sum we were given. After a few months, I stopped applying for fear of accumulating debt. The state acted as a creditor who was now out to collect.

Except for a brief period in 2021, we could not organise plays until the spring of 2022. So, theatre artists had two years with no jobs. In the meantime, I tried to transfer my work online. It took me one year to figure out how to reach online audiences. In 2021, I won funding for a project of online plays. The project required us to meet deliverables, such as audience numbers, which was difficult due to assembly restrictions. This forced us to record some performances and broad-

cast them online to reach the project requirements. However, we could not obtain copyright for the online shows which was unfair.

During COVID-19, I thought independent art would disappear. Spaces were disappearing, and colleagues migrated or changed career. Now we have opportunities, but we work in worse conditions and with less pay than before COVID-19. I cannot turn down anything because of the debt I have and the fear that something will prevent me from working in the future. In independent arts we rely mainly on funding from cultural grants. This creates a terrible work rhythm, with 'dead' seasons with no income and periods when we are overworked. In times like these I feel that I am sacrificing my child and my psychological welfare.

The pandemic made me slow down and provided me with an opportunity for self-reflection. I realised that I was defining myself through my work and social relations which I do not want to do anymore. When everything crumbled during the pandemic, it left me feeling useless and that no one needs artists. I realised that I had the right to exist on this planet and escape the capitalist logic in which I can only justify my existence as a wheel in the system. I found joy in small things like plants and cooking. I found solidarity with other mothers of young children. I have also decided to look for another stable job.

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LUXEMBOURG

February 2022

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**What I don't accept
is that people who
respect the protection
measures and get
vaccinated are
considered to be
followers.**

Ulrika

70 years old

From the beginning I marked each day with a marker on the window, like a prisoner. But living like this took my life force and I was depressed without knowing it.

I'm 70 years old, I'm retired, I have two adult children and I live alone. I will always remember the year 2020, we had sunny weather from March to September and I spent my time on the terrace. I live in a house where there is a lot of space, and a big garden. I was on the terrace, looking at the apple tree, seeing without observing, it was so static, it was like I was paralysed. I could have taken advantage of all this time to work in the garden, but I didn't do that. I was stunned. And I thought, I understand how people who are in prison go crazy. I thought afterwards, maybe they have more interaction. My children phoned me, but it was to forbid me to go and buy the newspaper. For them, what was important was that nothing happened to me physically. I begged them to phone me at least once a week, but they didn't. I can see that we, as old people, are no longer useful. I used to take care of my little girls a lot, and then they had to cope by themselves and now they are used to it.

I read a lot to survive, I put myself in artificial worlds by reading stories. I used to have a very active pensioner life, taking drama classes and going to exhibitions. From the beginning I marked each day with a marker on the window, like a prisoner. But living like

this took my life force and I was depressed without knowing it. I started setting goals to try and give myself some energy and then I thought I see now how depressed people must feel. In the autumn of 2021, I thought I was going crazy, I had anxiety, and I have never felt that before, it's a destructive thing. My deliverance in May 2020 was being able to buy masks, it was already better and with the vaccination it is even better.

One day we were on an excursion, and the driver said, "we're going to put our masks back on because there's one person who doesn't agree with taking them off". I said "yes, it's me", I didn't want to hide. I got back in the minibus, everyone put on their mask, and they started yelling at me. One of them said "you're really a coward", another one said, "why do you come on these excursions if you're so scared?". The whole world has fallen apart for me, because people I liked very much are behaving in ways that I consider selfish. I can understand and accept that people are afraid of the vaccine. What I don't accept is that people who respect the protection measures and get vaccinated are considered to be followers. So, I lock myself in by reducing the activities I sign up for because I don't know how to manage.

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CYPRUS

February 2022

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**I felt that my ability
to help my loved
ones as a doctor was
compromised due
to COVID-19
measures.**

Birjou

65 years old

I could not practice medicine face-to-face with my patients and I had to examine my patients online with the risk of making an incomplete diagnosis.

I am a doctor and married with three children. I have eight siblings. COVID-19 affected me in multiple ways. I remember in 2020, around the end of March, my older sister had an accident and injured her leg very badly. She needed immediate medical assistance. Usually, I run to help as I am the only sister who is a doctor. However, I could not help my sister because I was quarantined due to travelling. I felt that my ability to help my loved ones as a doctor was compromised due to COVID-19 measures. After the lockdown, my sister was my first patient in April 2020.

As a doctor, I did not charge my patients and tried to help them through phone calls. However, this was difficult for me. Technology was a very important feature of COVID-19. I was forced to learn how to use various systems. In 2020, I made my first steps into the National Health System as a doctor. I could not practice medicine face-to-face with my patients and I had to examine my patients online with the risk of making an incomplete diagnosis. I did not get paid so COVID-19 was also a financial problem for me, and I also had to pay taxes, social insurance, and all other levies to the government. But I could not benefit from the government measures and company/individual schemes as I was 'working'.

I observed that many of my patients developed psychological issues, including stress

and depression, and they needed to see a professional. COVID-19 was a dark period for my psychological status too because I felt alone. I could not see my children for a whole year. I didn't see my family and I reduced my activities. I was worried for my niece and my daughter who are both doctors. I am grateful that nothing happened to them.

The positive side of COVID-19 is that I live next to my older daughter, so I did not feel so lonely. Also, my husband and I have fields with oranges, and we could escape from everyday home quarantine. I felt uncomfortable with one particular incident during lockdown. We were allowed to send two SMS per day to leave the house. We sent one to go to the fields to cut oranges. We had to cut them alone since we had no ability or willingness to employ anybody due to COVID-19. So, we went in the morning and naturally it took more than the three hours 'unwritten rule' for each message. When we were returning home, a police officer stopped our car and accused us of using the SMS in the wrong way because a whole day's work in the field was not 'reasonable time'. We started arguing and shouting. He did not impose a fine in the end, but we felt bad. I believe this was a grand obstruction of our human right to free movement due to a bad interpretation of government measures.

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POLAND

February 2022

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**I think activism
helped me escape
from my grief.**



Katarzyna

22 years old

At the beginning, my parents were a bit confused, but over time they became proud of me. I raised their awareness on asexuality.

My name is Katarzyna, and I am a 22-year-old student. I am an asexual and aromantic person. I define myself as queer. I live in a city in northern Poland with my parents, two sisters, my grandmother, and two dogs. My mental health has deteriorated during the pandemic due to lockdowns and isolation. I was locked in my house, I couldn't see my friends, and I had no one to talk to. Before the pandemic, I was developing professionally, but due to the pandemic and my emotional needs, I decided to dedicate myself to activism.

I joined an association that works for people on the asexuality spectrum and have participated in the campaign for 'asexuality spectrum visibility week'. I also joined a project for LGBTQIA+ rights. Through workshops, the project increases people's awareness and knowledge regarding the rights and needs of the LGBTQIA+ community. Also, together with my friend, we founded a student organisation for LGBTQIA+ people at my university. We have various support and self-development groups within these associations that were active during the pandemic. We organised all events online, except the social campaign which adhered to COVID-19 rules. But it was not a completely new reality, because some of them had already been organised online before the pandemic to reach a wider group of people. People needed to social-

ise, so paradoxically we had a higher turnout than before the pandemic. Since I live 65 kilometres from the city where the association is based, it was also sometimes difficult for me to attend board meetings in person. Therefore, the pandemic and the organisation of these meetings online made it easier for me to attend. Instead of studying, I focused on activism. Now, meetings of support groups are organised in a hybrid format: people who are vaccinated can attend them on-site, others can attend online. We follow hygiene guidelines to avoid infection. The hybrid format of the meetings was also dictated by the needs of people with disabilities, as our office is not accessible.

At the beginning, my parents were a bit confused, but over time they became proud of me. I raised their awareness on asexuality. When they learned about asexuality, understood what it is, and that my activism makes me happy, they supported me. The pandemic also allowed me to seek professional help and it turned out that my concentration problems and rejection sensitivity were caused by ADHD. The most traumatic experience for me was the death of my grandmother. She died of COVID-19. I think activism helped me escape from the grief of my grandmother's passing and channel my focus towards learning how to help others.

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LUXEMBOURG

February 2022

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We were placed in a shelter, but by then my residence permit had expired and I lost my right to stay at the shelter.

Mina

36 years old

I am Togolese and I have three children. By November 2021, I had been in Luxembourg for two years. I left the marital home in April 2021 and ended up in hospital due to domestic violence against my children and me. It was the cries of my six-month-old daughter that alerted a neighbour who came to check on us. Her father dropped her, and I had been unaware of her injuries until we arrived at the hospital. That's when I decided to call the police and make a complaint against my husband. My other children who are aged 13 and ten (a boy and a girl) are still with their father. I did not know then that it would be so difficult for me to have them by my side.

After the hospital, I was placed in a hotel by an association with wounds all over my face and my little girl in plaster. In May, we were placed in a shelter, but by then my residence permit had expired and I lost my right to stay at the shelter. Normally I would go to the immigration office, but they cancelled the appointment without providing a new one. My daughter, who will be 16 months old soon, does not have a residence permit either. It is my residence permit that should resolve the

situation. However, the process is going very slowly with COVID-19. I have a court decision to access family assistance, but my appointments are very rare due to COVID-19. I also sought psychological follow-up for the children despite their father's objections. It took a long time to receive the letter authorising the psychological follow-up for them, but unfortunately, no action has been taken so far. I do not know when they will be able to follow up. Thankfully, I have a counsellor here who helps me a lot.

I said to myself, no one would believe all the things my children and I have been going through. I thought that they were things you would only ever see in films. But it is true. I'm not afraid to go back to Togo, but if I go back, I will lose all the people who support me here. So, I prefer to stay here for the children and to be protected. When I have the residence permit, I want to ask for custody of the children and look for work to put things in place and simply continue my life. I just want my children back; they are very important to me. I want it to see the end. I believe there will be justice.


I said to myself, no one would believe all the things my children and I have been going through.

GERMANY

February 2022

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**It feels as though my
life has been put on
hold since recently
discovering my
gender identity.**



Gender affirmation services have not been prioritised as much as life-saving procedures such as heart surgeries or cancer treatments.

Elisa

25 years old

My name is Elisa. I am 25 years old, and I recently came out as a trans woman. I will commence my hormonal treatment this summer. I am a nursing student. I have been working as a COVID-19 vaccinator, administering vaccines to people.

Before the pandemic, I had completed three semesters of my education but with the onset of COVID-19, most of our lessons were moved online. I did group work with people that I had no prior social interactions with which was challenging. I missed out on an internship opportunity and the chance to follow a patient through treatment. I had to take a virtual exam which I failed. I believe the virtual format contributed to my failure, as when I retook the exam in person, I passed with the highest grade. Because of the pandemic, the opportunities to gain valuable skills through internships have been lost, with no compensation available. My degree has not been put on hold. I have just had to continue through it. I feel I could have become a better nurse if COVID-19 had not disrupted my education. The practical skills necessary for nursing have been lacking in my training, and I now have to find alternative ways to acquire them. Despite these challenges, my experience working as a vaccinator has been posi-

tive. I never experienced anything dodgy or anyone being angry. I never felt threatened. It was a pleasant experience, and it was safe to work there. I am pro-vaccines and have received all my shots.

I have experienced a sense of loneliness during the pandemic. I could celebrate Christmas with only one family member. I have been impacted by the pandemic also as a transgender individual. Normally, there is a waiting period of four to five months to access treatment, but due to the impact of COVID-19, the wait time has extended to eight months nationwide. Gender affirmation services have not been prioritised as much as life-saving procedures such as heart surgeries or cancer treatments. It feels as though my life has been put on hold since recently discovering my gender identity. I often imagine how wonderful it would be to begin treatment right away, both in terms of the legal changes such as updating my name and CPR number (social security number), as well as undergoing hormonal treatment and voice training. I feel let down by the Ministry of Health and the Prime Minister as it seems that my access to treatment has been deemed less essential.

LITHUANIA

February 2022

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**Eventually, I had
to quit my job,
because everything
started falling apart
at home.**

Rachelé

41 years old

I was not able to focus on work because I was constantly thinking about the children, each with their own issues.

I am 41 years old, and I live in Lithuania. Currently, I am unemployed, and together with my husband, we are raising five children. The youngest one will soon be four years old, and the oldest one is 13. During the first quarantine, we put a lot of effort into making the situation as good as possible for the children, so that they wouldn't have to experience a painful quarantine. The twins went to the kindergarten, while the youngest child stayed at home. I wasn't working at that time. We spent a lot of time together, playing board games, going for walks, and exploring local areas. My husband took time off from his remote work at least once a week to spend it with the children. We had ideal circumstances, because we had a lot of rooms, allowing those who needed it the most - my husband and the two school-going children - to have their own space.

There were some issues with remote learning. It was completely different from usual schooling, and the children lost interest within the first two weeks. I had to spend a lot of time helping my sons with remote schooling and constantly motivating them. The teachers had high expectations, and I struggled to meet them. Unfortunately, this meant that the youngest children were deprived of my attention. Towards the end of the first quaran-

tine, we all started missing other people and gatherings. I missed my mother, but it wasn't possible for her to visit us as during the first quarantine travel within Lithuania from different municipalities was not allowed. We couldn't meet with my husband's parents either. However, the most painful thing for the children was not being able to spend time with their cousins and friends.

After the first quarantine, there was a relatively calm period. But then, the number of infections started increasing again in late autumn. The second quarantine was much more difficult. We were confined to our homes for two to three months. We lost our patience to entertain the children and be happy. A sense of apathy emerged, and I interpreted it as a sign that I wasn't fulfilling my mothering duties. I felt guilty. It also coincided with my return to work after parental leave and this, of course, made the situation even worse. Even though I worked remotely, it was very challenging for me, especially since my mother could not come to help me. I was not able to focus on work because I was constantly thinking about the children, each with their own issues. Eventually, I had to quit my job, because everything started falling apart at home.

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FRANCE

February 2022

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Since COVID-19, our caregiver situation has worsened. Many of them have left and they haven't been replaced.

Martine

74 years old

I'm 74 years old and a widow. I live with my 38-year-old disabled daughter who has myopathy. I used to work in a textile factory, but it closed down and I had to find a new job as a cleaning woman at the police station. Unfortunately, I had a stroke in 2016, and last year, I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Just before the COVID-19 lockdown, I lost my dad, my mum, and my dog. It was a difficult time, but we remained strong. We have no family, but we have friends. We receive home care services from an association that we've been with for six years. At night, someone comes to take care of my daughter since my stroke in 2016. During the day, there's a person from 8.30 am to 1 pm and from 2 pm to 8 pm. That is the best case scenario because we don't always have the people we need. There were already a lot of stoppages where people were not replaced, but I've never seen stoppages like now. When they need someone urgently in another sector, they take my daughter's caregiver because they don't have enough staff. They say, well, her mother's there, she can do it. When we say something, they threaten to drop us and tell us to look for someone else. The last caregiver who came was a 19-year-old girl who had no experience or training. They only taught her how to use the equipment to lift people once. This situation puts her in dan-

ger, as well as the disabled person she's supposed to care for. They even asked her to do a tracheotomy without proper training.

Since COVID-19, our caregiver situation has worsened. Many of them have left and they haven't been replaced. Initially, they didn't even discuss protective measures. We had to educate them and provide masks ourselves. They saw us as a nuisance when we asked for protective measures. We were seen as too demanding. We were afraid of having someone come to our house at night, so we only requested a two hour visit to put my daughter to bed. However, they were still paid for the full shift. On another occasion, one caregiver spent a day with us, and the next day she tested positive for COVID-19. We had to disinfect everything she had touched, get tested ourselves, and have a nurse visit. It was a significant risk for us. But during the second lockdown, they arrived in full protective gear.

We no longer go out to places like restaurants. We don't feel safe. Before the pandemic, we would go out in good weather during the summer, but now we've become very isolated. We tell ourselves that it's not going to last forever, it's going to end, but we don't dare go out too much.

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CZECH REPUBLIC

February 2022

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The commute that usually takes 25 minutes became almost four hours mainly because the government closed most of the border crossings.

Adina

53 years old

There was a lot of fear in the first wave, causing hysteria that labelled pendlers as 'virus spreaders'.

I am 53 years old. I live in a town close to the Czech-German border. I have three children—two are adults and my youngest is 14 years old. I have been working as a nurse in a social centre in a city in Bavaria since 2018. I am a so-called pendler, someone who commutes to work and back across the borders daily.

When the pandemic struck, our government closed the borders and left only one border crossing in the area open. The management of the social centre where I work pleaded with the German government to give an exemption for pendlers working within so-called critical infrastructure. On one hand, I was glad, but on the other hand, it brought me difficulties, both mental and physical. The commute that usually takes 25 minutes became almost four hours mainly because the government closed most of the border crossings, and all the critical workers and truck drivers were queuing at one crossing. It got to a point where it was psychologically and physically unbearable. There was lots of paperwork, the requirements were constantly changing, and we had to check several websites and sources daily. We also had to get tested every 48 hours, which was not easy during the first wave. At times, I waited in line for three hours during the winter, in the snow and cold. It was a bit like mental exhaustion and even a war-like feeling.

Our employer was extra accommodating,

switching our shifts so we could at least make it to work on time. Later, they offered me a place in a dormitory which was more like a fully equipped four-star hotel. But when I stayed there, it was still challenging because at the time I had a 12-year-old son and dogs at home. It was difficult lying there, not knowing how things would unfold.

There was a lot of fear in the first wave, causing hysteria that labelled pendlers as 'virus spreaders'. I was, for example, at the gas station, and a cashier said to me, "So you are coming from Germany, bringing the virus with you, huh?". On the other hand, there has been tremendous solidarity among the pendlers, sharing information about new rules, paperwork, or the traffic situation. We also received a lot of support from our employer, the clients, and the German side in general. We received gifts of food, fruit, and sweets. They probably thought that a well-fed nurse would last longer! People left thank you notes and flowers on our cars, that was really nice. But those were tough times.

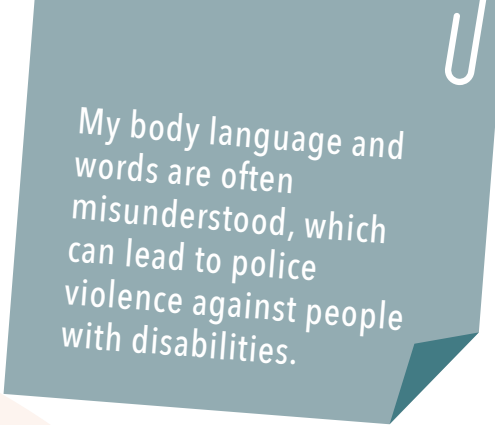
This pandemic experience is testament to the extent that Germany depends on cross-border labour, especially in healthcare and in social services. We struggled with staff shortages, many people fell sick, and we worked eight days in a row. However, I never thought about leaving work, leaving those people behind.

SPAIN

July 2021

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**As a person with autism,
I am vulnerable to the
police. During the
pandemic, they were
granted more power
than they have had in
a long time.**



My body language and words are often misunderstood, which can lead to police violence against people with disabilities.

Lur

33 years old

I am Lur, and I am a 33-year-old nonbinary person living in a small town in Spain. I am also autistic and receive a modest pension of EUR 400 a month from the government. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was living at home with my mother who is also disabled and my father. I was unemployed the entire time and I was studying to get my high school degree at the adult's school. However, my education was completely interrupted when schools shut down due to COVID-19. I felt very lost.

Living at home was difficult. My parents became very anxious after the confinement. My mother, who was morbidly obese, needed help at home because she could not move independently or clean herself. Although my father helped me sometimes during the day, I had to do most of her care, especially at night. For several months I slept very little, which negatively affected my mental health. I have an older brother who did not contribute to her care at all.

Also, I am very scared of the police, and I was afraid to run into them during the times I did

leave the house to run errands. As a person with autism, I am vulnerable to the police. During the pandemic, they were granted more power than they have had in a long time. My body language and words are often misunderstood, which can lead to police violence against people with disabilities. There are people who have been beaten by the police because they were unable to explain why they were outside the house. In a neighbourhood in our city, a young man with a mental disability and his mother were beaten by the police because they had gone out to the grocery shop. I was afraid something similar would happen to me, and I would not be able to explain myself. This fear made me rarely leave the house and become increasingly isolated.

Now that schools have reopened, I have resumed my studies and graduated. I am now trying to get a bachelor's degree. I don't have any work experience, but to earn some money I started taking care of young children. However, I had to make up my work history because I have no skills other than caregiving.

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THE NETHERLANDS

November 2022

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**This COVID-19 crisis
ended up bringing me
closer to myself.**

Daira

48 years old

*I joined an organisation
for people aged 40+ to
get to know each other.
I went to dance parties
I would never have
gone to otherwise.*

My name is Daira. I live with my husband and two children in a nice house in a small village. I have taken care of other people all my life. I focused only on others and was very good at putting my needs to the side. That cost me my first marriage and I also never had a paid job until recently. I did a lot of voluntary work and took care of my children.

During the first lockdown, I had just started a new job as a language trainer. Before I could properly start, all language courses were cancelled and all of a sudden, I found myself at home working and doing everything online. My children and husband also ended up at home. In the beginning, I enjoyed that as I had more quality time with my family. However, I also missed the dynamism of the participants in my groups.

Besides my work and family, I am a leader of a children's theatre group. Right after the first lockdown, a performance was planned. Of course, it was cancelled and at first, I thought it would go on a week or two later. That turned out to be very different. We couldn't even meet each other and practice. The realisation that things might not become 'normal' soon became more and more apparent. After a while, the sparkle of being together was gone. The children became tired and

irritable. My husband had to find new work and was often busy with it, and I found myself alone with my worries more often. After a year of ups and downs, I was laid off as my annual contract was not renewed. That felt so unfair. I felt like I had become a victim of a situation I couldn't do anything about. For the first few months, I didn't let it sink in that I no longer had a job. I was still getting unemployment benefits. But when that stopped, I suddenly looked around me. I asked myself what I had built up in all those years besides my family. It occurred to me that I had no idea whom to call when something was wrong with me. That shocked me.

During that time, I developed confidence by doing things. For example, I joined an organisation for people aged 40+ to get to know each other. I went to dance parties I would never have gone to otherwise. I found that connecting with others did me good. I started asking myself questions about what I really wanted. I think I was able to make more authentic choices rather than please others. After a few months, I stepped into a new job as a training coordinator at a large company. I would never have dared to do that otherwise. This COVID-19 crisis ended up bringing me closer to myself.

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CZECH REPUBLIC

November 2022

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While we were separated by borders, different government officials kept appearing in the media, sharing contradictory messages about the planned anti-pandemic measures and how long they would last.

Amelia

32 years old

My name is Amelia, and I am 32 years old. Currently, I am on parental leave with my eight-month-old son. I also have a flexible part-time position in academia. My husband is from South America. We got married right before the pandemic in the Czech Republic. We had a wedding with lots of international friends who then flew back to their home countries. Some of them got stuck in either transfer or home country quarantines. My husband, too, left for his home country. He had some work-related obligations as we lived there from 2019 to 2022. I was supposed to take care of his visa-related paperwork, submit my dissertation, and then fly back to South America. But the Czech government announced that they were closing the borders, and that Czech citizens were not allowed to leave the country. While we were separated by borders, different government officials kept appearing in the media, sharing contradictory messages about the planned anti-pandemic measures and how long they would last. It was terrifying and frustrating. Then, I met a guy online whose family was dealing with a similar situation, and we decided to create a Facebook group. There we

Then, I met a guy online whose family was dealing with a similar situation, and we decided to create a Facebook group. There we shared information about restrictions in different countries, border crossing, visa rules, etc.

shared information about restrictions in different countries, border crossing, visa rules, etc. At one point, the group had over one million members. Eventually, I reunited with my husband after four months apart when the rules changed.

Last year, I got pregnant, and we were planning to move back to the Czech Republic. I even got a job starting in the fall of 2021. But as my husband's country of origin was still on the so-called blacklist back then, and he didn't have his visa settled for the Czech Republic, so he wasn't able to join me. I didn't want to risk any uncertainty, so I decided to contact the Czech ombudsperson pointing out that the Czech government does not follow the EU regulations on family unification procedures. As other families were in a similar situation, he appealed to the government and the measure was eventually cancelled. I believe this measure was an example of the structural racism of the Czech government against non-EU foreigners. However, by then, it was past the date to start my new job, so I declined the offer.

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TURKEY

November 2022

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**This is who I am.
If that is rebellious,
then so be it.**

Sema

42 years old

I am 42 years old, and I live in a city in South-eastern Turkey. I could only finish primary school. I got married at 23. My husband is a carpenter. Four years ago, I lost my twin babies shortly after they were born, and I became depressed. Then, one day I went to a multipurpose community centre to ask something for my friend. This centre, like many others across the region, contributes to the development of the region and empowering women. I must have looked so depressed that the teachers there noticed. They convinced me to attend one of their courses. Eventually, I became the coordinator of a project where women do hand embroidery. Women, all of whom are housewives, come for two - three hours a week to work on samples and then take material home to embroider.

Right before the pandemic, I joined a program organised at the centre. The program consisted of 18 meetings where we acquired basic knowledge in many areas, from continuing education to starting a business, from mother and child health to reading. This program, which continued during the pandemic, changed my life in every sense. I learned many things, especially my rights. After the program, I decided to continue my education and finished middle and high school with distance education. I even took the university entrance exam with the encouragement of my friends. I did not do well, but even going to the university campus for the

exam was a great feeling.

Even during lockdowns, we had permission to work, so I continued to work from 8 am to 5 pm. Before the pandemic, we had difficulty getting by as a family, and it only got worse as prices increased and my husband had to close his workshop due to lockdowns. We kept the natural gas very low or off even in winter. We kept the lights off at home even during the evenings. I also saw that the number of women working for the embroidery project increased from 250-300 to 600-700 during the pandemic. The husbands of most of those women became unemployed, and the women could look after their families, meet their own needs as well as their children's thanks to this project.

As my husband's work decreased during the pandemic, he was depressed and there was tension at home. I tried to comfort him, saying that we can get by with my income for a while. But that bothered him even more. He was not happy with me working, saying that it should be him looking after the family. In this community, a woman working outside the household is considered rebellious, not proper. My husband thinks that I have changed since I started working. Actually, my mother thinks the same too. I have paid a huge price to be the person that I am today. This is who I am. If that is rebellious, then so be it.

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SERBIA

July 2021

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**The violence started
in January 2021.
He first hit me in the
head with a mobile
phone.**

Bojana

37 years old

The only person I can talk to is my cousin. She went through the same situation, and she tells me not to go back to him under any circumstances.

My name is Bojana. I am 37 years old, and I have three sons. The older boy is 12 years old, and the twins are eight years old. I have been divorced recently. I am an agricultural technician by education. I used to live in the city, but now I live in the countryside with my parents, my grandmother, and my three sons. Until June 2020, I was employed on a short-term contract. Then my company terminated my contract and offered me a less favourable one with less money. So, I resigned. My ex-husband was earning well, but he never brought the whole salary into the house. He spent it on dinners with friends and gambling.

At first, we saw COVID-19 as something that would pass quickly, not taking it seriously. When the government declared a state of emergency, we adhered to the measures. I had to go to work every day, and my ex-husband worked from home. At that time, he mostly dealt with the children and cooked for them.

The violence started in January 2021. He first hit me in the head with a mobile phone. He immediately started apologising and brought me ice to put on the wound. The trigger for the violence was probably my resignation from work. I didn't ask him before I made the decision, and maybe he was angry about it. I think that lack of money

and concern for the future provoked that violence against me. After that first time, the harassment lasted for a month, with mood swings and physical violence almost every day. He would shout at the children and beat them too. I didn't want to report him; I suffered. Then one day I told my aunt that he was beating me, but I begged her not to tell my parents. Yet, she called them immediately, and they called the police. They came and took us to their village. We got a restraining order against him, first for 48 hours and then for 60 days.

It's hard for me staying with my parents. My older son is going through puberty, and he protests against them, he wants to live with his dad. It hurts me terribly. My ex-husband told me that he still loved me, that he would change; go to therapy and marriage counselling. I'm thinking of giving him another chance, but my parents will never talk to me again and if he starts beating me again, they will not let me come back to their house.

I started learning to drive, and I found a job. It's not permanent, but it's a profession. I work in a greenhouse for organic peppers. The only person I can talk to is my cousin. She went through the same situation, and she tells me not to go back to him under any circumstances.

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BELGIUM

February 2022

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I feared that I wouldn't be able to access healthcare due to my status or that I would die alone in a hospital in a country that is foreign to me.

As an undocumented person, I am constantly anxious and apprehensive about approaching authorities, as I fear negative consequences.

Charlotte

33 years old

My name is Charlotte. I'm a 33-year-old woman from the Philippines, currently living in Belgium. After finishing my studies in Belgium, I became undocumented around the time that the pandemic started. I feared that I wouldn't be able to access healthcare due to my status or that I would die alone in a hospital in a country that is foreign to me. During this time, I attempted to become a student again, but my application was denied, and I was told to go home due to my legal status, despite the pandemic situation being dire in the Philippines. However, I was fortunate enough to receive insurance after informing the provider that I would be a student, which I still believed at that point. This was good, but I was scared that somehow it would not be given if they discovered my lack of legal status. I got a severe toothache at one point, and I waited ten days before seeking medical attention.

Eventually, I discovered that I could acquire a health card from my municipality which granted me basic healthcare, even though I was undocumented. Unfortunately, this information is not easily available, and I feel as though it is purposely withheld. As an undocumented person, I am constantly anxious and

apprehensive about approaching authorities, as I fear negative consequences. You need to show your ID when you want to access healthcare, and if you don't have any, you don't know what will happen, and this creates a lot of stress and anxiety. It was difficult to see that some people had access to such good healthcare while I was being excluded from it, and unable to get help for burnout, depression, and other health issues.

When the government distributed masks to every citizen, I didn't receive one. I was concerned that I would miss out on the vaccine. Luckily, my partner and his mother called the vaccination centre, and because I was already in the system somehow, they allowed me to get vaccinated despite my status. However, to access certain services in Belgium, I needed proof of vaccination which I could not obtain through digital means due to my status. My partner managed to obtain a paper certification for me using my old ID number. Unfortunately, government services typically do not communicate in English and are unable to help you if you don't fit in the right box. I was lucky to have people who could help me.

DENMARK

November 2022

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**It took my joy away
to be teaching during
lockdowns.**

Tina | 41 years old

I don't want to be recorded during my teaching. It's illegal when I haven't been asked for consent.

I am 41 years old. I have a husband and two girls aged 14 and 16. I am a teacher and I largely work in public schools. It was lonely during the lockdown. There were a lot of expectations in terms of what we were able to do, and I didn't think there was a lot of acknowledgements of these difficulties. We were left on our own, especially as the restrictions kept changing regarding the length of time we would be teaching from home.

There were also no guidelines in terms of what to do if the children started recording the online lessons. Some of my colleagues said that we needed guidelines and the Danish Teacher's Association supported this. The management, however, said that it wasn't possible. My colleagues and I experienced someone pressing record or sending a recording out on snapchat from class. I wonder how many times it has happened. My biggest challenge was when I was teaching gym class and showing the students how to do exercises. Students figured out how to send links to students from other schools. Suddenly, there were students from other schools present. I also had a student who received nasty messages through the chat function during a crafts class. The male student who sent those messages received a link from one of his classmates who had changed schools. Apparently,

this student who changed school had told his former classmates to join this online class and write ugly messages to that girl.

I needed understanding from the management. The management just said the situation with recording classes couldn't be that bad and that there was no more to discuss. I still didn't feel the issue was recognised as important or that was it being handled effectively. My manager said I could just call the mother of the student sharing videos of me on snapchat, but I believed management should handle it. I don't want to be recorded during my teaching. It's illegal when I haven't been asked for consent. Eventually, the management called the student and told her that she shouldn't record me teaching again. That was the only consequence. I felt violated in terms of not being taken seriously by my students who thought they could just do whatever they wanted.

After that, I didn't show my face on the screen. I contacted the Danish Teacher's Association to request that they should focus on the issue. They had so many teachers contacting them about similar violations and many were even worse than my experience. COVID-19 made it hard for me to do my job. It took my joy away to be teaching during lockdowns.

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ICELAND

November 2022

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I quickly developed stress-related symptoms because I was working too much while pregnant.

Sophia

32 years old

My daughter was born in the third wave of COVID-19, so we weren't allowed any visitors which was socially isolating.

I'm a 32-year-old nurse working in the blood and oncology ward of a hospital in Iceland since 2014. I'm married and I have a daughter. In December 2019, I became pregnant, just as I was asked to become the assistant manager of my ward. In the beginning, we didn't know how our patients and pregnant women would handle getting COVID-19, so there was a lot of stress and uncertainty. The workload as an administrator was massive, and there was a constant shortage of staff due to COVID-19. The rules regarding our patients and the quarantine process were constantly changing, which added to my workload. I quickly developed stress-related symptoms because I was working too much while pregnant. I should have cut back on work, but it was impossible as I was the one in charge. Eventually, I had to go on sick leave when I was 30 weeks pregnant.

The sick leave period was challenging as I was being very careful trying not to get COVID-19 so that my partner could be present at the birth. I gave birth in September 2020, and it was a traumatic experience. I think COVID-19 added stress to my situation which made everything worse, and I developed post-partum depression as a result. My daughter was born in the third wave of COVID-19, so we weren't allowed any visitors which was socially isolating. Breastfeeding was going badly, but I couldn't get a lactation consult-

ant because no one wanted to come to our house. My baby was restless, and I couldn't sleep. So, it was recommended that we get someone to look after her at night. But that wasn't possible due to the pandemic. I always had to go to every appointment with my child alone, which was not okay as I was so depressed. When my baby was just one and a half weeks old, I tried to admit myself to a psychiatric ward due to severe sleep deprivation. But pandemic restrictions prevented me from bringing my child, so I decided against it. Instead, I received psychological services at my local healthcare centre which were fragmented due to COVID-19 related cancellations and delays. Eventually, I gave up seeking help. However, I managed to get some psychotherapy during my daughter's first year and was diagnosed with PTSD.

Last spring, I burned out and have been on vocational rehabilitation ever since. If I had been in a different job, working from home, I would be in a better place today. If the situation at my workplace had been different, with less stress and more understanding from my superiors, I'm sure nothing like this would have happened. I'm still dealing with the stress that came with COVID-19 to this day. What kept me going through this difficult time was my resilience and the support of those closest to me.

LUXEMBOURG

February 2022

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**It is not good to
leave a mentally
disabled person
alone in hospital.**

Ana

65 years old

I was feeling desperate because I thought of everything: he doesn't speak; if they leave him on a bed, he could fall and break a leg.

I'm a married parent with a daughter who is also married, and I have a grandson. I also have a 40-year-old son who is mentally disabled.

In 2020, my son was at the day centre when they called to say he was having trouble breathing. They said they were going to call the ambulance and told me to meet him at the hospital. When my husband and I arrived before the ambulance, I informed the emergency staff that my son was going to arrive, and that I needed to accompany him because he was mentally disabled. However, they told me, "No, Madam, you can't go with him. It's forbidden". They refused to let me go upstairs with him and instructed me to go home. They said, "we'll do all the tests, and we'll call you." I went home with my husband. I was feeling desperate because I thought of everything: he doesn't speak; if they leave him on a bed, he could fall and break a leg. Luckily, I have a cousin who works at the hospital, I phoned her and explained the situation. She immediately offered to go to the hospital to be with him. After going to the hospital, she told me that his tests came back negative. After three hours, the hospital called me to say that I could collect him. I went to the hospital again and this time they let me in. First, I couldn't and then I could. It is not good to leave a

mentally disabled person alone in hospital, a person who doesn't speak, doesn't move, doesn't know anything. Mentally disabled people and the elderly should always be accompanied by someone who is familiar to them and knows their needs.

Four days later he was tested again, and it was positive; he had caught COVID-19 in the hospital. When he tested positive, we kept him at home. That was also very hard because normally there are two carers in the morning and in the evening and they told me, "Since there are sick people and to limit contact, only one person will come". I spoke with my husband and I told them not to come, and that we would look after him. They could care for others. They were exhausted. We took care of him for three weeks, and it was hard because the centre was closed, he was at home, he didn't see the carers, he didn't see the family, we weren't in contact with anybody. He was very unhappy as there was nothing to interest him at home. Upon returning to the day centre, he missed the interaction with others as they had put restrictions in place. Before, there were 45 of them in one room and during the pandemic, he was alone with a carer. We used to go on holiday and leave him at the centre for a week to have some time to ourselves, but now it's over.

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BULGARIA

February 2022

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**I said to myself:
You're either
getting sick now
or remain tortured
forever.**



Marietta

32 years old

When you're in a huge stress such as the one caused by the pandemic, you realise you're not in control. So, you see that in such critical moments, it's better to be surrounded with people who love you, not who abuse you and put you down.

I'm 32 years old and I work in the IT sector. I was in a toxic and somewhat violent relationship for a long time before the pandemic started and with the pandemic it worsened. My partner had taken me to another city where I was away from my friends and family. I got in touch with an organisation who help victims of domestic violence around seven - eight months before I escaped, which was in January 2021. I saw a post on their Facebook page about the first signs that a person might be a victim of violence- and I recognised myself.

I got connected with a mentor and we started writing online. But at some point, I decided to stay with my ex-partner, so out of shame I stopped writing to her for some time. Then in December 2020 I wrote to her again to say that I wanted to leave him. I lied to my ex-partner that I have to go to my dentist in the city. So, I managed to get there, even though it took a long time to persuade him to let me go. I slept at a friend's place for a night despite the pandemic. I then returned to my mother's place by taking a train, even though I was in a huge panic that I might get COVID-19. I said to myself: "You're either getting sick now or remain tortured forever". For a long time after I escaped, I was misera-

ble. I worked with a psychologist from an organisation who helped me a lot when I was having panic attacks. I was getting by, day by day. I never called the police or social care because I was afraid that if I called the police, they would laugh at me, or that my ex-partner would persuade them that I was crazy and that I was the one torturing him. I never felt I could trust the authorities to help me.

As absurd as it may sound, the pandemic led to a huge improvement in my life. When you're in a huge stress such as the one caused by the pandemic, you realise you're not in control. So, you see that in such critical moments, it's better to be surrounded with people who love you, not who abuse you and put you down. Now, I'm one of the Women Survivors- a network of women survivors from toxic relationships. We share our experiences with other people in order to empower them to make a step in their own lives. I joined a social initiative that teaches employers to recognise and help employees who are victims of domestic violence. My current partner knows my story inside out and he helps me a lot and supports me being a part of an organisation- this helped me to get stabilised and move on, as I saw there are also normal men.

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THE NETHERLANDS

February 2022

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At first, being confined gave me peace. Every afternoon my son and I would go for a walk. For the first time in years, we had long conversations.

Edith

56 years old

My name is Edith. I am 56 years old and until recently I lived with my youngest son, who is 18 years old and has a mild form of autism. I am self-employed as a mindfulness trainer and coach. Before the pandemic, my son went to school, and we only saw each other at night, but we were tired then and hardly talked to each other. When the pandemic started, my son and I found ourselves at home all day together. At first, being confined gave me peace. Every afternoon my son and I would go for a walk. For the first time in years, we had long conversations. During these conversations, my son acknowledged for the first time that he has autism and how much he is affected by it. And for the first time, he was open to help. When online classes started, he could not concentrate. It was also difficult for me to concentrate on work. Everything felt like a burden and working from home with my son around made me extremely fatigued. Sometimes he would stand by the refrigerator for an hour and a half making a sandwich or sit on the couch for hours busy with his phone. Eventually, through ups and downs, he graduated from high school. He wanted to attend college, but because

It was also difficult for me to concentrate on work. Everything felt like a burden and working from home with my son around made me extremely fatigued.

education was still online, everything stalled. It took a lot of energy to care for him at home, and there was no other option but to admit him to a residential home. It was hard at first, but when I saw that things were going well for him there I let go of worry.

During the pandemic, I discovered how important it was for young people to be able to reflect on themselves and all that is happening around them. In fact, I chose to offer mindfulness classes in schools and online to youth in need. I also began to rethink my work and my business relationships. I stopped working for my main clients because I found the pressure too high, and the path they wanted to take did not match my purpose in my work. I also needed to recover from the intense period of living with my son. Now I am taking time for myself and considering the possibilities and opportunities for my future. I have lost my faith in politics in recent times. I deliberately did not get vaccinated. I am so angry at the government for forcing young people in particular to get vaccinated so they can do fun things. Despite everything, I look back on an intense but valuable period of crisis.



SLOVAKIA

November 2022

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**I believe COVID-19
made me more
resilient.**

Laura

24 years old

I am amazed how the pandemic is forgotten now and that everything it made visible, all the social problems, they are invisible again. The solidarity got lost and people are on their own again.

My name is Laura, and I am 24. When the pandemic started, I lost my job and I had to move back in with my mother. Although I had a good relationship with my mum, it was not ideal. For me it was not easy to go back to the child role again, I was not used to it anymore. My mum started her own business as a masseur right before the pandemic. These professions were hit the most, and she could not work at all. We faced economic hardship. I believe my mum tried to hide many of her survival strategies. It is quite funny how now politicians talk about how people should save energy due to the energy crisis, but they do not realise that many have been doing it even before now, simply because they could not pay for it. I remember that during the pandemic winter we did not heat our home much. All these outside circumstances impacted our family relationship, there was a certain tension. Fortunately, the relationship got better as we both found ways to stabilise our lives.

The measures of economic help had quite significant loopholes that excluded many vulnerable groups. For example, students did not have any opportunity to get a job because those student jobs simply did not exist. I was quite lucky that a friend of mine helped me to find a job. Fortunately, I start-

ed university in the autumn of 2020. The university offered the students five counselling sessions for free, and I used that opportunity. It has helped me to think a lot about myself and my life. In the beginning, students did not see each other in real life, we met only through online courses. However, it was nice as we were all eager to study and hungry for the contacts, so we tried to get to know each other anyway. It was quite interesting to see how those relationships work differently in real life, when we finally met. People that you found interesting online were not that interesting offline and vice versa. I noticed it also with my old friends, that gradually, as we could not be in contact and we did not have common experiences, we did not have much to talk about.

Everything was so calm during COVID-19, there were not many people on the streets, it was like living in the countryside but in a city. I spent a lot of time during the pandemic on self-reflection, thinking about who I am, what I want in life. Actually, I believe it made me more resilient, more adult. It is a pity that it did not happen with society as well. I am amazed how the pandemic is forgotten now and that everything it made visible, all the social problems, they are invisible again. The solidarity got lost and people are on their own again.

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FINLAND

November 2022

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**People need support
faster, and this is
where small
organisations and
communities can
do a lot.**

Johanna

51 years old

I'm a 51-year-old woman. When the social media breakthrough happened in Finland about a decade ago, I understood that there is potential in these networks and wanted to do something around it. I founded a company and a CSO together with other people, to create social networks via digital platforms. When the pandemic began, I continued working within these organisations and was involved in many projects that discussed how civil society could respond to the situation.

Our organisation developed special initiatives, which aimed to support people to survive during the pandemic. For instance, we have a service that connects neighbours with each other, and we used this platform to launch COVID-19 aid, such as shopping for your neighbour. Many people offered to support, and some found help. However, many people who needed help probably did not find the service. I think it is important to find ways to connect people. If people had phone numbers for their neighbours that they knew they could call for help, this would create resilience during crisis. I understand that people are hesitant to connect with their neighbours because they don't want to lose their anonymity, however I want to search for solutions to change this. Our current service is still running but it's not very active now. It is difficult to gain the critical mass for continuation, and we also don't have funding to develop it further.

As a small organisation, we are very agile and able to help much faster than public authorities. For instance, after one month of COVID-19 restrictions, the city of Helsinki and the Lutheran church co-organised a food service, which particularly helped elderly people. This was a good thing, but it took a month to put up. People need support faster, and this is where small organisations and communities can do a lot. This is not always organised very well in Finland, where people expect that it is primarily the government that supports them. Various kinds of support networks can increase resilience. Another service that we founded during the pandemic was the crowdfunding platform. This platform provided artists, event organisers and restaurants an easy way to apply for crowdfunding when they faced problems during the pandemic. I think it took two days to set it up: one day for visual design and one day for technical construction. We applied for COVID-19 aid ourselves and got Business Finland funding for developing our services. This was very good for our organisation; however, I think it would have been better if our organisation got funding for the services that we developed for helping companies and organisations to survive through the pandemic. Then we could have advertised our services better at the time when they were very important.

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AUSTRIA

February 2022

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**Living with my
client feels like
a prison to me.**

Milena

50 years old

My client shows me that he knows how I feel and how exhausted I am. Sometimes he says that I should go home. But I cannot leave him alone.

My name is Milena. I work as a full-time caregiver in rural Austria. Originally, I am from Slovakia, but I have spent most of my time working in Austria. My client patient uses a wheelchair and can hardly communicate anymore. At the beginning of the pandemic, I could not go home. I stayed for a long time with my client which came with a massive physical and mental burden. At first, I didn't recognise the signs and could not name social isolation as the main issue. During that time, I was constantly under pressure. Even when my mother passed away, I did not take the time to mourn. Recently I started to process what has happened. Living with my client feels like a prison to me. My client feels the same way; he often misses his family. His children underestimate how much work I have with my client. At the same time, they are rarely around. I find this particularly difficult because all the things that need to be done around the house are put on my shoulders, though they are not covered by my contract.

The placement agency suggested to all families to pay every caregiver an additional EUR 20 per day for motivation and compensation. My client's family refused to pay such a bonus and instead suggested that I work for them privately, without the agency. I refused because I have to think about my future. Without an agency it is not possible to find new clients; there is no trust in foreign caregivers.

I earn EUR 800 net. No person would do this job for so little money. My client shows me that he knows how I feel and how exhausted I am. Sometimes he says that I should go home. But I cannot leave him alone.

When I realised that vaccination is necessary for crossing borders and easier than constant testing, I got the vaccination at the first opportunity in spring. However, my representative from the agency does not advocate vaccination. She has strongly opposed any kind of mandatory vaccination for 24-hour caregivers and does not comply with any safety measures herself. I don't wear a mask while working. I estimate the risk of infecting my client as very low. I test myself before and after every trip.

I have noticed that many 24-hour caregivers are not vaccinated. I see the fact that many are vaccine sceptical as a kind of defiant reaction against the government. Live-in caregivers have been waiting for years now for their working conditions to improve, but the government does not do anything. Now they are asking caregivers to be vaccinated, and caregivers can say no. I find this childish, but I can understand it to some extent. Our job is simply not appreciated. The work we do now was unpaid for a long time and was done by women. Now it is still done by women and paid poorly. It receives no financial or moral appreciation.

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CYPRUS

February 2022

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**It is not the virus
itself but the
psychological
dividing of people.**

Bob

30 years old

*My situation means
I could not apply for
any support scheme
during COVID-19.*

I am Chinese, born and raised. Currently, I am 30 years old and living in Cyprus with my wife, who is a Cypriot. In 2019 I was in China when COVID-19 started, close to my hometown. I was planning to come to Cyprus and reunite with my girlfriend in February 2020. When COVID-19 hit, we didn't know how serious it would get, until people started dying.

It took me eight months to come to Cyprus. The normal way to apply for a visa was not available for tourist and working visas. I tried to get a work visa but got rejected without a main justification. My wife's family had to use special resources to get me a visa. I had to do something that I was not comfortable with. I hate using corruption, but it was the only way to come to Cyprus.

My situation is special. I came with a special visa and then I married a Cypriot. When I got married, I got a temporary family reunification visa. I also applied for a permanent visa. The government immigration department made a mistake with my address when they sent the reply, and it took me six months to discover the mistake and why my visa was not issued. I am not even sure I am residing in Cyprus legally now. I want to learn to drive here in Cyprus and work legally, but I cannot do

it. The immigration department is very slow. I cannot go back to my country and see my family, because I don't know if I can leave the country or come back. My situation means I could not apply for any support scheme during COVID-19. Psychologically, I am worried. I can't do anything on my own. I cannot have electricity in my name, I cannot register for the National Health System. I am patient and I feel supported by my family here, but I feel I have to rely on other people all the time. I even had to use acquaintances to open a bank account.

I am not vaccinated. I am not against vaccination. Most possibly I would be vaccinated if I were in China. In Cyprus one can choose to be unvaccinated since there is no wide use of public transportation, and you can go anywhere with your car. However, it is annoying to do a rapid test every 48 hours. I cannot go for a drink or to a restaurant, I can't go to events with my job. I did not get vaccinated because of family influence. I feel discriminated against because of my vaccination status, and I feel there is a continuous argument between vaccinated and unvaccinated people. It is not the virus itself but the psychological dividing of people.

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SWEDEN

February 2022

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Despite the trauma of losing patients and many of my colleagues in my home country due to COVID-19, I have not requested any care.

Alice

46 years old

Recently, our employer invited the staff to a party, and it was lovely to dance. It feels like life is back.

My name is Alice, and I'm a 46-year-old nurse. I am married, and we have an eleven-year-old son. I came to Sweden from a central African country in 2007. I work at an intensive care unit in the infection clinic of a hospital. I have been working at the infectious disease clinic throughout the pandemic. At the beginning, it was chaotic with many people calling in sick or wanting to change jobs. Every day, there were new directives on how we should wash our hands and how we should dress, etc. We worried about getting infected. I got COVID-19 twice at work, and extreme fatigue and exhaustion were big problems. People who got COVID-19 didn't return to work for long; if they did then they got sick again. They just weren't healthy enough and they still aren't. In my ward, the situation deteriorated considerably as most of my colleagues quit. This means I had to take on more responsibilities, teaching the new staff and supervising them, which is hard when there are so many. I am the only experienced nurse on the ward now; I have worked there for almost five years.

My employer offered 'feel good' activities such as psychologist appointments. In addition to therapy, we have a counsellor and a hospital chaplain. Despite the trauma of losing patients and many of my colleagues in my home country due to COVID-19, I have not requested any care. I probably have

PTSD, just like my colleagues. I dare not show that as I'm caring for many patients with PTSD. I should get help. Most nurses come to work and throw themselves into whatever tasks they're given, and they don't focus on themselves.

This whole situation has been stressful and has affected my personal life. It has been like a nightmare. I feel like I have no life at home. I can see looking back that I haven't been myself for some time. For instance, when I got home, I generally argued with my family. Initially, I took care of myself, was motivated, cycled a lot to work, but now I have gained weight. The pandemic affected my health and my relationship with my family, and it's still not good.

I was also studying during this period. I wasn't able to concentrate on my last exam due to my exhaustion, stress, and anxiety; so, I failed it. Next year I hope that I can retake it. In the future, I would like to do research, maybe a comparative study regarding patient care in Sweden and my native country.

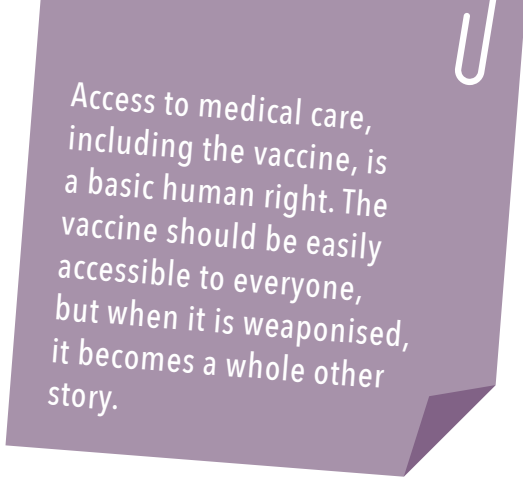
I am happy that we've gotten over the worst phase and it's more normal than before. Recently, our employer invited the staff to a party, and it was lovely to dance. It feels like life is back.

ICELAND

February 2022

“

I am not vaccinated even though I really want to be, because the authorities are using the vaccination to deport asylum seekers.



Access to medical care, including the vaccine, is a basic human right. The vaccine should be easily accessible to everyone, but when it is weaponised, it becomes a whole other story.

Alex

27 years old

I am a 27-year-old refugee seeking asylum in Iceland. I live in a reception centre for asylum seekers. I have been in Iceland for just over one year, and the authorities have rejected my application for asylum twice. Just recently, I received a negative answer about reopening my case. Legally I have the right to have my case reopened by the authorities after twelve months. This has been the case for other asylum seekers, but a selected group of men, including myself, have all been rejected. So now I'm in the dark about my situation and I'm in a waiting stage.

I am currently not vaccinated although I really want to be, because the authorities are using the vaccination as a tool to deport asylum seekers. This has happened before, and it has caused fear among asylum seekers. I can't let that happen to me because I have no place to go. I am afraid of not being vaccinated and getting seriously sick. This fear has affected me a lot. Even if you are vaccinated, it is still possible to contract the virus, but it is likely to

affect you less. However, if you are not vaccinated, you never know how the virus will affect you. It is also a safety issue for others that I get vaccinated; it isn't just my health at stake here. I don't want to put other people's lives in danger, so I have been isolating myself a lot. Access to medical care, including the vaccine, is a basic human right. The vaccine should be easily accessible to everyone, but when it is weaponised, it becomes a whole other story.

I haven't been able to communicate and be around people because I am not vaccinated. I have been isolated now for a very long time. Because of this situation, I haven't been able to integrate or get to know anyone or go to any social gatherings.

”

HUNGARY

November 2022

“

**I can now take
care of myself,
not just fighting
for survival.**

Erzsi

36 years old

My name is Erzsi, I am a 36-year-old Roma woman and I escaped from an abusive relationship seven years ago. I have one daughter who is 17 years old. I grew up in a small village in East Hungary and I have three brothers and sisters. I run an association in my village, which I set up under the first lockdown when I was forced to return home because of the closures. I have two brothers working in the association, which deals with housing, health, education and the employment of local Roma. My association also deals with environmental pollution, because we Roma live in a very polluting way. Because of our poverty, for example, we burn everything to keep the house warm.

In the past, I learned to keep quiet, and it led to depression. It never occurred to me to seek professional help; a Gypsy woman in the countryside has no one to turn to. One New Year's Eve, when I came home, my husband wanted to have sex with me, but I didn't want to, so he tried to strangle me with a string. I could feel death coming, I was about to let go of my life, but then he looked me in my eyes and let me go. Then I went out into the cold night without a bag, without a coat, leaving my child behind. She was ten years old at the time, and I never got my daughter

back. In the meantime, I met my current partner, who is a gift from God, and finally after six months I was able to see my daughter again. My daughter turned 18, so I can now see her, and she can come to me. I want to help my daughter to stand up for her own interests and fight for the things she wants. Our relationship is much more direct, better and calmer.

Today I run a camp for Roma refugees from Ukraine. This work in the refugee camp helped not only me, but also my association, because the development here is also done by the association. My life has improved in the last two years. I work a lot, but I do my work in a way that suits the good Lord. I give love, respect and support to people, and that's how we managed to fulfil our dream and build a house in my village. I can now take care of myself; I am not just fighting for survival. I will finally graduate soon so that I can go to university. Now I have the freedom to take care of myself. The COVID-19 period gave us a lot. We founded the organisation which completely changed my position in the village, and now the stakeholders take us seriously. We never get help from outside, but my partner and I do everything together. Now our money is enough, we can live normally.

Today I run a camp for Roma refugees from Ukraine. This work in the refugee camp helped not only me, but also my association, because the development here is also done by the association.

IRELAND

November 2022

“

Becoming a first-time parent during the pandemic was a strange experience.

Darren

33 years old

I took over all the night feeds straight away, and meanwhile I was thinking "What have we done? What kind of a world have we brought our child into?". COVID-19 was there, and we were dealing with having a baby- it was a hard time.

My name is Darren, and I am 33 years old. I am married and I have two daughters under the age of three. My wife gave birth to our first baby a week into the first lockdown. Becoming a first-time parent during the pandemic was a strange experience. During that time, the health services were all over the place, as they went through a crazy time. Consequently, basic care for our baby wasn't given, the public health nurses weren't doing the visits to check on babies, and all contact was over the phone.

I felt for my wife, it was very hard for her. What affected me the most was that the baby was born through C section, and she had to stay in the hospital for three days and I wasn't allowed to visit them due to pandemic restrictions. My wife took a year out of work and spent her maternity leave just cooped up in the house. She suffered from post-natal depression for a good few months after giving birth. She was very unwell, both mentally and physically. So, I just had to put myself aside for a while and take over. I took over all the night feeds straight away, and meanwhile I was thinking "What have we done? What kind of a world have we brought our child into?".

COVID-19 was there, and we were dealing with having a baby- it was a hard time.

One thing we did find helpful was going out walking. Just going out for a walk in the area, it was something that we stuck to. Every evening we'd go out for about half an hour, just for fresh air. My wife's mother lives with us, so that was great. We wouldn't leave the baby with her for the whole day, but she was there if we needed a break for an hour or two. It didn't really have an effect on us as a couple, we have a very strong marriage. I have a lot of admiration for my wife, and everything she has done. From my own perspective, as a new parent, I feel that the government was great at bringing in certain things, like the social welfare payments for people who lost their job. But there were a lot of oversights, particularly regarding the health services around childbirth.

It was a much more pleasant experience this time around with the birth of our second daughter. It was amazing. My wife burst into tears the first day when I went to visit her. She did not get to experience that with our first daughter.

”

SERBIA

February 2022

“

**I hope that we as
a human race have
learned something,
that we can do
something to prevent
the planet from dying.**



Advaita

51 years old

When the pandemic hit, my first feelings were claustrophobia, fear of the unknown, confusion and anxiety. It has catastrophically affected the trans community. There has already been great poverty in trans community due to the discrimination and violence we are exposed to, but the pandemic intensified it all. There was an immediate shortage of female hormones. Due to COVID-19, no one from the trans community could access trans-specific services. Many lost their jobs. COVID-19 is a tremendous collective trauma for our community! I work for a trans organisation that has a hotline, and we do advocacy programs. These advocacy programs have entirely stopped. We have focused solely on providing essential assistance. We had to stop self-help groups. We had a case of a trafficked woman. We had consultations with the state's anti-trafficking team, and they didn't know what to do with her. They didn't want to allow her to be in women's shelter because she is a trans woman. However, two anti-trafficking women's organisations paid for an apartment and provided everything for her. Our association's budget is very minimal, and we could not provide such support to her without them. They proved to be feminist allies in this case. Unfortunately, this is not often the case when

it comes to the trans community.

Many members of our community are homeless and engage in prostitution. The state has no answer to either of these things. We were traumatised by a feeling of helplessness, that there was nothing we could do. There was no plan, and it was exhausting. It was also hard for those of us who provided psychological assistance services. We could not organise getting supervision assistance, so many service providers have experienced burnout.

Just before the pandemic hit, I had tried to emigrate, and I failed. It felt like a crisis to me. Even before COVID-19, I had that feeling of isolation, depression and loneliness. The support I gave to others helped me. It fulfilled me that I could at least do something good and valuable for the trans community. I also consider myself an activist for animal rights and environmental protection. I have been a vegetarian for thirty years. I was glad to see that nature was recovering when the whole world stopped. I liked that about COVID-19. Slowing it all down allowed introspection. At least, I hope that we as a human race have learned something, that we can do something to prevent the planet from dying.

There has already been great poverty in trans community due to the discrimination and violence we are exposed to, but the pandemic intensified it all.

Concluding remarks

Below are the concluding remarks and reflections written by the editors drawing from our experiences of collecting the narratives as part of RESISTIRÉ and from our collective efforts assembling this book.

Challenges, resistance, inspiration

The stories presented in this book are particularly insightful because they offer a clear view of the meaning of intersectionality, looking at how the protagonists' lives are affected by multiple aspects of vulnerability and how Covid-19 amplified them.

At the time of publication of this book, more than three years have passed since the outbreak of the pandemic. In order not to forget the lessons learnt, the narratives collected are a testimony to the direct and indirect effects that policies have had on disadvantaged groups. The book also shows how civil society initiatives can be taken as examples of better stories in terms of the support they provided in the most difficult of times.

Finally, these pages illustrate how this crisis has been an opportunity for many to reflect on themselves, on a personal level, to care more about their own well-being, to find the strength and the courage to take important decisions and to fight even harder for their rights and those of their communities.

The hope is that readers, at the end of this journey, will find something to rejoice about, something to be indignant about, but also inspiration from the concept of better stories, for ourselves and for others.

Claudia Aglietti

Resilience, change, power

Being part of the RESISTIRE team that collected narratives describing people's experiences of life during the pandemic allowed us individually and as part of the wider project team to garner a greater insight into the myriad ways people experienced the pandemic. The narratives illustrate the complex ways people dealt with and experienced COVID-19 and the impact existing inequalities had on people's daily lives. Strikingly, the importance of connection and the impact of imposed social isolation shone throughout many of the narratives. As did how micro everyday strategies helped people to get by. Strategies such as daily walks and for many people engaging with nature – a free and powerful tool that helped many people get by.

The narratives show many stories of resilience and how the pandemic was a catalyst for change for many people however, it is important to acknowledge and to try and take lessons from the struggles a lot of people experienced. The narratives also illustrate that for many individuals at the margins of society the pandemic made already difficult situations even more of struggle. Not everyone had the time or space for introspection and/or personal growth. However, my abiding take aways from the narratives are that for many people the pandemic led to positive changes, strengthened communities and that the pandemic allowed many people to pause, regroup and reassess what they value in their lives.

Caitriona Delaney

Hope, care, resistance

Being part of the editing team for this book has been an emotional and humbling experience. It has been a privilege to read and engage with the narratives shared by individuals from such diverse walks of life, both those included in this book and many others that will stay with me for the rest of my life. Even before joining my dear colleagues in co-editing this book, I felt fortunate to have conducted interviews with people in Turkey, who not only generously shared their experiences with me but also allowed me to reflect on my own journey as a woman in Turkey, a country suffering from multiple intersecting crises, of which the pandemic was just one. As such, the narratives in this book not only demonstrate the resilience, resourcefulness, and solidarity exhibited by the interviewees as they navigate through immense challenges and seek ways to cope and resist in their daily lives. They also awaken us to certain privileges and challenges we have that we may be unaware of.

The significance of this book lies in its ability to humanize the statistics and policies, amplifying voices that are often silenced and overlooked. It exposes the deeply ingrained systems of inequality that persist in our societies while revealing personal and collective struggles in the face of adversity. What strikes me the most is how it demonstrates the interconnectedness and interdependence of us all despite our differences and the urgent need to place care, in all its dimensions, at the center of our lives and recognize it as a social, political, and economic issue that encompasses more than individual actions. This goes beyond caring for our loved ones; it extends to caring for other human beings, nature, animals, and last but not least, ourselves. That is perhaps why the pandemic period has not only produced or exacerbated challenges and gendered inequalities, but it has also provided us with a unique opportunity to reconsider our place in this world, both as individuals and as a species, reflect on ourselves and our lives, and resist what is deemed 'normal'.

I believe the precious stories shared in this book, weaving pain and trauma with hope and solidarity, will inspire the readers to find, cherish, and cultivate their own better stories, individually and collectively, and make them even better.

Pınar Ensari

Solidarity, historic testimony, hope

I could not imagine a better way of saying farewell to the RESISTIRÉ project than working on such a special book, with an incredibly kind and supportive group of people. I feel blessed that I had the chance to work in such an amazing environment. The book has been the result of a learning process, of thorough discussions and open exchanges. We treated these voices with care, but also tried to take care of ourselves in the process as much as possible. This is the most important takeaway for me. I believe the book is a powerful testimony of the challenges we lived through during the pandemic crisis, but also, and most importantly of the opportunities for change that came when the entire world stopped and we were forced to reflect on what was important. Asking themselves such questions, the many voices collected in this book responded with a renewed commitment to solidarity or discovered a sense of community. Others realised that they needed to take care of themselves, embraced their true self, or took the time to explore their needs and feelings. All these voices together offer a glimpse of a better future of equality, solidarity and care.

This book has the unique value of building a collective memory of the pandemic years through the voices of people in all their diversity, and particularly of those at the margins. Feelings and opinions are reported as they were originally narrated, without any attempt at fitting them into a preestablished narrative or silencing uncomfortable experiences.

This book is a lived testimony that invites the readers to take a journey, put themselves into other's shoes and open their mind to the possibilit(ies) of change in the present.

Elena Ghidoni

Solidarity, alterity, resilience

I believe this collection of narratives contributes to making sense of what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic at both the individual and collective levels. It gives the opportunity to the reader to reflect on these hard times and perhaps find echoes in some voices, while also providing access to other life stories and points of view. Having firsthand access to a diverse range of people's stories makes the complex effects of the pandemic tangible and highlights the concrete implications of such a global phenomenon on individual lives.

Furthermore, this book shows that lessons can be drawn especially from experiences that are frequently silenced but demonstrate remarkable resilience. By looking at marginalised voices and exploring how these individuals either resisted by themselves or organised collectively, it demonstrates how this period acted as a revealer of structural inequalities, local orders, and the importance of caregiving. End to end these narratives provide systemic insights into how the pandemic shaped our everyday lives and generated long-lasting change. It highlights the significance of caregivers and frontline workers, as well as the determinant role of social benefits, welfare services, and public institutions in navigating and recovering from this period. In many narratives, civil society organisations also play an important role in organising solidarity and connecting people with each other.

Overall, the accumulation of these stories puts our own into perspective and helps us to think about how to organise collectively to face current and future crises.

Audrey Harroche

Unity, fortitude, transformation

This book has shown the multifaceted nature of inequality and the ways in which the mental wellbeing of individuals was affected by the pandemic. It has brought to light the pervasive nature of structural marginalisation in regards to barriers to equitable healthcare, financial stability, employment security and safe spaces. This book however has also shown the resilience and adaptability of individuals in the face of immeasurable change, and provides a tool for readers to engage with and learn about the struggles faced by those around them. Many of those struggles that were hidden have now been brought to light, alongside the courage and human spirit that prevailed amidst the most challenging circumstances.

While numerous tragedies occurred during the pandemic and many suffered from the effects of structural inequalities and policy decisions, it is heartening to see the number of individuals who experienced significant personal growth, and also how individuals joined together to create communities of support and kindness. It is evident from the stories in this book that the pandemic was a period of great reflection, and allowed a reconsideration of the priorities in people's lives, leading to positive change. We therefore hope that these stories raise questions among the readers regarding what change needs to occur, and how we can become more resilient in the face of future crises to ensure the safety and wellbeing of every member of society.

Alexis Still

Solidarity, hope, memory

This book serves as a powerful reminder to me that I am part of a broader community extending beyond my immediate surroundings: my neighbourhood, my city, and my country. It has highlighted the shared experiences of suffering, but also the hope and resilience that unites us all. Throughout the process of working on this book, I have been going through some of the most politically challenging times where my very existence has been ignored and attacked as a queer-feminist activist living in Turkey. As I bear witness to the immense inequalities and rights violations endured by LGBTQIA+ individuals, women, migrants/refugees, children, seniors, animals, and nature, this book has acted as a shield, reminding me of the hope that emerges from solidarity as well as the relentless determination of individuals to better themselves and the lives of others.

This book aims to represent your voice - if not yours, then that of your friend or even of your next-door neighbor or perhaps of a passerby on your street. Undoubtedly, the personal experiences of some of us are reflected within these pages. And each story leaves a critical note in history and in this very moment, echoing the profound nature of how political the personal is. I hope that these stories will provide solace, foster a sense of solidarity and ignite hope to anyone who reads them. Moreover, I truly wish this book is that it will resonate with my fellow activist friends and human rights defenders worldwide, reaffirming their worth and reminding them of the crucial role they play.

Nazlı Türker

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Appendix

RESISTIRÉ narrative methodology

The stories presented in this book are collected through narrative interviews. A narrative interview does not follow the traditional question and answer format of other interviewing methods. Rather, the narrative methodology involves a conceptual shift, from presuming that respondents have answers to questions asked by an interviewer, towards respondents being narrators of their own experiences in their own voices (Chase 2005; Kim 2016).

The importance of marginalised voices being heard in their ‘own voice’ is a key tenet of the RESISTIRÉ project. The narrative methodology employed in this project provides a vehicle to do this. Indeed, narrative inquiry allows for “stories [to] be told, particularly the stories of those who might have been marginalised or alienated from the mainstream, and those whose valuable insights and reflections would not otherwise come to light” (Kim 2019: 14).

Data collection

The narrative interviews collected under the RESISTIRÉ project have been conducted and reported by 30 national researchers (NRs) across the EU27 (except Malta), Iceland, Serbia, Turkey, and the UK, with the aim to gather data on the lived experiences and impact of the outbreak and its policy responses (Axelsson et al. 2021).

Interviews conducted during July 2021 and February 2022 started with a general background question followed by an open, ‘grand’, question: “Can you describe to me how you have been affected by COVID-19 and what this has meant for your situation?”. The goal of the interview was for the narrators to remain the central actor throughout, and for the interviewers to be an ‘active listener’.

Interviews conducted in November 2022 saw a slight change to the open question employed. The specific focus was to collect examples of better stories of lived experiences and the individual strategies employed to cope with crises such as COV-

ID-19, as well as the intersecting inequalities that vulnerable groups encounter daily. To this aim, the opening questions used were “How have you handled your situation on an everyday basis during the pandemic? Have you experienced ways to cope with the negative effects of the pandemic that have been more successful than others? Has the pandemic led to improvements in your situation? Are there things that you or others have done that have helped you?”. NRs then followed up with more specific questions to garner a better understanding of the participant’s experience. This last round of interviews sought to explore the ways that the narrators coped with their situation, their agency, and their strategies.

Reporting the story in a narrative template

Upon completion of the interviews, the NRs summarised their findings using a project template and wrote each story as told by the person (using ‘I’), including translated quotes from the narrator when possible. The narrative template used in RESISTIRE included descriptions of personal characteristics (such as gender, age), as well as a mention of the life situation and background of the participant, the problem(s) described by the narrator, the causes and the consequences as understood by the narrator, the relation to COVID-19, the sequence of events as described, the places/locations and the main actors involved in the story told.

The template also included a section where the NRs could select which domains (care, decision-making and politics, education, human rights and health, gender care gap, gender-based violence, gender pay and pension gap, work/ labour market) and inequality grounds (age, class, disability, ethnicity, religion, sex/gender, sexuality, gender identity, nationality) were covered in the interviews, and sections for especially telling quotes, main findings and a headline that the NRs felt captured the essence of the story.

Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, following the procedure required by the European Commission or, if applicable, as required by national regulations. Participant information and consent forms were provided by the pro-

ject which NRs could adapt to national regulations if necessary. In cases where the interview was conducted online, consent was given verbally and recorded. Each narrator was given a pseudonym.

Sampling

Snowball sampling and purposive sampling were employed to collect diverse experiences in order to highlight the intersection of inequalities and identities, thus reflecting the gender+ approach of RESISTIRÉ. Purposive sampling in the third cycle mainly focused on respondents who could provide a narrative that could be analysed using the better story perspective. In terms of number, the target was six narratives per country for cycle one with this increasing to ten narratives in cycle two and cycle three.

Analysis

Initial analysis involved reading through all narratives and taking notes on the themes of interest. This inductive process resulted in a myriad of possible themes. All the narratives were subsequently imported into NVivo where they were assigned attributes based on the domains chosen by the NRs. All narratives have been analysed to produce insights to inform future COVID-19 policy responses. Furthermore, insights and knowledge gaps on the impacts on inequalities stemming from COVID-19 responses have also been identified.

All project outputs are available at <https://resistire-project.eu>.



RESISTIRÉ
Reducing gendered inequalities
caused by COVID-19 policies

