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RESISTIRÉ
Reducing gendered inequalities caused by COVID-19 policies

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Partners

ESF
ORU
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OBU
K&I
TUD
SU

[2] PU: Public, PP: Restricted to other programme participants (including the Commission Services), RE: Restricted to a group specified by the consortium (including the Commission Services), CO: Confidential, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)

UDEUSTO
ISAS
Sciensano
UGOT

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List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
EC	European Commission
NAR	Narrative 'C3NAR_SE02' refers to 'third cycle' + 'narrative' + country code ('SE', Sweden) + specific narrative number from that country ('02')
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SLB	Street Level Bureaucrat 'SLB_SE02' refers to 'street-level bureaucrat' + country code ('SE', Sweden) + specific interview number from that country ('02')

Summary

The aim of RESISTIRÉ is to understand the unequal impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak and its policy and societal responses on behavioural, social and economic inequalities and to work towards individual and societal resilience. RESISTIRÉ does so by collecting and analysing policy data, quantitative data and qualitative data in the EU27 (except Malta), Iceland, Serbia, Turkey and the UK, and translating these into insights to be used for designing, devising and piloting solutions for improved policies and social innovations, which in turn can be deployed by policymakers, stakeholders and actors in the field across different policy domains. The project relies on an eleven-partner multidisciplinary and multisectoral European consortium and a well-established network of researchers in 30 countries.

Throughout the course of RESISTIRÉ, research conducted consistently show how already vulnerable and marginalised groups have become even more vulnerable and marginalised; existing inequalities have increased, and new ones have emerged (Axelsson et al. 2021; Cibin et al. 2021, 2022; 2023; Harroche et al. 2023; Sandström et al. 2022; Stovell et al. 2021, 2022). Significantly less overall attention has been paid to practices that may transform inequalities and very little attention has been given to individual agency. The third and final research cycle in RESISTIRÉ therefore looked to the future and shifted focus to individual 'better stories' (Georgis 2013; Altınay 2019) and strategic forms of agency (Lister 2004, 2021) of marginalised groups during the pandemic. With an analytical focus on gender+ inequalities, this report addresses the following overall research question: What kind of agency is practiced, or available to practice, by individuals and street-level bureaucrats, with an emphasis on what enables and what hinders strategic agency?

The report is based on two methods of qualitative data collection: narrative interviews with individuals strategically recruited based on their marginalised or vulnerable profile and semi-structured interviews with front-line workers in public authorities, so called 'street-level bureaucrats'. The material is extensive; all in all, it includes 321 individuals, who generously shared their knowledge and experiences. The semi-structured interviews with street-level bureaucrats (n=24) covers nine European countries and were conducted by consortium partners. The narrative interviews (n=297) were conducted by the consortium partners and a network of 21 national researchers covering the EU27 (except Malta), and Iceland, Serbia, Turkey, and the UK. The interview material was analysed thematically, drawing on Ruth Lister's (2004, 2021) typology of agency and an intersectional approach to gender which acknowledges the centrality of gender and the mutual shaping of multiple complex inequalities (Walby et al. 2012).

Main findings from the third cycle

The narrative interviews show the variety of issues individuals dealt with during the pandemic. These include: social isolation, fear and loneliness; constraints on relationships; inactivity, boredom and, conversely, increased burdens of paid and/or

unpaid work; limited access to services and economic uncertainty and hardship. Individuals responded to these changes to their everyday life in different ways:

- They found ways to cope with everyday life during the pandemic and 'got by' using the social support available to them but also through practicing different forms of self-care.
- Some objected to COVID-19 measures that in many ways reinforced their vulnerability, and they 'got (back) at' authorities through everyday resistance, primarily by not following pandemic-related rules and guidelines.
- For some, the pandemic offered a welcome change of pace and a chance to re-evaluate life, sometimes resulting in positive life changes. The pandemic could also act as a catalyst for change by making a previously difficult situation unbearable. For example, some women 'got out' of abusive relationships because of the pandemic.
- Many individuals 'got organised' either informally or formally to exchange information and offer each other material, emotional and social support. Online communities and neighbourhood support networks were particularly common. Some of these initiatives went beyond offering support and tried to effect change on a wider scale. Quite often, the starting point in these narratives is the narrator's own adversity (e.g., members of the Roma community, people living with disability, survivors of gender-based violence etc).

Two of the 'better stories' that can be drawn from the narrative interviews relate to solidarity. One is that the pandemic shone a spotlight on mental health and the awareness that others were suffering too made it easier for many to address their mental health issues. Second, many narrators – though far from all – reported a stronger sense of community as a result of the pandemic. It is important to make these better stories of solidarity visible, as they provide a 'counter narrative' and insights into acts of support and into the ability to act and have an impact on society. They show how it is possible to exercise agency to counter-act shaming and othering of vulnerable and marginalised groups. These can be seen as starting points for the formulation of collective political claims and for practising strategic political forms of agency (Rikala 2020: 1034), and for building counter-narratives (Georgis 2013; Lister 2015).

The interviews with street-level bureaucrats identified several enabling and hindering factors when providing support during the pandemic relating to the proximity of the service; the digital divide; shortage of staff and resources (including time); bureaucratic rules; disregard/distrust of rules and information deficits.

Street-level bureaucrats can be understood as being in a position of power in their function as gatekeepers to a variety of resources during the pandemic. At the same time, in their positions as front-line workers during the pandemic, street-level bureaucrats can themselves be considered a 'vulnerable group', and like the persons interviewed for the narratives, they made use of different strategies to resist, redefine, transgress and

collectively organise in order to cope with and change the system or simply to get by and help their clients to do the same:

- The results show many accounts of actions by street-level bureaucrats to 'make do with what you have', i.e. what has been described as adaption or improvisation to the changing situation, being loyal to the organisation and adhering to top-down priorities while at the same time recognising the declining conditions.
- They also show many instances of creativity and innovation. Some solutions involved small changes in everyday management, others the discovery of new tools for their job. Some strategies have been decisive in trying to reduce inequalities among vulnerable groups, but the interviews show how finding alternative and creative solutions on the job is only partly in the hands of street-level bureaucrats. They will be truly effective only if paired with supportive institutions and policies.
- More transgressive practices include street-level bureaucrats not following the rules or finding ways to work around them. It also includes examples of street-level bureaucrats as the target of such practices. Clients often displayed frustration and anger over flaws in the system which the street-level bureaucrats many times recognised but had little power to improve.
- Finally, street-level bureaucrats engaged in collaborative initiatives with colleagues in a community of practice type of organising. Such organising inspired new practices and helped relieve stress. However, many also reported difficulties in getting their voice heard when trying to report upward in the organisation on obstacles such as difficulties in providing service according to the needs of different target groups.

RESISTIRÉ
Reducing gendered inequalities caused by COVID-19 policies

Table of Contents

List of tables and figures

Introduction

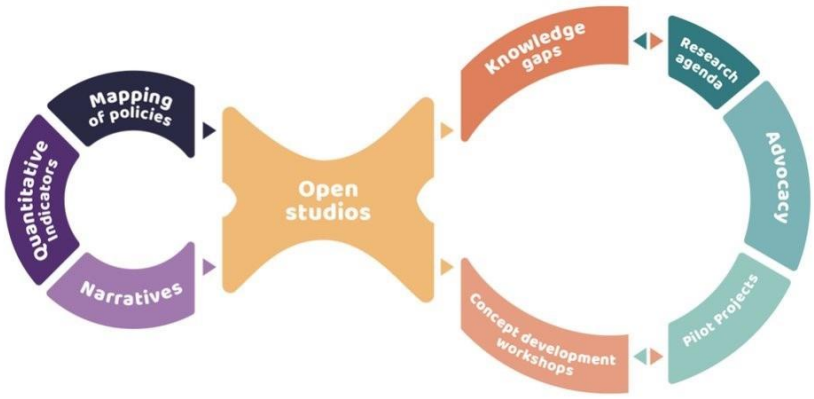
The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the introduction of national policy responses and recovery measures to slow infections, prevent deaths, and build recovery. Responses have left already marginalised groups further behind (Axelsson et al. 2021; Sandström et al. 2022). Gender mainstreaming and intersectional responses have been scarce (Cibin et al. 2021, 2022), but the impacts of COVID-19 and its responses, like those of other crises, have been highly gendered. These gendered impacts intersect with sex, age, disability, ethnicity/race, migration status, religion, social class and other inequality grounds (Stovell et al. 2021, 2022; Lokot & Avakyan 2020; Walter & McGregor 2020). Their impacts and consequences – intended or not, short-term or long-term – are uneven, unequal, uncertain and disproportional for different groups (Cumming et al. 2020).

The aim of RESISTIRÉ is to understand these unequal impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak and its policy responses on behavioural, social and economic inequalities and to design solutions and innovations to work towards individual and societal resilience. To meet these aims, RESISTIRÉ conducts policy analysis, quantitative research, and qualitative research to inform the design of innovative solutions, including operational recommendations, new research agendas, and pilot actions.[3] It responds to the outbreak through co-created and inclusive strategies that address old and new, durable and temporary, inequality patterns in and across different policy domains. The domains include work and the labour market; the economy; the gender pay and pension gaps; the gender care gap; gender-based violence; decision-making and politics; human and fundamental rights; and environmental justice.

RESISTIRÉ builds on a gender+ theoretical approach (Verloo 2013; Walby et al. 2012), including the mutual shaping of gender with sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, nationality, class, age, religion/belief, disability, and gender identity. The overall methodology is based on a step-by-step process running in three cycles over 30 months (April 2021 – September 2023). All project activities are organised in these three cycles, feeding results into one another, including feedback loops between the cycles (see Figure 1). The project relies on a ten-partner multidisciplinary and multisectoral European consortium, and a well-established network of researchers in 30 countries.

[3] For RESISTIRÉ project publications and datasets, see the RESISTIRÉ community on Zenodo: https://zenodo.org/communities/resistire/?page=1&size=20

Figure 1: RESISTIRÉ methodological step-by-step three cycle process



Throughout the course of RESISTIRÉ, there has been a rapidly growing pool of research on the COVID-19 pandemic which has focused on the negative effects on inequalities of already marginalised groups, the lack of attention in recovery policies to these negative effects, the importance of inequalities in building resilience to future crisis, and the recognition of the pandemic as a potentially disruptive moment in history that may lead to changes in the system. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, studies conducted in individual countries or by regional/international authorities have recorded the many negative and devasting impacts of the pandemic on gender and gendered inequalities (Maestripieri 2021). This research, as well as the data collected in the first two cycles, consistently show how already vulnerable and marginalised groups have become even more vulnerable and marginalised; existing inequalities have increased, and new ones have emerged (Axelsson et al. 2022; Sandström et al. 2022). RESISTIRÉ's research has shown that policy and societal responses have not sufficiently addressed these deepening inequalities (Cibin et al. 2021, 2022, 2023). Thus, the people most affected by COVID-19 and its policy and societal responses are often those who are already vulnerable and often disadvantaged by multiple inequalities and their intersections: age, dis/ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, religion or belief, sexual orientation, social class/socioeconomic background, and other inequality grounds. RESISTIRÉ has identified and explored inequalities and how these increase, for which groups, and with what effects, in different policy domains throughout the pandemic (Axelsson et al. 2021; Cibin et al. 2021, 2022, 2023; Harroche et al. 2023; Sandström et al. 2022; Stovell et al. 2021, 2022, and the potential solutions and way forward to address and reduce them, including operational recommendations for different stakeholders (Kerremans et al. 2021; Kerremans & Denis, 2022; Živković et al. 2021) and agendas for future research (Sandström & Strid 2022; Živković et al. 2022).

While the research community has seemed almost exclusively focused on problems, inequalities, barriers, and specific groups experiencing specific problems, there has been significantly less overall attention on practices that may transform/change

inequalities and indeed, very little attention on the better outcomes and individual agency. The third and final research cycle in RESISTIRÉ therefore looks to the future and shifts the focus to individual 'better stories' (Georgis 2013) and strategic forms of agency (Lister 2004, 2021) of marginalised groups during the pandemic. The research interest here is the lived experiences of individuals and their strategies to cope with crises, such as the COVID-19 public health emergency. In contrast to the first and second cycles, this third cycle analysis thus focuses on the individual agency of the informants during crises, by learning from individual better stories.

To this end, the partners and national researchers have conducted individual narrative interviews to collect insights on lived and observed experiences connected to the pandemic outbreak itself and its policy and societal responses, narratives from individuals who have been strategically recruited based on their marginalised or vulnerable profile, but who have experiences of using different strategies to better cope with life in times of crisis. Partners have also interviewed front-line workers in public authorities, so called street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1971), to explore the agency of those meeting marginalised or vulnerable groups as clients. Street-level bureaucracy, as a sociological theory, seeks to 'explain the working practices of front-line workers in public services and the ways in which they enact public policy in their routine work' (Cooper et al. 2015: 376). From the results emerged in the first and second cycles, it is clear that the interviewed experts encountered a significant increase in inequalities, perceived though their direct experiences as well as that of their clients. However, prior to now, we did not have evidence about how individuals in our sample coped with these inequalities. In this report, we set out to try to understand what micro-strategies and actions were utilised by marginalised or vulnerable individuals in everyday life in order to cope with crisis.

While the focus of the analysed experiences is still gender+, that is, gender is an organising principle while highlighting intersections of identities and inequalities, the approach in the third cycle differs somewhat from the first two cycles. Firstly, because the focus is on narratives that capture individual better stories – a concept borrowed from feminist anthropologist Dina Georgis (2013). Secondly, because the analysis explicitly uses Ruth Lister's work on strategic agency (2004, 2015). Thirdly, because we turn to those that serve as the frontier of government responses to crises and emergencies and whose experience and knowledge are essential for better stories to unfold, the street-level bureaucrats (Gofen & Lotta 2021). The report thus explores the idea of the better story within individual experiences of strategic agency, where the better story 'focuses on the ways in which the pandemic can be seen as a catalytic moment for change' (Harroche et al. 2023: 8). Hence, this report addresses the overall research question: What kind of agency is practiced, or available to practice, by individuals and street-level bureaucrats, with an emphasis on what enables and what hinders strategic agency?

Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological approach, including the theoretical framing, methods and materials, used in the deliverable.[4] All data collection and analysis have been guided by the RESISTIRÉ conceptual gender+ intersectional framework and analysed using better stories (Georgis 2013) and strategic agency (Lister 2004, 2015, 2021). The data collection relies on the consortium partners and a network of national researchers, covering 30 countries (see Acknowledgments), using interviews with individuals across Europe sharing their personal and professional experiences and knowledge of life during COVID-19. The data cover 30 countries: the EU27 (except for Malta), Iceland, Serbia, Turkey, and the UK.

Theoretical framing

The theoretical framing is based on the RESISTIRÉ gender+ intersectional approach, which highlights the centrality of gender relations and gender inequalities, yet simultaneously considers how and acknowledges that gender inequalities are mutually shaped by other inequalities (Walby et al. 2012). It is also framed by the concept of better stories, which is used understand inspiring practices, the better ways of responding to the pandemic (Georgis 2013). Finally, the data collection and analysis utilise the framework of strategic agency, as developed by Lister (2004, 2015). The focus of the analysis combines the individual better stories and the agency of marginalised groups during the pandemic and beyond. This theoretical approach allows for an analysis of what kind of agency that is practised by marginalised groups, with an emphasis on what enables and what hinders strategic agency and makes visible stories that are more inclusive and representative of marginalised communities, thereby disrupting dominant COVID-19 narratives and challenging the power structures that are maintained through these dominant narratives. In order to better understand the conditions under which agency could be practiced during the pandemic we have also applied the framework of strategic agency and better stories on the analysis of expert interviews with street-level bureaucrats (e.g., frontline workers) that have been in close contact with and providing support to vulnerable groups.

Better stories

The concept of better stories, as developed by feminist anthropologist Dina Georgis, is used on both a micro and meso level. On the micro level, it is used to understand marginalised persons as engaged subjects who make use of resources from everyday life, whereas on a meso level it can be used to understand initiatives with a potential for social change (Georgis 2013). Better stories – on each of these levels - are those that are inclusive and representative of marginalised communities and that challenge dominant narratives and power structures, including those that uphold the separation of the personal and political. These stories are seen as valuable because they can promote

[4] For the overall project methodology, please see https://resistire-project.eu

social change and create more just and equitable societies. Georgis argues that the stories we tell shape our understanding of the world and ourselves, and that dominant narratives often exclude and marginalise certain groups of people. She argues that by telling stories that are more inclusive and representative of marginalised communities, we can disrupt these dominant narratives and create more equitable and just societies. Further, stories keep the personal and the political together (Altınay 2019).

By challenging the power structures that are maintained through dominant narratives, we can empower marginalised communities and work towards a more equitable future. This kind of storytelling can be a powerful tool for social change and for creating more just and equitable societies. Hence, a story that is inclusive, representative of marginalised communities, challenge dominant narratives and power structures, and disrupts the personal/political divide, could be considered a better story. In RESISTIRÉ we also use the concept of better stories to investigate and inspire future change initiatives in a more practical sense. We seek to find those factors described in better stories that enable or hinder change by analysing 'what works'. In the narrative inquire this is notable in how the interviews are analysed and the narratives constructed paying attention to elements in the story told by the informant (described further in the methodology section).

Strategic agency

The concept and framework of strategic agency (Lister 2004, 2021) are used to provide an understanding of what kind of agency is practised by marginalised persons, what enables and what hinders individual agency. Agency, in this respect, entails behaviours and actions to cope with vulnerability and aspects of marginalisation to make the best of a given situation and imagine and strive for even better visions and situations in the future. This form of agency is always exercised in the context of social relations, which can be simultaneously both enabling and constraining (Lister 2004: 13). Hence, agency is understood as situated in the complexity of the everyday struggles of vulnerable and marginalised persons, it may involve a multitude of different actors and practices, such as the social security system, health, and medical care system, education system, working life, and it may be constrained and shaped by existing inequalities and entangled with gendered social expectations such as care responsibilities.

Lister proposes a framework with four forms of agency which constitute different ways in which individuals and groups can assert their power and influence in society: getting by, getting out, getting back at, and getting organised (see Table 1). These forms of agency are not mutually exclusive and often work together to empower marginalised groups.

Table 1: Forms of agency

Personal	*Political*

Everyday	**'Getting by'** 'Getting by' refers to everyday-personal forms of agency. Lister characterises it as 'the fight to keep going' in the face of adversity' (2004:130). It includes different coping strategies and multiple ways of managing one's life that all involve exercising agency (Rikala 2020). It is important to notice that as Lister explains: 'Getting by can all too easily be taken for granted and not recognised as an expression of agency. Yet study after study demonstrates the hard work and skill that are needed' (Lister 2015).	**'Getting (back) at'** 'Getting (back) at' combines the everyday and political dimensions and includes all types of everyday resistance, from rejection of conformist values or negative labelling to doing unrecorded work or violating the regulations of the benefits system. Drawing on feminist and Foucauldian constructions of 'the political', Lister regards this type of agency as political in the broad sense of the word, underscoring the significance of the everyday micro-politics practiced in this form of agency (Rikala 2020).
Strategic	**'Getting out'** 'Getting out' covers the personal-strategic activity aimed at escaping adverse circumstances. For Lister (2004:145), these routes 'themselves are forged by structural and cultural factors, which can assist or obstruct the exercise of that agency'. Therefore, the ability of people to exercise such agency reflects the resources they can draw on and the opportunities and constraints they face due to their social position (Rikala 2020).	**'Getting organised'** 'Getting organised' refers to collective strategic agency and political action. In local communities, this may take the form of collective self-help, such as strengthening informal social networks with others in similar positions, or more direct political action like welfare rights campaigning. However, in order to develop, collective agency requires a sense of collective identity, of belonging to a certain group of people with common interests and the articulation of collective political claims (Rikala 2020).

The description of the forms of agency in the table is taken from Lister (2004, 2015) and Rikala (2020)

Lister's forms of strategic agency can be applied to an analysis of gendered inequalities in several ways. First, Lister's concept of 'everyday resistance' can be used to examine the ways in which women and girls actively resist gender-based violence and discrimination in their daily lives. This can include actions such as refusing to conform to societal gender norms, speaking out against discrimination, and seeking support and resources to cope with violence and abuse. Second, Lister's concept of 'redefining the terms of engagement' can be used to examine how women and girls are working to change the societal and cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality. This can include efforts to change laws and policies that discriminate against women, as well as efforts to challenge harmful stereotypes and cultural practices that marginalise women and girls. Finally, Lister's concept of 'collective action' can be used to examine how women and girls are organising and mobilising to demand rights and equality on a

larger scale. This can include grassroots activism, political campaigns, and social movements aimed at challenging systemic gender inequality and achieving gender equality. It's worth noting that Lister's forms of strategic agency are not limited to women and girls, they can be applied to any group that's marginalised by society. Lister's four forms of agency provide a framework for understanding how individuals and groups assert their power and influence in society by using everyday strategies and tactics, escaping oppressive situations, resisting and challenging systems of oppression, and building collective power, all of which are transgressive practices that challenge and disrupt dominant norms and expectations, as well as dominant narratives and stories.

Street-level bureaucrats

The theories and research around street-level bureaucrats have a fairly long history tracing back at least to the 1980s, when Lipsky (1980) first described them as a specific category of civil servants. Street-level bureaucrats interact directly with citizens in public service provision while often facing, and having to balance, the demands of public policies and legal requirements with the needs of the individuals and the communities they serve. Welfare services are provided through both public, private or even a mix between the two, e.g. through semi-private public companies. The term street-level bureaucrats, in the way it has been discussed, have often incorporated those workers that deliver welfare service in any of these types of organisations. We have therefore chosen to use the term throughout the report even when the person is employed by a private company. We consider the street-level bureaucrats as essential in two ways. First, for understanding the institutional aspects of strategic agency, e.g. what hinders or enables strategic agency in its various forms, as outlined above, where street-level bureaucrats we believe play a big role. Second, because street-level bureaucrats are themselves often part of the vulnerable groups we focus on.

In the following we will discuss some aspects of the situation of street-level bureaucrats, in general and in the crisis in particular, that are important in order to understand their role in responding to clients' strategic agency, and in exercising strategic agency both for themselves and for their clients. Part of the high importance placed on the role and work of street-level bureaucrats is linked to citizens' trust in government (Smith 2012) and as we have discussed earlier, trust is a key issue in the perceived support that vulnerable groups get from society.

Street-level bureaucrats exercise what has been described as discretionary power, where they have the possibility, and duty, to take decisions that will affect in what way and with what consequences policies will be implemented. One of the main concerns relating to street-level bureaucrats in research is how they conform to the policies and regulations they are set to implement (adherence) on the one hand, and how they alter the content and intent of policies (divergence) on the other, and by doing so becoming 'policy-makers', rather than 'policy-takers'. Three distinct ways of discretion are suggested by Affolter (2021: 1) the leeway which street-level bureaucrats have in dealing with cases (clients' situation), and their obligation to make decisions; 2) decision-makers'

actions of interpreting legal rules when applying them to specific cases or situations, and; 3) street-level bureaucrats' actions of 'establishing the facts' of a case (Affolter 2021: 6). Street-level bureaucrats' discretion power and the actions they will take are also influenced by a combination of their own understanding of gender equality and discrimination, by their professional role, and - in relation to these - the perceived balance between the needs of an individual and public interest (Callerstig 2012).

Street-level bureaucrats during the pandemic

Street-level bureaucrats were often at the frontline of the pandemic and were those who, on a daily-basis, met with groups in their communities who faced problems as their every-day lives changed drastically because of the pandemic. They are civil servants (or those commissioned to act on behalf of the public) tasked with implementing policy responses to the pandemic; providing acute and essential support to those who suffered the consequences of the pandemic and upholding basic public services during the crises. They are health workers, teachers, police offices, social workers, mental health counsellors, employment officers and many more who had to continue working and increase their efforts during the crisis.

The vulnerable groups who had their life affected by the pandemic, and the professionals that worked with mitigating these effects, faced similar but different obstacles as they were closely linked to each other. The situation of vulnerable persons was shaped by the encounters with welfare service providers just as the results of welfare service provision depended on the action of those who were meant to receive it. Many of the so-called front-line workers or street-level bureaucrats during the pandemic are also themselves part of the vulnerable groups we study, which created a double or triple burden of trying to help others while also trying to cope oneself. One example is the female-dominated care sector in which women, not seldom with immigrant backgrounds, working in nursing homes during the pandemic were faced with difficult dilemmas related to their own situation, the situation of their relatives and the situation of their care receivers. As Cox et al. (2021) describe: 'In this environment, workers must balance, in addition to low status, low likelihood of advancement, and low rates of pay, an existential threat to themselves or their immediate family members. (…) bringing the job home with them might also mean exposing vulnerable family members to the virus. Or, to protect their families, they may take precautionary steps and remain at work, thereby denying care and assistance to their loved ones.' (Cox et al. 2021: 42). The pandemic created a situation in which already challenging working conditions were put under even more stress affecting in particular street-level bureaucrats.

The work of street-level bureaucrats under crises, while being at large understudied, had been somewhat discussed. Some argue that the work of street-level bureaucrats has always been characterised by features resembling conditions under crises; they have to both adapt and respond to rapidly changing circumstances and support persons in difficult and life affecting situations (Gofen & Lotta 2021). Also, the COVID-19 crisis has been described as somewhat different from other crises. First, there was little prior experience from handling this type of crises in 'ordinary' crisis management, and second,

because of the uncertainty and massive scale of the crises (Boin et al. 2020). In general, street-level bureaucrats in their everyday capacity are of great importance because, as Gofen & Lotta (2021: 4) put it: 'As the frontline of public service delivery in ordinary times, street-level bureaucracy, by definition, serves as the frontier of government response to crises and emergencies.' At the same time this puts heavy pressure on street-level bureaucrats as their specific professional knowledge risks being obsolete in times of crises and replaced with lack of orientation, information, and experience (Gofen & Lotta 2021).

A crisis in general increases the need for and dependency on public services provided by street-level bureaucrats. In case of COVID-19, the crisis rapidly expanded from being a public health emergency into being an economic and humanitarian crisis and many countries started to implement policies beyond the mere health dimension, involving a wide range of service provision including vital public services in health, education, policing, and social services. Following this, Gofen and Lotta (2021) conclude that street-level bureaucrats during COVID-19 have experienced 'a higher, sudden pressure on demand for essential public services, accompanied by a dearth of resources to meet the needs and demands of citizens, as well as a lack of information entwined with vague and contradictory messages from all managerial levels' (Gofen & Lotta 2021: 8). Also, the physical distancing policies, which is a particular feature of the COVID-19 crises, place a severe restrain and alter the conditions under which street-level bureaucrats operate on a daily basis. The conditions for service provisions have varied, some had to continue face-to-face, whereas others shifted into digital provisions/online delivery (e.g., teaching), and yet some became a mixture between the two. The situation for street-level bureaucrats also changed during the course of the pandemic: the more tasks and policies being imposed, the more the policy ambiguity and street-level bureaucrats' discretion power increased, allowing more space for manoeuvre even though there were variations (Gofen & Lotta 2021).

There are many overlaps from studies on how street-level bureaucrats have used their discretionary powers with Lister's descriptions of strategic agency (see Table 1). Similar patterns when comparing street-level bureaucrats' responses during the pandemic broadly have been highlighted, themed as adaptation, resistance, and innovation, or the more nuanced adaption and innovation (Gofen & Lotta 2021). In a study of nursing homes, Cox et al. (2021) found the workers (many in a precarious situation themselves) were typically engaged in three different forms of strategies in relation to the policies imposed/not imposed: resistance, improvisation, and innovation. Resistance entailed breaking rules that were considered wrong (similar to Lister's 'getting back at'); improvisation was instead strategies, often out of loyalty with the clients to ´make do with what you have´ often placing themselves at great risk, one example was working without enough staff or sufficient protection supplies (similar to 'getting by'). Innovation, instead, refers to the spontaneous creation of new ways of working to counteract the shortcomings of official policy responses, one example inventing new meeting routines (similar to 'getting out'). Whereas innovation strategies are inherently bottom-up, grounded in the expertise of street-level bureaucrats, creating solutions to the changing

needs of supported individuals, improvisation is more related to adherence to top-down priorities (Cox et al. 2021). Cox et al. (2021) link these forms of agency to the theoretical framework of Albert Hirschman (1970) who describes responses to what is seen as non-satisfactory or declining conditions within an organisation as the choice between either quitting the job or voicing concerns to improve the situation (where voicing concerns can be understood as a 'getting organised' strategy, either internal or external). The latter, often out of a sense of loyalty, obligation, or duty, often leads to staying even though conditions are declining (Hirschman 1970).

Implications for the RESISTIRÉ project

The focus on better stories and agency of marginalised groups is important in understanding the transition from vulnerability and social exclusion. It provides insights into how to support, rather than hinder, individuals' ability to act and have an impact on society. Focusing on agency also makes it possible to counter act the shaming and othering of vulnerable and marginalised groups and instead provide a counter-narrative (Lister 2015) while at the same time avoiding individualistic interpretations, i.e., placing the responsibilities for transforming structural problems on individuals.

While the focus in this deliverable is individual agency, previous research has revealed how attempts of individual agency can either fail or become successful depending on the responses from the social and structural context. When institutional practices restrict attempts of strategic agency, a person will soon return to the struggles of everyday life, often with growing resentment and cynicism towards the system. When, on the other hand, strategic agency is supported by institutional practices, pathways out of distress and towards transformation may emerge. Correctly and efficiently targeted institutional support may then enable and create a 'sense of belonging', not only to society but also with others in distress. This, in turn, is a starting point for the formulation of collective political claims and for practising strategic political forms of agency (Rikala 2020: 1034), and for building counter-narratives (Georgis 2013).

The narratives and interviews with street-level bureaucrats analysed in this report serve as an input to policy learning and social innovation. By re-sharing real-life accounts, deeper learning can take place on how initiatives to deal with crises can be made in an inclusive way and how and why transformation into a more equal/equitable society is possible on a more general level. Thus, bringing together better stories and strategic agency allows an analysis of narratives that deepen the understanding of the impact of COVID-19 with a focus on individual better stories and the agency exercised by vulnerable groups to cope with existing and growing inequalities during the pandemic.

Methods and materials

The data collection relies on the consortium partners and a network of partners and national researchers in 30 countries, applying a standardised methodology coordinated

via guidelines, grids and online training and sessions and monitoring. The materials have been gathered via interviews with individuals across Europe sharing their personal and professional experiences and knowledge of life during COVID-19. They were gathered in two steps, each using different methods. The first step collected data via narrative interviews on the individual lived and direct experiences of the impact of the outbreak and its policy responses (n=297). These data cover the EU27 (except for Malta), Iceland, Serbia, Turkey, and the UK. The second step collected data via semi-structured expert interviews with street-level bureaucrats on their professional experiences in dealing with clients during COVID-19 in (n=24). These latter data cover nine countries: Belgium, Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey.

All data collection has been guided by policy domains drawn from the EC Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (EC 2020) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UN Women 1995) domains, both central to RESISTIRÉ (see Table 2).

Table 2: Definitions of key domains in the report and RESISTIRÉ

Decision-making and politics	'There are still far too few women in leading positions. Be it in politics or government agencies, at the highest courts or on company boards. This is the case even if gender parity exists at the lower levels' (EC 2020: 13).
Gender care gap	'Thriving at work while managing care responsibilities at home is a challenge, especially for women. Women often align their decision to work and how to work with their caring responsibilities and with whether and how these duties are shared with a partner. This is a particular challenge for single parents, most of whom are women, and for people living in remote rural areas for whom support solutions are often lacking. Women also carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid work, which constitutes a significant share of economic activity'. Some emerging issues: 'Sharing of care responsibilities at home is crucial', 'Insufficient access to quality and affordable care services is one of the drivers of gender inequality in the labour market' (EC 2020: 11).
Gender-based violence	'Violence that is directed against women [or transgender persons] because they are women, or that affects women disproportionally'. Examples include 'sexual harassment (also online), abuse of women, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced abortion and forced sterilisation, early and forced marriage, so-called "honour-related violence", trafficking in human beings' (EC 2020: 3).
Gender pay and pension gaps	'Women still earn on average less than men. Accumulated lifetime gender employment and pay gaps result in an even wider pension gap, and consequently older women are more at risk of poverty than men'. [...] 'Eliminating the gender pay gap requires addressing all of its root causes, including women's lower participation in the labour market, invisible and unpaid work, their higher use of part time work [or alternative forms of work] and career breaks, as well as vertical and horizontal segregation based on gender stereotypes and discrimination' (EC 2020: 10f).
Work/	Many women still experience barriers to joining and remaining in the labour market. Connected topics: 'Improving the work-life balance of workers is one of the ways of addressing the gender gaps in the labour market.' [...]

labour market	'Mainstreaming gender in public administration, state budgeting and financial management.' [...] 'Social and economic policies, taxation and social protection systems should not perpetuate structural gender inequalities based on traditional gender roles in the realm of work' (EC 2020: 8).
Economy	As opposed to the previous domain, the domain of the Economy addresses issues at the macro-economic level, rather than based on individual or organisational considerations. 'Some women are structurally under-represented in the labour market' (EC 2020: 7). 'Women remain under-represented in higher paid professions. More women than men work in low-paid jobs and sectors, and in lower positions' (EC 2020: 10). Macro-economic considerations also call into play wider disparities among countries and geopolitical inequality, in turn evoking gender+ intersectional perspectives.
Human and fundamental rights	Severe socially restraining measures raise profound concerns about compliance with fundamental rights, e.g., non-discrimination; dignity; justice and equality; work and education; access to health; privacy and data protection, access to digital technologies. Within RESISTIRÉ, the areas of health and education are particularly considered, particularly in the first and second research cycles.
Environmental justice	Women are among the most affected by climate change. Meanwhile, their voices are often ignored in environmental planning. They also have less access to land and productive resources (UN Women 1995). Gender+ perspectives are imperative to understand the differential effects of environmental issues, as in the case of mobility patterns, availability of public transportation, commuting distances, availability of and access to green urban areas.

Narrative interviews

The first step of data collection included narrative interviews, a qualitative research method that involves inviting participants to tell their own stories and experiences in their own words. The technique is used to collect and share a person's story which entails both a research methodology and a mechanism for storytelling i.e. both a way of telling a story, and a way of knowing (Lyons 2007). Narrative research, reflects on:

> *[O]ur experiences to construct stories. In other words, narrative thinking is an attempt to create a fit between a situation and a story schema about some experiences or events that consists of who, what, how, and why. It describes the flow of events and actions (Kim 2019: 4).*

The narratives may provide the space for re-thinking; alternative interpretations; reflections on implicit and taken-for-granted norms and provide insights into the life and thoughts of vulnerable groups (Lara 1998). Stories have both intuitive and emotional elements, which are important complements to statistics and more impersonal and generic accounts of inequalities. Narratives as a technique can make visible how multiple sources of inequalities intersect, as well as the situational and contextual nature of inequalities from a single person's perspective. The function of narratives here is to find the better stories and to analyse agency. Partners and national researchers collected

narratives that provide examples of stories – better stories – of lived experiences from individual strategies to cope with crises, such as COVID-19, and the many intersecting inequalities that marginalised and vulnerable groups of people need to deal with on an everyday basis. The focus has been on the ways in which these individuals have coped in difficult circumstances, and by using which forms of agency.

Recruitment and data collection

The informants (n=297) were recruited, interviews conducted and reported by 30 national researchers and partners in the EU27 (excluding Malta), and Iceland, Serbia, Turkey, and the UK (coordinated and monitored by K&I). In two cases, one interview generated two narratives (Austria, Germany) and due to recruitment difficulties, one national researcher recruited only seven informants (Luxembourg). Hence, the total number of narratives is 299. In the third cycle, national researchers had the option to interview informants that had been interviewed once before - either in the first or second cycle – whom the researchers believed could offer experiences entailing a better story and a form of agency. Out of the 297 informants, 247 were new, while 50 were also interviewed in previous cycles (19 in the first cycle and 31 in the second) (for narrative results in previous cycles, see Axelsson et al. 2021 and Sandström et al. 2022).

The national researchers, in turn, were recruited via the extensive network of professional connections among members of the consortium. Most of them are researchers and experts with a focus on gender and inequalities and worked as national researchers in the first and second research cycles of the RESISTIRÉ project. The data collection, training sessions and monitoring were coordinated by Knowledge and Innovation (K&I). All researchers were provided with guidelines and templates for reporting, co-developed by the partners. An information and training session, repeated twice, was organised prior to the start of the recruitment, and regular helpdesk and monitoring activities were in place throughout the four-month period when the narratives were collected and reported (September-December 2022).

The researchers recruited informants using selective and purposive sampling. Purposive sampling includes relying on the researcher's own judgment to select informants who fit the purpose of the study: informants were thus selected based on the researcher's beliefs that their experiences could contribute to the aim of the narrative collection (Campbell et al. 2020), including the potential of the informant to provide a narrative that could be analysed using the better story perspective and experiences of coping and agency. Each researcher was asked to recruit ten informants with diverse lived experiences through a sample of diverse inequalities and identities, thus reflecting the gender+ approach of RESISTIRÉ, including women, men, and non-binary persons.

Interviewing

The narrative interviews started with information about the project. The informants were given time to read the project information and consent sheet and ask questions about what they were consenting to. A general background question opened the interviews,

followed by an open-ended 'grand' question to invite the informant to share their experience. The aim was for the informant (the narrator) to remain the central actor throughout the interview, and for the interviewers to take the role of an 'active listener'. The researcher (the inquirer) listened actively, paraphrased back to ensure understanding, and, if needed, asked clarifying questions (Lindsay & Schwind 2016). Hence, in contrast to the structured or semi-structured interview, the narrative interview does not follow a traditional question-answer format. Instead, the narrative interview entails a conceptual shift away from the idea that informants have answers to questions posed by an interviewer, and toward the idea that informants are narrators with stories to tell and in their own voices (Kim 2019; Chase 2005).

The interviews opened with general questions: '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?' While the overall approach was the same narrative inquiry technique as the first two research cycles of RESISTIRÉ (Axelsson et al. 2021; Sandström et al. 2022), the researchers could occasionally ask clarifying questions to better understand the experiences shared and to ensure the interview included the information needed for the analysis but had to be careful not to interfere too much with the story being told. Finally, to verify that the researchers had understood the narrators correctly, the interviews ended with the interviewer retelling the story back to narrators, giving them a chance to correct any misunderstandings.

Reporting: construction of narratives

After the interview, the researchers summarised their findings and constructed the narrative report, using the provided template. The guidelines included instructions to write the narrative, as far as possible, in the informant's own voice and to highlight the intersections of identities and inequality grounds, leaving space for how social identities can be both empowering and oppressive and how a person can be both a victim and in various ways exercise agency even in difficult situations.

The main part of the summary consisted of the narrative, using first person, and including translated quotes from the informant. The narrative included a description of personal characteristics and demographics of the participant, such as gender, age and life situation, the problem(s) described by the person, the causes and consequences as understood by the person and how they relate to COVID-19, the sequence of events as they are described. The template also included sections to select the inequality grounds and policy domains that the narrative related to, five to ten keywords that capture the narrative, and especially telling quotes.

The template also included sections to select the different forms of strategies that the informant practiced, and the narratives were written with a focus on describing individual practices/agency according to the forms of strategies outlined in the theory section, i.e.,

'getting by', 'getting out', getting (back) at' and 'getting organised'. To this end, the researchers were required to include what the informant shared related to:

- The main challenges.
- The main events and actions described.
- The involved actors (e.g., friends, employer, unemployment office, criminal justice system etc.).
- Causes and consequences of events or chain of events.
- Triggers of a specific situation (e.g., specific encounters or actions that set events in motion) and the effects on individuals.
- The places/locations.

In particular, the narrative reports were to display the factors, actions, events, or other situations that have made a positive difference to the informants' lives (especially in relation to policy or civil society responses) and the institutional factors that have enabled (or obstructed) a person's agency.

Analysis of the narrative interviews

In the third cycle, national researchers submitted their narratives in three different waves, each wave consisting of three to four narratives per country. After the first wave had been submitted and the narratives had been read through, the national researchers were invited to a briefing where they could get feedback on the work they had done so far and ask questions about how to proceed with the data collection. Each batch of narratives were read carefully as they were submitted, and notes were taken on possible themes relating to the theoretical framework and the third cycle research questions. All 299 narratives were compiled in an Excel database which was later imported into NVivo. The national researchers were asked to select which forms of agency were present in each narrative (see Table 6). Using this information as a starting point, NVivo was used to sort the narratives into four groups, one related to each form of agency. The four forms of agency were then read again and coded one at a time according to both pre-defined themes and new themes emerging in the process. Since more than one form of agency could be selected for each narrative, there was considerable overlap between the forms. By the time coding on the fourth form of agency started, most narratives had already been read several times and the coding structure had been refined with codes added, split or merged as the work progressed. For each form of agency, the focus was on experiences and events directly related to the pandemic and the ways in which the informants acted in response to these experiences and events. Specific attention was also paid to the salience of different inequality grounds, and their intersections, in each form of agency.

Overall, the narratives give an extensive and multifaceted picture of the agency exercised by individuals in vulnerable positions during the COVID-19 pandemic. To illustrate this multitude of voices, the results section contains many 'quotes' from the narratives. Quotes shorter than 40 words are included in the main text, for longer quotes, block quotes are

used. It is important to bear in mind that the quotes are rarely direct quotes from an individual, but rather a quote from an already processed and constructed narrative written by the national researcher. Also, all names used in the results section are the pseudonyms given to the narrators by the national researchers which is why the naming might appear inconsistent (e.g. some are given a letter rather than a name and some have been given quite colourful nicknames).'

Overview of the narrative material

The number of narratives is 299. In total, 297 informants were recruited. Of these, 79% (n=235) were women, 16% (n=47) were men, and 5% (n=15) were non-binary. Most informants (n=131, 44%) were 20-45 years old (see Table 3: age of the informants and Table 4: vulnerability profiles of the informants).

Table 3: Age of the informants

Age groups	Number	%
15-29	50	17%
30-45	131	44%
46-64	83	28%
65+	33	11%
Total	**297**	**100%**

Table 4: Vulnerability profile of the informants (= the reason for being recruited), number

Vulnerability ground	Number
Sex and/or gender	209
Social class/socioeconomic background	139
Age	92
Disability	54
Nationality	34
Ethnicity	37
Religion/belief	12
Sexual orientation	25
Gender Identity	15
Other*	64

** Other includes: Job and/or income loss (12), mental wellbeing (10), physical wellbeing (7), frontline worker (6), domestic care burden (5), urban-rural divide (4), migrant/refugees (4), gender-based violence victim/survivor (3), care for a child with disability (3), activism (4), young age (2), refusal of vaccine (1), widow (1), pregnancy (1), conscientious objector (1).*

Expert interviews with street-level bureaucrats

The aim of the expert interviews in this cycle is to investigate deeper the interplay between the individual and institutional levels and how societal systems are supporting or hindering strategic agency facilitating resilience and recovery on an individual level. To reach this aim, public authority professionals tasked with assisting vulnerable groups in mitigating and coping with the inequalities produced by the pandemic and its policy and societal responses – the so-called 'street-level bureaucrats'- were interviewed. A set of five sub-questions were explored:

1. What are the experiences from first-hand service providers of the strategies and actions of the citizens they serve?
2. How do first-hand service providers respond to these actions and why? What dilemmas and obstacles do they experience?
3. How do first-hand service providers experience the development of the service provided by them before, during and beyond the pandemic?
4. Do first-hand service providers believe that the pandemic has changed or improved the way service is provided in any way and in that case, how?
5. What do first-hand service providers suggest needs to be improved to better support the agency of individual clients?

Recruitment

The informants (n=24) were recruited, and interviews conducted and reported by the eight RESISTIRÉ partners involved in this task and covered different professions and areas of expertise (see Table 5 for a summary of the street-level bureaucrats interviewed in each country). Recruitment took place via the partners own networks and through snowballing, and occasionally with the help of the RESISTIRÉ network of national researchers. Partners were encouraged to recruit street-level bureaucrats that had a direct connection to the civil society initiatives mapped in RESISTIRÉ Work Package 2 (see Cibin et al. 2023). The street-level bureaucrats were civil servants i.e., public authority officials, with first-hand experience of working to provide public service to citizens and/or enforce the actions required by a law and public policies. They directly interact with citizens on an everyday basis and have considerable discretion in the execution of their work. Examples include police officers, social workers, schoolteachers, health professionals, safety inspectors, legal-aid lawyers, and employment officers. The partners were asked to diversify their selection, to avoid interviewing repeated professional profiles.

Table 5. Street-level bureaucrats interviewed by service sector and country

Service sector/street-level organisation	Number	Countries
Social Services	7	BE, ES, SE, TR (2), CZ (2)
Prison/probation	2	CZ, UK
Education	3	BE, IT, UK
Healthcare	3	IE, UK, IT
Recreational/leisure activities	1	LU

Immigration services	1	IE
Housing	1	IE
Police	2	IT, IS
Employment services	1	SE
Family counselling	2	IT, TR
Youth counselling	1	SE

Interviewing

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide adapted to the theoretical approach. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via online video calls. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews started with information about the project and by asking the interviewed person to sign the consent form. The first question asked was to describe the background of the informants, including the organisation they worked for and their role within the organisation. The second section of the interview included questions on the challenges caused by the pandemic to the clients and how they have responded to them, aimed thus to grasp the clients' agency. The third section focused on the ways in which the informant was able to support the clients in their efforts to cope with their situation, and whether the informant has encountered obstacles to support their clients. A fourth section was dedicated to the working situation of the informant and how the pandemic has affected this situation, including also more general questions on informants' opinions on the role of street-level bureaucrats at political level and in public debates. In the fifth section, the informant was asked to provide an example of a case in which the situation had improved for the client. The last section comprised question on what could be done to improve the situations of the clients, the lessons learnt from the pandemic and whether the informants' organisations would feel more prepared to respond effectively to new potential crises.

Reporting

Once the data collection was completed, the partners in each country summarised their results in an interview report, using the provided template. First, a general background section on the situation of the street-level bureaucrats in the country was given by the partners, including for example information about the street-level bureaucrats' independency in relation to their clients, their influence at political level, or their reputation in public debates. After summarising the background information of the interviewed person and the reason(s) for interviewing, each of the partners conducting the interview was asked to provide a summary of the informant's description of the problem encountered by the clients during the pandemic, paying particular attention to relevant inequality grounds, intersections and domains. In this section, the partners were asked to describe the different forms of agency that the informant mentioned to have been adopted by the clients, classifying them in the four strategies (getting by, getting out, getting back at, getting organised). The third section of the template was dedicated to describing opportunities/enabling factors that allowed the clients to improve their situation, or that the informant encountered to support the clients; and

obstacles/hindering factors that impeded clients' support. In this section, the partners were also asked to summarise the form(s) of agency the street-level bureaucrats practised (if any). The template included then a section on improvements made during the pandemic and shortcomings identified by the informant which are relevant to face new crises. A last section included a summary of the case description given by the informant.

Analysis of the expert interviews

The recordings and transcripts of the interviews were analysed using Lister's framework of forms of agency, trying to identify how both street-level bureaucrats and their clients found solutions to their specific situations. The agency framework is effective in finding a common ground between the interviewees, who dealt with very different environments and problems, allowing us to compare experiences from a variety of public sectors. Moreover, by investigating the agency which each interviewee had, we can try to understand the changing role which street-level bureaucrats experienced, shifting from policy-takers (administering policies) to policy makers (having to find ad hoc solutions to help their constituents, clients, and communities in the absence of clear guidance from institutions). The results of this qualitative analysis are grouped following Lister's framework to help readers understand the common solutions adopted in each situation, highlighting the resilience and/or endurance of street-level bureaucrats and their central role in the community they are part of. We also investigate the institutional factors that these workers identified as hindering or enabling in their ability to provide a service, ultimately hoping to understand how future policies can better help them respond to crises such as the one created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results: Narratives

This section presents the results from the narrative interviews. It is structured according to the theoretical framework that guided the analysis, namely Ruth Lister's (2021) forms of agency. After a brief introduction to how the different forms of agency are distributed and how the results should be interpreted, each of the four forms of agency is discussed in turn. The section concludes with a summary of the results that pays particular attention to how these forms of agency relate to inequality.

Forms of agency

The narratives were categorised by the researchers conducting the interviews (see Table 6), using Lister's (2004, 2021) framework. This framework categorises actions, not actors, and any given actor could potentially exercise all forms of agency. In the template used by the national researchers, multiple selection was possible; hence the total is greater than the total number of narratives. The results show that 'getting by' is by far the most frequently occurring form of agency in the narratives: 242 of the 299 narratives are indicated as examples of this form of agency. The second most common is 'getting out', with 167 narratives. Actions towards the political end of the spectrum are less common,

especially 'getting (back) at' which is identified in slightly less than a third of the narratives.

Table 6: Distribution of narratives per form of agency

Form of agency	Number
Getting by	242
Getting out	167
Getting (back) at	97
Getting organised	130

Quantifying qualitative data is always somewhat problematic. In this case, the fact that thirty individual researchers have been involved in the classification and the data is generated through a very open, narrative interview method adds to the difficulty. For that reason, table 6 above is best read as an indication of how frequent the different forms of agency were in the narratives rather than absolute numbers. As we will see in the remainder of this section, the line between the different forms often blurs, and alternative interpretations are sometimes possible. On a similar note, when different themes are presented below, exact numbers regarding how many experienced a certain problem or took a certain action are avoided. This is to avoid the impression that the findings can be generalised in a statistical manner (e.g., '50% of the population suffered financially'). Such generalisations would be difficult to make as the population is loosely defined as 'marginalised people' and the level of representativeness is difficult to establish. Also, as the open interview method relies less on set questions and more on what the informant decides to share, it is difficult to ascertain how many actually experienced a certain problem. Some effort has been made, however, to indicate how common a certain theme was in the narrative material analysed and signposts such as 'many', 'several' and 'some' are used. As a general rule of thumb, when referring to the sample as a whole rather than a subgroup, 'many' would mean at least thirty, 'some' could be as little as five. Finally, effort has been made to ensure that all thirty countries are presented in the section below but due to the space constraints contextualisation of the country-specific examples is limited.

Getting by

The everyday, personal form of agency that Lister calls 'getting by' often goes unrecognised as an expression of agency; it is taken for granted and seen as simply 'getting on with things' (Lister 2021: 130). For that reason, acknowledging 'getting by' as a form of agency can shed light on the effort it takes just to get through the day when the circumstances are difficult.

Whereas Lister (2021) discusses the various ways in which people cope with everyday life when living in poverty, this section explores different strategies of coping with everyday life during the pandemic. Naturally, as people's experiences of the pandemic varied a great deal, their responses to it also differed. The first thing that needs to be

established is what people were coping with, and in the narratives some common themes can be identified. First, people were coping with fear, not least the fear of being infected with the virus. Second, many were coping with social isolation and loneliness, often leading to mental health issues that had to be coped with. Third, while loneliness might have been less prominent for those living with others, isolating together also put a strain on many relationships. Fourth, and partly related to the theme of isolation as well, people were coping with inactivity and boredom. Fifth, on the opposite end, there were those whose level of activity increased and who had to cope with increased burdens of paid and/or unpaid work. Sixth, many struggled with limited access to services, not least medical services and, finally, economic uncertainty and hardship was widespread.

Although close to all narrators faced at least some of the above-mentioned difficulties, the 'coping resources' available to them were not equally distributed. Starting with the first theme, coping with fear, those belonging to at-risk groups because of old age or underlying medical conditions were particularly affected. In addition, those who lived or worked with at-risk groups often expressed fear of infecting others. The narrators devised different strategies for protecting themselves, and others, from infection. This usually involved following guidelines strictly and avoiding social contact as much as possible. Remote working, when not already enforced by employers, was sometimes requested by employees in order to stay safe. Martina, a 36-year-old woman from the Czech Republic, had been dealing with mental health issues since childhood and working from home was an important part of her coping strategy:

> *My mental state also improved once my employer officially established a home office. The home office gave me peace of mind, having things under control and not worrying about returning to the office and potentially being exposed to COVID-19. Due to my pre-existing conditions, I was allowed to stay in the home-office mode during the summer months when other colleagues had to come back to the office (C3NAR_CZ01).*

However, not all had the possibility to isolate and had to leave their home for work or other reasons. They had to find other ways of coping. Dahlia, a 40-year-old living in Belgium, became pregnant during the pandemic which intensified her fear of catching the virus. She developed a meticulous cleaning regime to cope with this fear:

> *I did a lot of things to avoid being sick. I cleaned more. Every time my husband came home from work, I didn't let him come home like that, he took off his shoes, he put his clothes in the entrance and I put them in the washing machine right away, and really I cleaned a lot because I was afraid. Also after shopping, I would clean the fruit, the vegetables with vinegar. It was a bit difficult because of that. It was tiring, I even washed the doors, I put eucalyptus and mint in the house to disinfect the air (C3NAR_BE10).*

For many narrators, the feelings of fear eased over time. Sometimes because the

circumstances changed. For example, when vaccination became available it did ease the fear of many.[5] Others came to the realisation that the fear itself was damaging their mental health and made more conscious efforts not to give in to fear. Interestingly, a number of narrators stated that they stopped watching the news for this reason. Romina, a 67-year-old woman from Romania, was caring for her husband during the pandemic and she stated that 'the news did more harm for us than the virus':

> *[My husband] refused to go out because of the risks that he heard about on TV, but his panic was so big that he even stopped being active inside the home […] At one point he fell on his knees begging me to not force him to go outside anymore. I never saw him in this position. This was a shock and from that moment on I did not turn on the news channels anymore. We would only watch cartoons and videos. I devised small games for him, I would read to him, I would engage him in my crosswords, just to keep him distracted. It took two weeks of sheltering him from the news until he agreed to go out of the house (C3NAR_RO05).*

Other narrators reached a breaking point where they realised they needed professional help to deal with their fear, such as Pijus, a 29-year-old non-binary person from Lithuania:

> *The grandfather's death was a turning point. Quarantine was already bad, but quarantine plus this, I realised something needed to be done, something was happening to me. It was an existential load, that these things were related to death. Everyone dies and I will die. How to be with oneself and others when you realise your own mortality? A circle of dark thoughts and feelings started brewing. It was such a marathon and a whole series of factors that made me realise that I might be going crazy, I needed therapy (C3NAR_LT09).*

Isolation was in some ways a coping strategy for dealing with fear. In other ways, it was something that had to be coped with. When the national researchers were asked for keywords that indicated the main theme of the narrative, 'mental health' was by far the most common keyword with 42 instances,[6] and this figure by no means covers all the narrators who stated that the pandemic had a negative effect on their mental health. Crucially, social isolation was usually seen as the main cause of their mental health issues. One way of coping with isolation was to try to stay as connected to other as possible, albeit from a distance. Access to digital forms of communication in the form of videocalls and online chatgroups were commonly used aids, but quite often, an old-fashioned phone call could be just as valuable. Ave, a 76-year-old woman from Slovenia had struggled with anxiety and a 'sense of uselessness' since the death of her husband and

[5] Although it should be noted it also led to new fears for some, an issue that is explored further in the section 'getting (back) at'.
[6] In comparison, 'healthcare' and 'single mother' came joint second with 22 instances each.

her retirement a few years prior to the pandemic. The pandemic reinforced these feelings. She was happy that she had been able to maintain, even strengthen, her relationships but she still missed physical contact:

> *I even deepened my relationships with acquaintances. Those sorts of superficial relations become deeper. And I am very pleased with that. All my social contacts during the epidemic were limited to telephone conversations and email letters. It was some sort of contact, although it is not the same as meeting in person. Feeling of loneliness nevertheless stayed. I am a person who cares a lot about a touch, a hug. I missed that very much. Sometimes it seemed I even missed an expression of anger on somebody's face. You cannot see this when talking on the phone and I even missed that (C3NAR_SI09).*

Just as the possibility to protect oneself and others from infection was not equally available, so too were social resources to protect from the negative effect of isolation. Ava lived on her own which put her at a disadvantage. People who for various reasons had a limited social network, and for that reason relied more on casual connections less likely to be maintained also suffered. Immigrants, especially recent immigrants, stand out in this regard. They were also more likely to be separated from loved ones for a long time as border closures added an additional obstacle.

Living with family was not always beneficial, however. Being confined to a limited space with the same people for long periods of time was difficult for many. The size of the space, and the availability of outdoor spaces, played a role here. As did the nature of the pre-pandemic relationships. Several of the younger narrators found themselves living with their parents again after having lived independently for some time. Sometimes by choice as they wanted to be closer to family but more often out of financial necessity. The narrative of Viky, a 27-year-old non-binary person from Slovakia, shows that moving back home could be a painful transition:

> *Right before the pandemic I came back to Slovakia after 5 years of studying abroad. I moved back to my family that is quite conservative. I came back to a more traditional space, different from what I have been used to. Basically, I have to come back into the closet […] I tried to negotiate the boundaries, the privacy but my parents do not really accept them. So, it is a safe space but not totally, I really cannot do whatever I want to do. I feel safe in a physical sense, but mental safety is still missing (C3NAR_SK09).*

Viky coped with their situation with various distractions. They learnt to crochet, 'smoked a lot of weed' and got a bunny that 'didn't ask stupid things', something they found refreshing. This strategy of finding ways to 'keep busy' was used by many narrators. Sometimes it was used as a distraction from feelings of fear and loneliness, sometimes as a way to cope with boredom and inactivity. It could involve spending time on a new or old hobby, reading books, cooking more elaborate food. For many, 'keeping busy'

also included some form of exercise. The level of intensity of the exercise varied, as did the reasoning behind it. For many, it was a way of compensating for a more sedentary lifestyle during the pandemic, but it could also be an important part of maintaining a sense of routine during the pandemic, or a way of coping with increased stress. For several, exercise was a part of a wider strategy of self-care. The narrative of Rachel, a 45-year-old mother from Ireland, contains a couple of commonly used strategies of self-care (going for walks with friends and spending more time outdoors), as well a less common one (joining a mindfulness class):

> *Working from home was ok. But with my wife, me, and our teenage daughter all scrambling for space it was fraught sometimes! To handle the stress of the pandemic I had coping mechanisms, I did more exercise, met 'a friend in a park most mornings' and got to know nature a bit more. 'I wouldn't have traditionally taken breaks, even lunch breaks; I tended to work through, whereas with the new regime being at home I took more breaks. I went out into the fresh air, rejuvenated myself, and went back in again. I felt that helped and I started a new mindfulness class. That was helpful as it taught you techniques – how to be in the moment, that really was good' (C3NAR_IE03).*

As Rachel's narrative indicates, working from home could be the cause of increased stress, especially when combined with increased care obligations as children were also being educated from home. For many of those who continued working outside of the home, especially those classified as 'essential workers', the pandemic brought with it increased workloads. Alice, a 46-year-old migrant nurse living in Sweden, worked in a COVID-ward throughout the pandemic. The pressure was intense, not least because of a severe shortage of staff in her ward. While her employer offered some, albeit limited, support to help staff cope with the situation, Alice found it difficult to use these services:

> *Despite the fact that it was very traumatic at the beginning with patients dying and several dying alone […] I have not requested any care. I probably have PTSD, just like my colleagues. I dare not show that I am one of them, as I'm the one caring for many patients with PTSD. I should get help. You are not the wiser than yourself. In addition to therapy, we have a counsellor and a hospital chaplain. We haven't used that either. Most nurses come to work and throw themselves into whatever tasks they're given, and you just don't focus on yourself even if it is more than eight hours (C3NAR_SE04).*

Alice and her colleagues coped by throwing themselves into work, leaving the issue of their own trauma unresolved. There was simply no time for long-term coping strategies. They also faced a more normative obstacle in the sense that it can be difficult for the carer to recognise that they too need care. The end result was often burnout and many of Alice's colleagues had left the profession, leaving her under even more pressure.

The pressure that healthcare workers were under during the pandemic naturally also impacted on those receiving care. Mental and physical illness can be difficult to cope with under normal circumstances and, with a few exceptions, the pandemic made it considerably harder as access to healthcare was more limited. Both the nature of the care needed and the resources available to the individual determined how well they coped with limited access. The handful of narrators who suffered from long COVID stand out as particularly hard hit. As the condition is new, they were met with not only limited access to care, but a limited understanding of their actual illness. As a result, they were left with great uncertainty whether they would ever be well again. Regardless of which illness the person in question had, coping with it usually involved relying on friends and family for help. For partners, it usually meant providing care as well as taking a larger share of the housework. For children of older adults, it sometimes also involved offering financial support. Magda, a 75-year-old woman living in Serbia, said her son and granddaughter sometimes visited her but the most significant support came from her daughter, even though she lived on a different continent. When Magda took ill with COVID-19, the daughter came home to be with her:

> *I also got a bacterial infection due to Corona, and I couldn't eat anything or keep food down. The doctor said that I have to go into isolation and that I have to take some particular medicines that are not on the list of free medications. My daughter paid for it all. I don't know how I would do without her. My pension is only 37,000 dinars (about 300 euros). I, indeed, would not have survived without it (C3NAR_RS05).*

The social resources available to a person often determined how well they coped with not only illness, but a range of difficulties faced during the pandemic. At first sight it may not be obvious how this relates to agency but as Lister (2020: 142) notes, the 'ability to develop, sustain and activate the social relationships' that provide support does require agency.

Magda, who was quoted above, relied on her daughter for care and emotional support, but she also clearly needed her economic support. Liza, a 33-year-old mother from Latvia struggled to cope mentally with the pandemic and she ended up using her own money to pay for therapy, despite a promise of free sessions:

> *All my savings melted in the pandemic. In the winter of 2021, I started going to therapy because I couldn't take it anymore. 10 free therapy sessions were announced. To apply for free therapy, a referral from a family doctor was required. The family doctor 'destroyed' me, I had to beg her for a referral. I had a disgusting feeling. The free places ran out very quickly, so in the end I didn't get to the free therapy at all. I went for my own money. I poured all of myself into the children, the couple's relationship suffered. Work-home, nothing else. Great fear and stress of getting sick. To the point of hysteria (first pregnancy experience that made everything worse). Therapy was the only thing that helped (C3NAR_LV04).*

Magda and Liza were far from the only narrators who struggled financially during the pandemic. Although we apply Lister's agency framework to a wider range of distress than it was originally intended for, many narrators did also have to cope with varying degrees of poverty. The strategies used for coping with this economic hardship depended on the resources available to them and the nature of the constraints they faced. Andy, a 37-year-old Nigerian refugee living in Italy moved from a migration centre to his sister's house during the pandemic. His life had been hard in the centre, and it continued to be hard after the move:

> *[my sister] works here as a domestic worker. It was difficult, even for her, because with the arrival of the pandemic she was fired. But despite everything, she also provided for my livelihood. Sometimes, to help her, I would go out and ask friends for food. Italian friends, my sister's friends. They helped us a lot. I wanted to find a job. But in September 2020, a new lockdown came. We didn't know how long the pandemic would last. We couldn't leave home to look for work. So, we made do with the few resources we had. We ate half-rations to make the little food we had last longer […] After the second lockdown, I started begging in front of the supermarket. For more than a year, every day (C3NAR_IT02).*

One day a man approached Andy an offered him informal work. This eventually led to a formal contract with a different employer. Finally, Andy 'no longer risked expulsion from the country', and he was 'free from hunger' (C3NAR_IT02). In other words, Andy 'got out' of poverty in the end. Others moved in the opposite direction. They may have lived fairly comfortable lives before the pandemic but when everything closed down, they could no longer make a living and found themselves with little state support. The self-employed, especially those working in creative professions, stand out in this regard. When attempting to apply for financial support, they were faced with complicated bureaucratic rules and sometimes failed to qualify for support due to some technicality. Eeva, a 33-year-old artist and musician from Finland, had the following story to tell:

> *Economic issues were not a problem for me personally. I received unemployment benefits from Finland and managed to get some smaller grants for projects that I was able to do online. However, I know that some of my colleagues did not receive unemployment benefits. One needs to know how to communicate with officials. For instance, if a musician tells the employment office that they are practicing their instrument even though they are unemployed, they will not get any benefits. I have a guilty conscience because I didn't share this knowledge with all my colleagues in time. I didn't know that not everybody knows how to deal with unemployment office (C3NAR_FI07).*

As Eeva's case shows, getting support sometimes requires that one knows how to 'play the system' or how to bend the rules in a way that comes close to 'getting (back) at', the

form of agency discussed in the section below. The line between 'getting by' and 'getting (back) at' is indeed often-times blurred and 'getting by' is often interlinked with the other two forms of agency as well. 'Getting organised' can often enable people to 'get by' and with time, people often *get better* at getting by, which sometimes lead to long-term changes that come closer to 'getting out'. Finally, it should also be noted that while the pandemic made it more difficult for many to cope with everyday life, there were also those for whom everyday life, at least in some respects, became easier. We will return to some of these stories under the 'getting out' heading. For now, we will stay in the everyday dimension but move from the personal to the political side of things. In other words, we will look at agency as a form of resistance and a way of 'getting (back) at'.

Getting (back) at

Lister (2021: 147) highlights the sense of anger, despair and powerlessness often experienced by people in disadvantaged positions. Sometimes, though far from always, these feeling lead to everyday forms of resistance and defiance, i.e., informal ways of 'getting (back) at' the more powerful. Envisioning the everyday as a spectrum rather than two separate poles, many of the examples in this category fall somewhere in between and it is not always easy to separate 'getting by' from 'getting (back) at'. Quite often, an act can be an example of both. The typical example given by Lister (2021:149) is that violating the regulations of social benefits systems can be both a survival strategy (getting by) and a way of 'getting (back) at' state officials.

A reoccurring theme in the narratives is a sense of anger and discontent with how the pandemic has been handled. Although a majority of the narrators can be said to have expressed some discontent, the sentiment varied in strength. Some believed measures were generally well-intended but were critical of how certain aspects had been handled, others had lost all faith in public authorities. Two narrators from France expressed these sentiments particularly strongly. Claudine, a 64-year-old woman who lived on a small pension that she supplements with some sewing work, had the following to say:

> *As far as politics and government are concerned, it was a series of disasters: announcements, counter-announcements about masks, about everything! The ease with which politicians can finally take hold of the people! I said to myself that it's a virus, it's serious, but it gave a sort of bitter foretaste of what a dictatorship can be, how you can control people through fear. It generated power abuse, it was infantilising. And all the public services were closed. Those were really big failures (C3NAR_FR02).*

Isidora, a 52-year-old woman of Brazilian origin living in France, echoed Claudine's concern about the authoritarian elements of the pandemic measures. She also showed great concern about growing inequalities:

> *There was all this media coverage of covid, which benefited the politicians because they wanted to sort people, sort the rich and the poor. Inequalities*

> *have existed in France for a long time, except that they have become even worse with covid […] So they make a separation between people who have the means, and people who don't. It was a war against covid. But it was also a way to stop the yellow jackets [a very large social protest movement prior to the pandemic] and everything, it also served that purpose. There wasn't enough economic support. Except for the companies! (C3NAR_FR03).*

The question of *who* received support during the pandemic, and who was left without, is also a recurring theme in the narratives. A number of narrators expressed anger at being left without financial support. Limited access to healthcare and other services, including access to education and childcare, were also common sources of discontent. More common still were complaints about the lockdown measures that prevented people from seeing each other. Many also noted that these measures had unequal effects. In most cases, these sentiments did not translate into concrete actions but the brewing sense of resentment towards state officials, and the increasing distrust in their ability to handle the pandemic and its consequences in a fair and equitable manner could have far-reaching consequences in the long run.

There were also cases where this sense of injustice translated into acts of resistance that could be classified as getting (back) at. Deciding not to take the vaccine, despite strong recommendations and often heavy restrictions on the movement of unvaccinated people, is one such example. This theme is strongly linked to the previously mentioned sense of distrust that the public officials have the best interest of the people at heart. For some, not taking the vaccine could be a way of exercising agency in a position of very limited power: they are at least still in control of what they put in their own bodies. However, there are also those who speak from a position of relative privilege. To Daniella, a 37-year-old woman from Iceland, belonging to a disadvantaged minority group was something of a novelty:

> *I resent the criticism that I'm not doing my part. It is incredibly unfair to the group I belong to, which is a minority group that did not want to be vaccinated, how we have been treated and criticised and discriminated against. We were thought of as conspiracy theorists and against science which couldn't be further from the truth. I felt like I wasn't allowed to express my point of view and that I should be silenced. I felt like I was a part of a minority, marginalised and my rights were not respected. This was at least a very interesting and educational experience. I have never belonged to the minority until now and I say that while being fully aware of my privileges; I´m a young white woman who has had the chance to educate myself (C3NAR_IS02).*

Breaking or bending COVID-19 rules and regulation in order to see friends or spend time outdoors was also frequently reported. As seen in the narrative of Aritz, a 20-year-old man in Spain who spent the lockdown in a small house with his parents, the question of inequality is central:

> *We could hardly move around, and that affected my sleep and my mood a lot. So, when I saw that the situation was going to continue for a long time, I made an agreement with a friend who owns cattle […] I registered the ownership of the field so that I could leave the house and spend time with him there tending to the animals and being outdoors. This meant that I was misunderstood by my friends, who saw that I was breaking the rules and called me selfish. But of course, they lived in big houses, or in houses with gardens, and not in a small flat with no balcony or windows to the outside (C3NAR_ES06).*

Using the terms 'political' in the broadest sense of the word, Aritz actions were political in the sense that they were motivated by a sense of injustice. It should be noted, however, that breaking COVID-19 restrictions was not always politically motivated in this sense. In many cases, it was simply a way of 'getting by'. Quite often this entailed protecting one's own mental health by escaping isolation for a while.

Another area where the line between 'getting by' and 'getting (back) at is blurred is the domain of work. As the original purpose of Lister's framework was to enable the analysis of the agency exercised by people in poverty, work is a central as a means to escape poverty. It is also a domain were people exercise forms of agency, including way of getting (back) at. Lister (2021: 151) brings up undocumented work as an example of agency that in some cases could be classified as a form of resistance or withdrawal from an oppressive system. In the narratives, there are some examples of undocumented work, but it is rare that these practices are motived by something other than sheer necessity. Lister also brings up other forms of small, informal protests that can take place in the workplace. Such strategy is to limit the amount of effort a person puts into work. There are some examples of this strategy in the narratives, especially among people who found themselves close to burnout because of increased work burdens due to the pandemic. Adrian, a 48-year-old Romanian man who works as a janitor in a public hospital, described his strategy for avoiding being overworked:

> *But you need to know how to work. To not exhaust yourself […] You need to dose your work, to know how to do it and when. Because if they see that you are available, they push you too hard, they do not spare you. So, you need to protect yourself, because they do not care about your limits […] If they have you unload a truck-full of hospital beds, you carry no more than five beds per hour. You are not Robocop. They might threaten you that there are dozens lining up outside to take your job. 'Let me see them', I tell them. Because I know that those in their twenties are not willing to do this type of job. You also need to not let your colleagues take advantage. I test them sometimes. Say we are carrying a table and the others are just holding onto it. I just let my side down for a second, to check if they are really contributing (C3NAR_RO06).*

Another way of resisting exploitation in the workplace is simply to leave a job when

working conditions are bad (Lister 2021: 153). However, the narrators who chose this route usually did not leave their jobs in protest and they typically had some sort of back-up plan in place. As such, their actions are probably more appropriately classified as 'getting out' as they have a strategic aim to improve one´s situation that 'getting (back) at' usually lacks.

To the forms of resistance discussed above, Lister (2021: 153) adds what she calls psychological and discursive resistance. This form of resistance involves defining the meaning of one's disadvantaged situation for oneself by rejecting categorisation and negative stereotypes. It is a way of 'talking back' and challenging dominant discourses. Although Lister is mainly concerned about the stigma of poverty, it can be applied to other forms of disadvantage as well. In the narratives, several of the older narrators challenged the ageism apparent in COVID-19 policy. Magdalena, a 68-year-old woman from Bulgaria is one such narrator:

> *I found the reactions of the state very inadequate and frustrating as a whole. I was especially angry that they kept repeating in the media how vulnerable old people are (and myself included in that). The whole public space was buzzing that old people are at a big risk, that we should go and hide somewhere. I felt that this was a huge generalisation and that we were being discriminated against… like not being allowed in a shop between certain hours because we are 'old'. This was offensive and stupid. I hated that, so I was trying to live my life normally despite this whole hysteria (C3NAR_BG03).*

Finally, one category of narratives that are difficult to classify are those that involve individual, formal protests of various kinds. More often than not these are not 'pure' examples of any of the four forms of agency. They indicate a form of resistance, but they are not covert and informal in the manner that is typical of 'getting (back) at'. In some cases, especially when a person's livelihood is at stake, they could be seen as cases of 'getting by'. At the same time, there is a clear strategic element to these actions that brings it closer to 'getting out'. Finally, formal protests require a level of organisation that brings it closer to 'getting organised' but they lack the collective element typical of that form of agency. The narrative from Angela, a 53-year-old woman from Sweden who is suffering from long-covid is one example of this form of resistance:

> *I'm currently in a conflict with the Social Insurance Agency since the summer of 2022. The Agency decided that I no longer should receive sickness benefit part-time. They have assessed that I can work full-time, while my specialist doctors at Post-COVID Clinic say that I can't. I have appealed the decision (C3NAR_SE01).*

In addition to being an individual act of protest, there is a collective element to Angela's story as her clinic had gone to 'the National Board of Health and Welfare and taken [her] as a learning example as they believe that the Agency makes the wrong assessments

over and over again' (C3NAR_SE01). Angela is privileged in the sense that she is highly educated and relatively well-off financially, but she admitted she still found it difficult to defend herself. To some other narrators, the obstacles to making formal protests are too high. Kacper, an 89-year-old man from Poland, received no financial compensation from his insurer after falling ill with COVID-19. He said he could have appealed the decision be he did not 'have the money to fight them' (C3NAR_PL07). Others avoid certain actions to preserve a sense of dignity. Carla, a 54-year-old woman from Italy and Georgia, a 48-year-old woman from Romania, are two such example. Carla protested her lack of financial support at the municipality and was given the unofficial advice to register as homeless, but she rejected this advice as it would be 'shameful' (C3NAR_IT09), and Georgia decided not to take legal action when her ex-husband refused to pay child support in order to 'protect the children from family scandal' (C3NAR_RO09).

Getting out

Unlike previous sections, where the focus was on *coping* with adversity, this section will highlight more strategic efforts to *escape* adversity. As previously stated, adversity is interpreted in a much broader sense than poverty and the narrators faced a number of difficulties that they tried to find ways to 'get out' of. Poverty is certainly present in the narratives, however, and it is also important to note that it acts as a constraining factor when trying to 'get out' of other forms of adversity, not only those related to adverse working conditions but also those related to, for example, health and social relations.
Although attempts to 'get out' were not always successful, the pandemic did open a *window of opportunity* to make positive changes to several narrators' lives. These narratives can be divided into two broad categories: first, there are those for whom changing circumstances during the pandemic forced a change in their lives that turned out to be positive. Second, there are those for whom the pandemic offered a welcomed change of pace in life. As seen in the 'getting by' section, not all narrators experienced a slow down during the pandemic and among those who did experience a slow-down, there were those who did not view it as a positive. However, for those who did appreciate the change of pace, it offered a chance to reflect on what matter to them in life, and more time to spend on the things, and people, that they valued.

Starting with the first category and the narrators for whom changing circumstances forced a change, the most clear-cut examples are perhaps those who left an abusive relationship during the pandemic. There are a few such narratives that follow a similar path. Typically, the violence was present in some form before the pandemic, but being isolated with the perpetrator escalated the situation to such an extent that the victim/survivor of the violence saw no choice but to leave. Marieta, a 32-year-old from Bulgaria, was one of these women:

> *Exactly during the pandemic, or worsened by it, I had a very bad emotional experience in the relationship I was in. I was in a toxic and somewhat violent relationship for a long time before the pandemic started. We were closed at home which was claustrophobic, especially when you're in an abusive*

> *relationship. Even the smallest chances to get distracted are limited, you can't see other people. You can only stay at home and be with the person who is torturing you. It was a very difficult situation. My partner had taken me to another city, I was far away from all friends and family, without a car, without a way to leave (C3NAR_BG02).*

With the help of an NGO, Marieta managed to leave in the end. A psychologist from the NGO also helped her work through her psychological issues after the separation. She suffered from panic attacks and was angry at having wasted five years of her life. Marieta added that 'as absurd as it sounds, the pandemic led to a huge improvement in my life' (C3NAR_BG02). It was a critical moment that made her realise the importance of surrounding herself with love, not abuse.

Not all those who 'got out' of relationships were exposed to violence. Some discovered during the pandemic that the relationship had simply run its course. Sometimes lockdowns provided a distance from other people that was deliberately maintained post-pandemic. This was the case for 37-year-old Lucy who found not having to spend time with her family during the pandemic a 'massive relief' (C3NAR_UK04). Her fractious relationship with her mother affected her well-being negatively and she decided to not resume contact with her again. More commonly, spending more time together during lockdowns led to the realisation that a separation was the best option. As in the case of Lucy, separations were not reserved to couples but could also involve other family members. Julia, a 21-year-old lesbian woman from Greece spent the pandemic with her family. It was a tumultuous time and to her, 'getting out' came to mean literally getting out of the country:

> *There were a lot of conflicts because we were too many people in a small space. My father was nervous and got angry. There were fights. I did not like that, and this is when I took the decision to move outside my house and outside Greece. I decided that getting out was the only solution. I didn't want to live in Greece anymore […] I followed my girlfriend to a European city and now I have a job in a restaurant. I am staying at a friend's house temporarily, but I am looking for a place to rent. I feel much better here (C3NAR_GR02).*

There were, however, those for whom being forced to spend more time together had a positive effect on both their relationships and their well-being. Not least because it forced them to deal with unresolved issues. For 20-year-old Kit from Estonia, 'getting out' meant 'coming out' as non-binary to their parents:

> *So, I guess, my pandemic story really is rather strange: because it cut me off from my friends I used to hang out with, it worsened my mental health issues and this made my parents seek treatment for me which, in turn, allowed me to come clean to them. I am not sure how this would have gone otherwise. I have also cautiously started to reach out to the broader LGBT+*

> *community, by going to some events in safe spaces where I have met trans folk and have been able to reflect on this as well (C3NAR_EE07).*

Another, more common, unresolved issues that was brought into light by the pandemic was the unequal division of unpaid work. For some of the couples who worked from home, the pandemic had led to a more equal division of both care work and household chores. Usually, it was the woman who questioned the gendered nature of the division, but it also helped that the male partner could see more clearly the amount of work that had to be done when spending more time at home. Liisa from Estonia is a 41-year-old mother of two and she explained it the following way:

> *My husband finally understood what I have to do, both in my paid work and at home. He had worked from home before, but not to this extent and, as it often is, had not fully realised how many things had to be done on a daily basis just to maintain a household […] We had to have a few hard talks, as initially he assumed that he was going to be able to continue his work, like in the past […] but I put my foot down firmly and I am very glad […] we have maintained the better distribution of childcare work even now that the children are back in childcare. I got my project done, even, at the tail end of the pandemic. But above all, the children now have a father who knows more about his children's lives than most of other fathers I know. I am not sure this would have been possible had there not been a pandemic (C3NAR_EE02)*

Although there are such stories of positive change, it should be noted that this does not represent the majority of the narratives. Most mothers remained the primary caregivers throughout the pandemic and the increased burden caused by the closing down of childcare and schools did not significantly alter the division of unpaid work. This applies both to single mother narrators and those living with a partner. In some narratives, the father/partner is simply absent from the story. In others, the lack of effort shown by the father/partner is brought up as a cause of frustration, but no change can be detected.

The pandemic naturally affected many narrators' paid work as well and the narratives include a number of stories of people losing their jobs, quitting their jobs or working reduced hours, but there are also stories of people finding new jobs. Although these jobs were typically found *despite* of the pandemic, not because of it, the pandemic sometimes brought about a realisation that a change was needed. For some women, the burden of unpaid care work increased to such an extent that their combined workload became unmanageable. Joy, a 43-year-old mother from Slovenia, was one such woman:

> *I used to work 14, 15 hours a day and during [the lockdowns] I realised I have had enough. […] I was working from home and also taking care of my 3-year-old […] when my partner came home [from work], I would then work until 9 or 10 PM to have the work done. And at that point I realised I have had enough. […] So, at that time I started to look for a new job and now I*

> *know it was the best decision to change jobs. I am now more at peace, my brains function better, I have more energy and can for example play with my child for six hours. Now I have an 8-hour working day, free weekends and holidays and I don't even bring the computer home, because I don't have to. And this is a very positive outcome of epidemic, while if there wasn't the epidemic the constant stand-by would not be so obvious and maybe I would continue to live like that (C3NAR_SI03).*

For Joy, finding a new job meant finding better work-life balance. For others, the pandemic increased the already significant job insecurity in their line of work, and they decided to look for something more stable. Luna, a 36-year-old freelance writer and theatre director from Croatia told the following story:

> *In order to survive and be visible, I worked like crazy. Low financial compensation for theatre engagement forces you to look for as many arrangements as possible in different places. Sometimes, I would wake up in the middle of the night, scared and frustrated, not knowing where I was, in what town, and how to perform all these tasks without collapsing. I dreamt of a break, of having at least two days for contemplation and rest. Sometimes I thought that I'd invited and provoked the pandemic with my thoughts. But it didn't turn out as something that provides tranquillity and peace of a soul (C3NAR_HR10).*

Instead of providing peace and rest, the pandemic diminished Luna's opportunities for freelance work and the state support on offer for freelancers was minimal. She soon found herself struggling to make ends meet. What saved her in the end was getting a permanent contract with a commercial television station. Accepting the position was a trade-off between creative independence and economic security, but the pandemic had made Luna realise how much she valued the latter.

Although there are some cases were finding a job offered a way out of deep poverty, see for example the story of Andy (C3NAR_IT02) who was quoted in the 'getting by' section, generally those who struggled to get by financially before the pandemic were still struggling after it. 'Getting out' of poverty was not made easier by the pandemic and many also expressed worries about things to come, with the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis and rising inflation being common reference points. Quoting Daly and Leonard (2002), Lister states that the 'very strain of getting by can mean that the future is 'framed in terms of hours and days rather than years' (2015: 153). In other words, poverty can by itself make it difficult to make strategic choices with potential long-term benefits. Although there are exceptions to this rule in the narratives and although there are plenty of hopes and dreams expressed, the hopes of those with limited resources as generally modest in scale and the future is often a source of anxiety. Hence, it would be wrong to state that the narratives show necessity as the mother of all invention. Instead, those that benefitted in some way from the pandemic were more likely to be those who had at least some modicum of security in place. 55-year-old Karen from Denmark is a case in point.

At the start of the pandemic, she was unemployed, and the financial security offered by the state was a great relief when setting up her own business:

> *For me it was simply a circumstance that corona was there while I started my business, so I had to find ways in spite of it. How to find customers and how to start while Denmark was shut down. I started right around the time that everything shut down. I was so lucky, because normally there is a limit to how long you can receive supplementary unemployment benefit (dagpenge). When corona came, the duration of the unemployment benefit was suspended […] I felt a sense of freedom, because I didn't have to worry about an expiration date. It was a big relief not to have to worry about it (C3NAR_DK01).*

The question of *who* benefitted from the pandemic remains central when we move to the second category of 'getting out' narratives: i.e., those who found that the pandemic brought with it a welcomed change of pace. Among these narratives we find those who benefitted from working from home during the pandemic. Generally speaking, working from home is not an option open to most working-class people, which in itself points to a certain privilege. Also important is the fact that remote working did not suit everybody. For example, those more dependent on work-related social connections, because they were living alone or for other reasons, were less likely to see it as a positive change. For those who did view it as a positive, however, an improved work-life balance was highlighted. The following example from 'C', a 35-year-old social worker and a mother of two from the UK, is quite typical:

> *On a normal day pre-COVID, I would have to wake my children up at 7 to get them to breakfast club and then sit in traffic for an hour and a half to get to the office. COVID forced our managers to trust that people would get the work done. Whether you see it as a positive or negative, the work/life boundaries were lost and that meant more productivity and more work completed, which ultimately led to more trust from management. Now I am able to wake the children up at 8.15 and take them to nursery before going home to start work, and this means that they get a better sleep, and I get to spend more time with them in the evenings which has improved our quality of life greatly (C3NAR_UK07).*

To 'C', the pandemic freed up time and allowed for more agency over how to spend this time. She thought it was likely that she would be able to continue to work from home in the future as well as her employer had now seen that it worked. Like 'C', parents often state spending more time with their children as an advantage to the pandemic years, even though combining paid work with caring for their children was a struggle at times. Spending more time at home during the pandemic was not reserved to those remote working, hence most narrators ended up spending more time with family members. While this led to increased tensions for some, many others stated that their relationships had deepened as a result.

Slowing down and spending more time at home also freed up time for more creative pursuits. Hobbies of different kinds were brought up as a coping strategy in the 'getting by' section but they can also be something more than simply passing time: they could be a way to explore different sides of oneself and a way to learn new, useful skills. Asli, a 50-year-old woman from Turkey, said she was normally content spending time at home, but the quarantine made her 'compelled to flee'. Once the transportation ban was lifted, she volunteered with a natural building collective:

> *Volunteering was the only option for me, otherwise I could not attend such workshops which are around 500 euro to learn about natural building. I've been interested in natural building for about 7-8 years and have watched numerous videos and read numerous books on the subject. But I wanted to give it a shot physically. I was involved in the natural building construction of this collective within a farm. I stayed for one month. There was no one else volunteering except me at the time. In the midst of the pandemic, I doubt anyone imagined something like this was possible. Then I went back and stayed for two months. I learned how to plaster. And now when there is a need in the collective, I work as a plasterer and make money out of it (C3NAR_TR04).*

Others turned to more formal education when faced with more time on their hands. 'ERT23', a 34-year-old woman from Cyprus who was working from home, and living with her parents during the pandemic, told a complex story of which education was but one aspect. Working from home came with some difficulties as neither her parents nor her employer respected her boundaries and expected her to be accessible at all times. Despite this, she saw benefits to the arrangement and to the pandemic as whole:

> *COVID-19 isolation helped me deal with my problem. It gave me the time to heal on my own, to stay in an environment that I could control. Sometimes I felt down. It was ok to be depressed in my own home. I didn't have to live up to others' expectations to be happy. I didn't have to socialise or pretend. I had time to concentrate and finish my TESOL masters, I calmed down as a person. I saved money and repaid my student loan! That relieved me from a lot of stress. I even stopped taking pills. I started dealing with depression on my own through exercise, working on mindfulness, meditation, reading books (C3NAR_CY07).*

'ERT23' had lived with depression since she was a teenager and while it may be a stretch to say that she 'got out' of depression because of the pandemic, it did make it easier to live with. As indicated in the 'getting by' section, mental health concerns of various kinds were widely reported in the narratives. Some were pre-existing, as in in case of 'ERT23', some were brought on by the pandemic. Sometimes, the double nature of the pandemic as both the cause of stress and anxiety, and as something that allowed the space and time to deal with mental issues, was present in the same narrative. Charlie, a 20-year-old

non-binary student provided one such example. They lived in Luxembourg with their parents but was not used to spending so much time at home. Charlie did not get along that well with their parents. The parents did not know about Charlie's identity which caused Charlie to feel restricted in how they behaved. At the same time, the slower pace of life provided a welcomed break:

> *The pandemic gave me a long-needed break because before the pandemic I didn't have any kind of break in over a year and I was really burned out. Having to sit at home for two months from a burnout perspective was good also because I really needed rust and calm. But at the same time, it also took a big mental health toll because it was still a tense situation with a lot of stress from being together with people who don't accept me for who I am and for losing like the biggest part of my support network (C3NAR_LU10).*

Also present in many narratives was an awareness of the fact that others were suffering too. The pandemic put the spotlight on mental health and that sense it also provided a window of opportunity on a societal level: it made it easier to speak about mental health issues. As 20-year-old Artiz from Spain put it:

> *We are still facing the consequences of all this. There are still a lot of people with sleep problems, with anxiety. I think the only good thing about all this is that the taboo about mental health has been broken. Now everyone talks openly about going to a psychologist, and if we don't feel well, we talk about it (C3NAR_ES06).*

People dealt with their mental health issues in different ways. Many sought, and benefitted from, professional help, whereas others turned to friends and family for support. Various strategies of self-care were also important. These included lifestyle changes such as exercising more, meditating, eating healthier and giving up drinking or smoking, but it also included efforts to be kinder to oneself, to allow oneself to say no and refuse to take too much on, both in work and in one's personal life. For many, it was a time of getting to know oneself better and caring for oneself more. Daira, a 48-year-old woman from the Netherlands started her first paid job in a long time shortly before the pandemic. She had spent most of her adult life caring for others and losing that job was something of a wake-up call for her:

> *I suddenly looked around me. I asked myself what I had actually built up in all those years besides my family. I noticed that I had always withdrawn in difficult situations and now I saw that everyone around me had moved on and I had actually come to a standstill. It occurred to me that I had no idea who to call when something was wrong with me. That shocked me […] During that time, I developed confidence by doing. For example, I signed up with an organisation for over-40s to get to know people. I went to dance parties I would never have gone to otherwise. I found that connecting with*

> *others did me good. I got to know myself anew. I started asking myself questions about what I really wanted. I think I was able to make more authentic choices than choices to please others* (C3NAR_NL03).

It should be noted that far from all experienced the pandemic in this way and even those that did see benefits to a changing pace in life usually saw downsides to it as well. Sentiments sometimes changed over time as well and some who initially welcomed the break came to long for a more eventful life after a while. Finally, even when there was a clear desire to maintain a slower pace post-pandemic, some found it hard to sustain. 37-year-old Lucy for the UK is one such narrator:

> *I am now perpetually, chronically busy and forms of self-soothing that I had fostered during the pandemic have been removed. I felt that during the pandemic I was far more creative as I had the time and space to undertake projects. I have acknowledged that in my life I exist in chaos, and I have to fight to find pockets of peace. These pockets were more frequent in lockdown, and I now have to consciously ensure that I make these pockets and carve out 'nothing time' for myself (C3NAR_UK04).*

Getting organised

The final form of agency is what Lister calls 'getting organised'. The starting point here is that macrolevel surveys show that poverty tends to be associated with lower levels of political and civic engagement (Lister 2021: 164). Lister sets out to explain this 'participation gap' by identifying obstacles to participation. One major obstacle is that collective action usually requires a collective identity to organise around, and poverty is not necessarily something that people want to identify with. As Lister (2021: 168) puts it 'proud to be poor' is not a banner under which many are likely to march. Poverty is typically individualised and blamed on the poor, which can lead to self-blame and/or distancing from others in similar situations. Hence individual rather than collective solutions are sought. Another obstacle to participation is that the sheer effort it takes just to 'get by' when living in poverty leaves many with little energy to 'get organised'. A sense of powerlessness and lack of faith in their ability to change a system that seems rigged against the poor limits participation as well. Despite these obstacles, people living in poverty do sometimes 'get organised'. Quite often, people in poverty organise around other collective identities when taking political action, such as single mothers, pensioners, or local residents. Different forms of collective self-help (a more organised form of 'getting by') are also common. The value of such organisations should not be underestimated, and they do sometimes lead to more politically oriented action (Lister 2021: 169-173).

Not all narrators were living in poverty, many were recruited on the basis of other inequality grounds, but the points brought up above are still of interest. First of all, many of the narratives in the 'getting organised' category are examples of 'collective self-help' in various forms. There are examples of both formal and informal organisations of this kind and the stories are told both from the perspective of giving support and receiving

support. Quite often, the narrator was both the giver and receiver of support. This spirit of reciprocity and mutual aid is seen most clearly in the number of narratives that revolve around organising at the neighbourhood level. Interestingly, it did not always rely on pre-existing bonds. Joana, for example, is a 35-year-old single mother from Germany who moved house during the pandemic:

> *Shortly after that my son and me became sick with covid and on the one hand, there was nobody who could help us. On the other hand, I had a two weeks' quarantine and time to arrange our new home. In my former home, I used to live near to my father's house which was helpful but when moving to this new flat, I didn't know anyone. But this has changed, we are a good community of single mothers who support each other and helps us not to feel isolated and lonely. Especially for our children (C3NAR_DE06).*

In Joana's case, neighbourhood support helped relieve the increased burden of childcare during the pandemic and she specifically mentioned single motherhood as the collective identity around which this community was formed. In other narratives the support networks were more loosely formed around a neighbourhood identity and neighbours developed different routines for checking in on each other to see if help was needed. Some groups naturally had greater needs than others. Older people were often helped by neighbours with practical task such as grocery shopping, but they also relied on neighbours to break often quite severe social isolation. Arat, an 85-year-old woman from Serbia was critical of how older people were treated during the pandemic, but she managed to find some moments of joy in the neighbourhood:

> *The actual market was closed, but people gathered in the street, displayed their products on the sidewalk, and old people like me came and bought. That was our only social life - shopping on the street at four in the morning. But it was interesting to see how people turned a great misfortune and injustice into the beauty of social life! […] I have my cats in front of the building […] I couldn't imagine anyone stopping me from going out to feed and pet them. And then my neighbours and I agree to meet in front of the building, even during the lockdown, to sit, talk, feed and pet the cats. When we notice an unknown person approaching us, someone we know is not from the neighbourhood, we run away, like girls, easily! (C3NAR_RS10).*

Some neighbourhoods were also faced with deepening poverty during the pandemic. They required more material support and, usually, a different level of organisation. The urgency of the needs meant that such organisations were typically aimed at alleviating immediate needs rather than advocating for long-term change. Marta, a 43-year-old community worker from Spain, described the neighbourhood network she helped set up as deliberately apolitical, arguing that this reduced institutional obstacles and ensured the help of police and social services. Despite its apolitical stance, the way that poverty was tackled in the network could still have positive effect that go beyond

meeting immediate needs:

> *We de-stigmatised poverty: we treated each other's as equals, not as poor people. We tried to de-mystify poverty and gave people what they needed, what they asked for, not just a pre-established food box, same with the menstrual supplies: I'll give what you ask for, you don't have to adapt. This has been a good lesson (C3NAR_ES04).*

Marta herself was put on temporary layoff during the pandemic and at one stage she had to use the foodbanks she helped set up herself. Despite this, she called herself 'privileged compared to others':

> *I am a white, western woman. I am still disadvantaged as a woman, but I had my networks, my family, I could negotiate with my landlord. During these months I managed doing odd jobs, because I have networks, and my friends supported me. Migrant families did not have any of this (C3NAR_ES04).*

As Marta pointed out, poverty intersects with other forms of inequalities, not least inequalities based on ethnicity. Roma communities, for example, were particularly hard hit. Katalin, a 57-year-old Roman activist from Hungary, survived COVID-19 and ended up founding a small church in her community:

> *It was horrible, I wouldn't do it again. The settlement was closed, people were left without money and food, only a small church helped us and brought food, masks, medicine, and disinfectant. A Roma organization from Germany sent vitamins. The end of this whole nightmare was that I started a small Christian church. I converted; this is what covid brought me. Those who go there have all relatives who died of covid. People find solace in this church (C3NAR_HU10).*

Djosla, a 56-year-old woman from Serbia also testifies to the difficult situation and the limited support offered to the Roma community:

> *Since I am active in the Roma movement, everyone called me to help in the Roma settlements. Most of the people I communicate with through the association do not have a job, or if they do, it is primarily a job that could not be done during the lockdown, such as selling on the street or at green markets or collecting secondary raw materials. Even before COVID, the Roma were threatened, and now they are in a terrible situation. It seems that I found meaning in helping them. I didn't know what else to do, and they kept calling me. Institutions did not care about Roma; nobody cared about them (C3NAR_RS04).*

Djosla's work in the settlement revolved around meeting basic needs for food and

hygiene, as well as providing much needed emotional support. She also advocated for the rights of Roma people, something that she believed had become harder. Discrimination had increased and there was less empathy than before: 'Everyone is tired of sharing. People have become selfish, angry, and furious' (C3NAR_RS04). Djosla's story is an example of how organising around a collective identity, in this case the Roma, can also be a fight against poverty. In addition, it shows how providing material support is sometimes combined with advocacy efforts. Djosla herself had a regular job and a steady income. Just like Marta, she considered herself relatively privileged. In that sense they were quite typical of narrators who have made more active efforts to help others. They may have been marginally better off than those that they were trying to help, but their actions came from a place of solidarity and understanding for the difficulties they face.

In addition to neighbourhood initiatives, various kinds of online communities where also commonly referred to in the narratives. These initiatives vary a lot in scale. Amongst the more small-scale, informal, initiatives we find 20-year-old student Peter from Slovenia (C3NAR_SI04) who meet up with fellow students online in groups of '10 or 15 people at the same time on voice call, chatting, listening to music [or playing] video games together'. He also arranged for a more convenient way to share study materials online and overall, he found the first phase of studying and socialising online quite enjoyable. At the opposite end of the age spectrum, we find 75-year-old Ritva (C3NAR_FI01) from Finland who started a Facebook group with the aim of cheering people up during quarantine. It became a place of both sharing funny videos and place for sharing useful pandemic-related advice. On the more formal end of the scale, many pre-existing organisations had to take many of their activities online during the pandemic. Gregor, a 44-year-old LGBT activist from Slovakia, highlighted both advantages and disadvantages to this shift:

> *We produced various webinars and videos that are still on the Internet, available to everybody. It can reach more people, even in regions. For example, we have started a podcast on queer people that became pretty successful. We had this idea even before the pandemic, but then the timing worked very well. People could not meet but they wanted to be in touch with a community, so this was an opportunity for them. In general, those online activities turned out well. Contrary, with counselling it was more difficult. I volunteer as a psychologist in an LGBT counselling centre. Yes, we went online but it is not the same. First, I do not read emotions and moods that well, the rapport is simply not the same. Second, we work mostly with young people and many of them ended up back at home with their parents. Not all of them have supportive families. They did not have a safe space to talk (C3NAR_SK02).*

It is clear from the narratives that digitalisation can both exclude and include. Whereas some found the shift from offline to online communications difficult, either because they lacked the technological equipment and/or skills, or because the form of

communication did not suit them, others found the shift back from online to offline difficult. Such was the case for Mary, a 40-year-old woman from Serbia who has a physical disability. Because of her reduced mobility, the pandemic provided more opportunities to get organised:

> *The possibilities opened up for me to participate in seminars and events online that I would otherwise not be able to attend because it is expensive or not accessible for people with my mobility difficulties. However, when the lockdown ended, everything suddenly seemed to return to the old factory settings, like when you restart a mobile phone. And people have become estranged, more distant than before Corona (C3NAR_RS03).*

Peter (C3NAR_SI04), the student who arranged to meet his friends online during the initial stages of the pandemic also found this shift back to 'normality' upsetting. During the latter stages of the pandemic, his friends started hanging out in person again and as he lived further away, he was often excluded.

So far, we have looked primarily at different ways of supporting others—or perhaps more accurately, each other—during the pandemic. However, there are also examples of narrators getting organised to effect change on a more structural level. Quite often, the starting point in these narratives is the narrator's own adversity. Kristin, for example, is a 37-year-old woman from Austria who is working for an organisation that supports and advocates for self-determined living for people with disabilities. Kristin has a disability herself and was acutely aware of what the target group went through during the pandemic:

> *For the past two years, it has been very difficult to find new assistants in this sector, and this means an existential threat for us, as we depend on their work. When the assistance is not available, I am forced to fall back on friends and family, but not everyone has this back up and it puts me in a dependent situation again. My parents are 70 and I don't want permanently to be cared for by my parents. I want to be independent and self-sufficient. The situation also causes an emotional burden and restriction for family and friends (C3NAR_AT01).*

Marieta from Bulgaria, who was quoted in a previous section as she 'got out' of an abusive relationship, also turned her experience into different forms of collective action:

> *Since then, 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, we talk in the media, and join different actions. For example, I joined a social initiative that teaches employers to recognize and help employee victims of domestic violence (C3NAR_BG02).*

In the case of Kristin and Marieta, as well as several other narrators, their own experiences motivated them to 'get organised'. That helping others could be a way to help oneself was not only apparent in initiatives based on mutual aid or in narratives where the narrator acted on behalf of a group they themselves belonged to. Seeing a need that was not being met – of which there were many during the pandemic – and deciding to take action could also be beneficial to the person taking action in other ways. Several narrators stated that 'getting organised' gave them a sense of purpose and in that sense, it acted as a coping strategy for some. It gave them a reason to get out of the *house* and, perhaps more importantly, it gave them a reason to get out of their own *mind*. Katarzyna, a 21-year-old woman from Poland, identifies as queer and she spent the pandemic focusing on LGBT+ activism as she found this suited her emotional needs at the time:

> *The most traumatic experience for me was the death of my grandmother. She died of COVID. And I think that focusing on activism and helping other people in need allowed me to escape from sorrow and grief. It helped me not to think about my grandmother's death and focus on learning how to help other people (C3NAR_PL01).*

While narrators who decided to 'get organised' in one way or another often motivated their actions, lack of action is typically not motivated. There are, however, a few telling exceptions. One is the narrative of Daniella from Iceland. She was also cited in the section on 'getting (back) at' as she decided not to take the vaccine and generally objected to COVID-19 policy. Despite her strong standpoint, she found it difficult to take collective action:

> *I found it helpful to have friends who thought about things like me, and I found I could relax with them, especially my husband who is very realistic. We took part in a protest march (protesting vaccinations and the strict curfew rules) a few times but stopped because then we were labelled even more as some alt-right lunatics and Nazis (C3NAR_IS02).*

By taking part in this protest, Daniella found she was ascribed a collective identity she did not want to associate with, hence she ended her involvement in such actions. To Rasmus, a 39-year-old gay man from Estonia, not getting organised was more a matter of protecting himself in a hostile environment:

> *I am politically aware and have very strong opinions about so many things in our society, but as a gay man, especially a neurodiverse gay man, I just have chosen to not speak out as I have to think of myself and my parents. I know it is cowardly, but I cannot make being gay my main job. I have too many economic concerns as it is. I have, however, used the possibility to leave for at least half a year on a scholarship, to get out of this atmosphere of intolerance and self-interest that is only likely to increase as the elections come up […] I know it is selfish, but I have to think of my own mental well-*

> *being. Sometimes voting with one's feet is also a political act (C3NAR_EE04).*

Then there those who want to get organised but encounter institutional obstacles. Grazia, a 65-year-old woman from Italy is one such narrator. Grazia was the main carer of her adult son who has a severe form of autism, and she was active in an association for parents of children with disabilities. She found the pandemic had made it difficult to keep up the same level of engagement in the group as the COVID-19 crisis had intensified familism that expect women to stay at home and care for their families:

> *The policies implemented reflect the basic idea that one of the two parents must take care of the disabled child. To this end, the government provides a contribution to the caregiver equal to a real salary. In this way, one of the two, usually the mother, is expected to give up her own life to devote herself to caring for the disabled child. In general, people in my situation hope, indeed expect, that public authorities, both central and local, will provide more services, activities and facilities for people with disabilities. Facilities and services that would allow the family to be 'freed' for a while, something that would allow (especially the woman) to be able to leave her child with more serenity and be able to devote herself to something else. But this does not happen, there are not enough public funds […] This is why families feel increasingly discouraged and demotivated to go out, to leave their youngsters in the care of these facilities. That is why they stay at home, in their family, and do not get organised (C3NAR_IT01).*

Grazia's narrative give some idea of the type of obstacles faced by civil society organisations both during the pandemic and more generally. A number of other narratives deal more exclusively with organisational aspects: the obstacles they faced, how they attempted to overcome them, how they adapted to the pandemic, etc. As this topic was explored in the RESISTIRÉ Work Package two in the third cycle, it will not be discussed further here (Cibin et al. 2023). One final point should be made regarding this, however. The narratives that revolve around the organisational aspects of 'getting organised' are usually told by people for whom civic engagement is not only a way to make a difference, but also a way to make a living. To these narrators, the issues faced by those working in other sectors were often amplified. Job insecurity was often greater as funding was always an issue, and the risk of burn-out was substantial as the needs they encountered were never-ending, but the resources limited. Lisete, a 33-year-old woman living in Portugal, worked for an organisation that provided a safe house for LGBTQI youth exposed to violence when the pandemic hit. Pre-pandemic, she had spent a lot of time in the house, but this was not possible during lockdowns. As a result, the youth were often left on their own and she was always on call:

> *I was confined at home and as a I live alone. I was full time thinking about this and also about all the pandemic contexts. I had the phone of [the safe house] so I often received contacts late at night and at weekends. For me*

> *that time was a 24h per day working experience. Also my fault because I had nothing to keep me away from that, I had nothing to care for, so I was always available and concerned. Then I had the burn out (C3NAR_PT04).*

Lisete partly blamed herself for not having other things to care about during the pandemic. At the same time, she added, it was not her but the system that made her burn out. If she had tried to spare herself from too much work, she would not have been able to do the work that was actually needed. Lisete did not go back to work for the organisation but found herself a job as yoga teacher instead.

Forms of agency and inequality grounds

As they offer a useful starting point when summarising the results above, the difficulties faced by the narrators during the pandemic listed in the 'getting by' section bears to be repeated. They were: 1) fear of being infected, 2) isolation and loneliness, 3) relationship strain, 4) boredom and inactivity, 5) increased work burdens, 6) lack of access to services, and 7) economic difficulties. In addition, 'mental health' can be seen as a cross-cutting theme related to all other themes in some way.

The above themes are not only relevant as difficulties that people had to cope with, or aspects of pandemic life that they had to 'get by' despite of. In some cases, they acted as triggers for more strategic agency that allowed people to 'get out' of pre-existing difficulties. They were also areas where people found injustices that they protested against, either informally as a way of 'getting (back) at' or in more organised forms. In addition, people 'got organised' in various ways to help others 'get by' and help each other cope with these difficulties.

The personal, social and material resources used to cope with these difficulties were not equally available to all narrators and neither was the possibility to turn the situation around and make positive long-term changes to their lives. Personal resources can refer to the coping skills the individual possesses as well as their state of health: a person in good mental and physical health was generally better placed to cope with the pandemic. It could also be argued that some individuals have more resilient personalities that others and in some of the narratives, there is a definite tendency to individualise coping in this way, i.e. 'I got through this because I am the kind of person that does not give up'. While such claims are not necessarily without merit, it would be dangerous to assume that positive thinking can overcome all obstacles faced. This is shown, not least, in the considerable importance placed on both social and material resources in both coping with, and overcoming, obstacles. What the remainder of this section will focus on is how the issues faced, and the resources available to cope with these issues, varied across inequality grounds.

Table 7: Forms of agency by vulnerability profile (absolute values and percentages in brackets)

Vulnerability	Getting by	Getting out	Getting (back) at	Getting organised
Sex/gender (209)	171 (82)	122 (58)	68 (33)	94 (45)
Social class (139)	111 (80)	77 (55)	46 (33)	63 (45)
Age (92)	76 (83)	43 (47)	29 (32)	38 (41)
Disability (54)	49 (91)	27 (50)	25 (46)	18 (33)
Nationality (34)	26 (77)	17 (50)	10 (29)	14 (41)
Ethnicity (37)	23 (62)	18 (49)	6 (16)	16 (43)
Religion/belief (12)	10 (83)	8 (67)	6 (50)	4 (33)
Sexual orientation (25)	21 (84)	16 (64)	2 (8)	8 (32)
Gender Identity (15)	12 (80)	9 (60)	3 (20)	8 (53)
Other (63)	57 (91)	35 (56)	30 (48)	26 (41)

The table above (Table 7) shows the forms of agency used by narrators with different 'vulnerability profile'. The 'vulnerability profile' refers to the personal characteristics of the person interviewed, and it indicates on which inequality grounds the national researcher recruited the person. The table is included here mainly to show that all forms of agency were used by all 'vulnerability profiles' and that, with a few exceptions, they are fairly evenly distributed across the categories. What the table does not show, however, is the diversity and complexity in each category.

Three things should be noted, the first being that the table represents the individuals recruited for the narrative interviews, not these categories in a more general sense. In the recruitment process, purposive sampling was used, and part of the aim was to highlight 'better stories'. This means that the sample include a number of stories from people that have overcome considerable obstacles seemingly against all odds. Second, and related to the first point, the table does not show how different inequalities intersect with each other. That is not necessarily to say that the distribution of forms of agency would have been different if these intersections were taken into account, but it does make the achievements of those facing multiple inequality grounds all the more remarkable. Finally, the different forms of agency could take on different meaning depending on the inequality ground in question.

Bearing these reservations in mind, some general observations can be made on how personal, social and material resources used to cope with the pandemic are linked to inequality grounds. **Social class/socio-economic status** is a useful starting point as it is explicitly linked to the material resources available to a person. For those of lower socio-

economic status, who are less likely to have savings and for whom the margins are much slimmer, even a small reduction in income can have devastating consequences. Living in economic precarity meant access to services was limited, crowded living conditions put a strain on relationships within the household, and worrying about expenses caused stress and anxiety. In addition, working class people were more exposed to either unemployment or the COVID-19 virus as the type of jobs available to them were typically not performed from the home. Socio-economic status also intersects with other inequality grounds. **Women**, for example, are more likely to live in poverty. Single mothers in the narratives, who in many cases were already struggling to support a family on one income, now faced the additional challenge of trying to combine paid work with childcare. The **intersection of gender and age** is also worth highlighting as women typically receive lower pensions. Some of the older women in the narratives struggled to make ends meet when the possibility to supplement pensions with paid work was cut off during the pandemic. Both **ethnicity** and **nationality** also intersect with socio-economic status. Undocumented migrants were particularly vulnerable as the pandemic made it harder for them to find casual work and they rarely had a formal right to welfare.

Economic difficulties during the pandemic were not reserved to those with a previous history of living in poverty; some found themselves in an economically precarious situation for the first time. The latter were in an advantageous position in several ways. They usually had some access to material resources even when losing their main source of income: they had savings or assets to sell, they could get a loan and be reasonably confident that they could pay it back and, with the exception of some self-employed narrators, they typically received some welfare payments as they had been in regular employment. In addition, they often had personal resources in the form of education and previous work experience that made them more likely to quickly 'bounce back' from their temporary set-back. For some of these narrators, the pandemic provided a welcome break from an otherwise busy life. They could spend the break re-evaluating their lives and often came out of it with a work-life balance that they were more content with. For those who lacked personal and material resources, social resources were essential for getting by financially and for accessing services. Sometimes resources were found within the family, as in the case of adult children helping to pay for their parents' healthcare, sometimes it required informal or formal ways of 'getting organised'. In a few cases, the social resources available were not enough to compensate for the lack of material resources and coping with poverty came to mean coping with hunger.

Social resources were not only used to compensate for the lack of material resources, but they were also invaluable when coping with the mental strain of the pandemic. Although social isolation affected people across all inequality grounds, some groups stand out. **Age** was most commonly selected as an inequality ground for those over the age of sixty and those under the age of twenty-five. Both groups faced considerable difficulties with social isolation, albeit in different ways. For the older age group, the need to isolate was emphasised more as they were considered an at-risk group. For the younger age group, limited contact with peers often led to feeling of having missed a formative part of their youth. The majority of the narrators in the **sexual orientation** and

gender identity categories were also under the age of 30. Many of these were either still living at home or had moved home because of the pandemic. Although there were examples of young people coming out to their parents and deepening their relationship as a result, stories of not feeling accepted in one's home and feeling isolated from one's community were more common. For **migrants**, being isolated from family members for long periods of time due to border closures intensified feelings of isolation. **Women**, while not necessarily more exposed to isolation than men, sometimes faced more severe consequences of it, as they were more likely to be exposed to violence in the home.

While some could rely on the social resources within the household for support, finding ways to stay connected to the outside world was crucial for most in coping with isolation. Many found the pandemic made them more connected to their neighbourhood, others found solace in online communities. Digitalisation proved something of a double-edged sword in this regard. On the one hand, it excluded those without the equipment and skills needed. It also failed to fully compensate for in person contact for many. On the other hand, it provided a way of 'getting out' of pre-existing isolation to some. For example, **members of the LGBTQI** community living outside major cities and people living with reduced mobility due to **physical disabilities** found it easier to 'get organised', whether for social support or for advocacy purposes.

In summary, material and social resources both played a vital role in how well a person coped with the pandemic. While few narrators were better off financially than they were before the pandemic, some did find themselves better off in terms of social resources: connections were made, communities were formed, and the pandemic left some with a renewed sense of solidarity with others. Turning the attention inwards could also be beneficial and some believed the pandemic had made them better equipped to handle everyday life in terms of personal resources. When normal routines were upended, they became more aware of their own agency which pushed them to get to know themselves better and take better care of themselves.

This ability to turn the pandemic into a positive change was not available to all, however. A certain level of stability in terms of material and social resources was usually required. Access to such resources were shaped, but not *determined,* by inequality grounds. Both 'better stories' and examples of people left despondent by the pandemic are found across all inequality grounds. Crucially, the community support that many narrators highlighted as important in many ways covered for a lack of sufficient responses from public authorities. Not all were part of supportive communities, however, which left them more exposed to these shortcomings.

The following section will deal with this issue from a different perspective, namely the perspective of the street-level bureaucrats tasked with supporting people in various ways during the pandemic.

Results: Street-level bureaucrats

The third cycle of RESISTIRÉ, which builds upon the second, aims to further explore enabling and constraining factors and the strategic agency of both vulnerable persons, as analysed using narrative interviews, and groups that in their daily profession often met with them, i.e., street-level bureaucrats, many whom served as the frontline workers during the pandemic.

RESISTIRÉ is interested in understanding in what way, and with what strategies, street-level bureaucrats used their discretionary powers, i.e., the room of manoeuvre that the 'system' allows for, whether discretionary powers were sufficient to assist the supported individuals in coping with the pandemic, and finally, what better stories could be detected in the descriptions of their everyday work during the pandemic. We are also interested in understanding how the pandemic created new conditions for service-provision, what forms of agency street-level bureaucrats identified among supported individuals, and what they saw as hindering or enabling in providing support. It is important to note that not all providers of essential services are directly employed by a public organisation, so they are not 'bureaucrats' in the traditional sense of the word, even though all are described as street-level bureaucrats in the description and analysis below. In total 24 interviews were conducted in nine countries across Europe. The interviewed persons represent eleven different types of service sectors/street-level organisations (see Table 5).

Challenges of supported individuals identified by street-level bureaucrats

To systematically analyse the experiences of street-level bureaucrats and to understand common traits experienced by individuals supported by them, we have identified common challenges described by the interviewed street-level bureaucrats. Below, we describe thematically the challenges which we have found in common. In the account we also highlight what the street-level bureaucrats reported as hindering and enabling factors for addressing the challenge described.

Economic vulnerabilities

Issues related to financial instability, and other economic-related difficulties in finding a job, accessing unemployment benefits, or getting back on track after a period of economic insecurity, were described by many interviewees. These street-level bureaucrats who reported on financial difficulties worked within a broad range of service provision, from probation officers for legal offenders to family counsellors. The principal problem described was the ability of their clients to find a job after a period of unemployment that arrived prior to or during the pandemic. The street-level bureaucrats describe how this situation caused severe stress, affected by the little opportunity to find a new job during the pandemic. Many other types of financial difficulties were mentioned, some related to lifelong economic difficulties of the clients adding up to the

limited financial resilience in the crisis. The experience of women was also mentioned to be particularly more stressful by some interviewees. A family counsellor in a Turkish municipality, for example, mentioned specifically that she encountered many women which had difficulty accessing basic sanitary needs such as menstrual pads, stressing that young women were the most affected by the pandemic, as many of them suffered financial insecurity on top of gender-based violence and limited access to education and to the labour market (SLB_TR02). In Ireland, the housing officer reported that a combination of factors especially at the beginning of the crisis (job losses, backlog of welfare claims) brought income losses and, consequently, difficulties with their rent accounts (SLB_IE03). Some street-level bureaucrats observed a social gradient in access to their service by clients. Two of these worked in schools and reported that better-off students were able to follow lessons freely and easily from home, while those less advantaged struggled much more to stay on top of work and follow lessons when face to face classes were abruptly dismissed. These teachers worried especially that the lag that these students experienced for the first year of the pandemic will likely affect their learning and performance in the long run, creating an inequality between those students which could afford to easily do work from home and those that could not. Importantly, an inadequate support from institutions was also reported (SLB_UK02, SLB_BE01).

Hindering factors

Job losses and the consequent loss of income were described by the street-level bureaucrats as direct consequences of the pandemic and lockdown policies implemented to reduce the spread of the virus. One person emphasised the negative spiral in that pandemic policy measure affected the labour market and the availability of jobs, which then influenced clients' financial situation and in turn affected the ability to pay alimonies, debts and so on. In a context of job scarcity, people with criminal records, a condition connected to social stigma, had even more difficulty finding one (SLB_CZ02). According to the interviewees, some groups found themselves in a more disadvantage position because of their background. Language barriers when dealing with authorities and looking for a job, as well as discrimination while looking for housing were mentioned by one expert (SLB_CZ01).

Other factors, described by the interviewees had to do with the ambiguity of the institutions and their rules. The experience of one street-level bureaucrat was that the conversations with the Universal Credit officers left many of their clients more confused than before, as they were not getting proper advice aboutsupport grants and loans; perhaps also leading to the client receiving less support than they were entitled to (SLB_IE03).

Enabling factors

According to the interviewed street-level bureaucrats, the support given by street-level' organisations (SLOs) and local communities was a decisive factor for vulnerable people who needed help throughout the crisis. For example, the manager of a provision centre for asylum seekers reported that during the pandemic they liaised with an NGO with

which they often cooperate, and that NGO provided them with material support such as clothes for children and other donations. The informant also noted that individual donations were provided by individual members of the public, who, as she said, 'were aware of the Centre' (SLB_IE02). Another Irish street-level bureaucrat mentioned that the local community groups were very good at the start of the pandemic:

> *They were just getting out there, ferrying groceries, bread, milk, other services to tenants; delivering them to their door for those who were vulnerable. I had also seen a lot of local businesses providing donations to the local community groups (SLB_IE03).*

There were positive reports of the provision of material, both from institutions and from peers. For example, as reported by the UK expert, the school eventually provided students with Chromebooks during later periods of remote learning (SLB_UK02). Another expert in Turkey reported that the municipality was responsible for the distribution of hygiene kits and food packages (SLB_TR02). Regarding language barrier, a Belgian street-level bureaucrats reported that summer camps for learning Dutch contributed to gradually closing the gap between families who did not speak Dutch as first language (SLB_BE01). In other cases, enabling factors were more related to the sensitivity of the interviewed person. A police officer, for example, started to listen to people's reasons for breaking the rules or committing crime (SLB_IT02).

Isolation and fear, physical and mental health

Among the interviewed street-level bureaucrats, isolation is the most recurring theme mentioned as a challenge for their clients. Those interviewees who worked mostly with older clients reported loneliness to be the hardest problem to solve during the peak of the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic (SLB_LU01, SLB_IE01, SLB_SE01, SLB_CZ03). The interviewees reported a variety of different experiences, but predominantly that home confinement had a severe effect on the mental health and social behaviour of people living in isolation, making contacts with the public service providers much more complicated. For example, a prison educator focusing on art found that the complete halt of face-to-face lessons, made engagement challenging which resulted in a loss of interest by some inmates (SLB_UK01). Many reported how clients increasingly started to bring up negative feelings from isolation and phycological aspects. An employment officer, from Sweden, reported how clients that were seeking help to find a new job in the pandemic more often that before would bring up stories of isolation and distress in the conversation (SLB_SE02) A housing officer in Ireland noticed a rise in antisocial behaviour and in disputes among neighbours, possibly linked to lockdown measures (SLB_IE03). Finally, services specific to women's health were severely hindered and, in some cases, completely halted according to the experience of one member of the family advice centres (SLB_IT01). These services, which ranged from gynaecological counselling to cancer screening (and should have been considered under the umbrella of primary health care) were completely suspended, significantly affecting the health of the population which the interviewee mainly interacted with. Migrant women

specifically, which heavily relied on the services provided by the interviewee's organisation, were completely deprived of this aid without a valid alternative for them to access.

Hindering factors

The street-level bureaucrats described in the interviews how lockdown policies imposed in most of the countries for repeated periods of time during the pandemic had a huge impact on the mental health of all the population, and particularly those groups that were more vulnerable. People living alone were the most affected by confinement, according to the interviews, as they no longer had possibilities to meet face-to-face with other people. An interviewee who worked in a retirement home and home for people with mental illness reported that clients suffered because of the no-visits policy or restricted visits; some of them were confused and unable to recognise the staff or their family members because of the medical protections, such as mask and over-the-body covers (SLB_CZ03). Living in rural areas was another factor that contributed to dispersion, making it difficult for the street-level bureaucrat to reach clients (SLB_ES01). For more vulnerable groups, a big obstacle was the fear of the disease and of getting infected. As reported by a street-level bureaucrat, in many cases relatives did not want to move the client to a home because they had restrictions on who could visit them, and they were afraid that they would never meet them again or less often (SLB_SE01).

Enabling factors

According to the interviewed street-level bureaucrats, having a broad social network helped families to feel less isolated, as they could rely on grandparents and other relatives to help them (SLB_BE01). In other cases, the ability to keep social contacts (e.g., through family, friends, neighbour, or the club, mainly via phone or via other initiatives) was merely an individual characteristic which helped people to not feel isolated (SLB_LU01).

The combination of street-level bureaucrats' willingness and the use of digital devices made it possible in some contexts to help vulnerable groups to keep contact with other people. For example, elderly people living in rural areas were able to make their situation and needs known through the technology that volunteers made available to them, which they would not otherwise have been able to use (SLB_ES02). Other elderly and disabled clients were helped to keep contact with their families and friends through digital technologies, even though for people with severe mental issues the digital connections were confusing (SLB_CZ03). As reported by a street-level bureaucrat, they could stay in touch with their clients from different groups, women, children, and young people, thanks to the rapid switch to online services, and ease their feelings of loneliness while struggling with the challenges of the pandemic. Internet packages provided to women clients enabled them to participate in the online events and trainings delivered by the organisation while staying connected to the world (SLB_TR03).

Gender-based violence

Both negative and positive episodes were outlined by the interviewed street-level bureaucrats who had to deal with cases of gender-based and domestic violence. While one police officer described the difficulties encountered by their clients to report episodes of domestic and gender-based violence because of the impossibility to approach them and talk to them directly (SLB_ES01), another expert working as family counsellor in a municipality mentioned that the hotlines of the municipality and of a women's NGO for reporting gender-based violence were particularly helpful for women experiencing violence and unable to leave their home (SLB_TR02).

Hindering factors

A major hindering factor, described in the interviews, in relation to gender-based violence – and which already emerged in the cycle two of RESISTIRÉ (Sandström et al. 2022) – was that the victims did not have the freedom to approach the police officers and talk to them directly (SLB_ES03). This was, according to the street-level bureaucrats, mainly related to lockdown policies which imposed people to stay at home.

On an individual level, a hindering factor mentioned by the street-level bureaucrats was the lack of trust, related to different reasons. One interviewed person said that she felt women were less likely to open up about issues such as domestic violence, linked to the fact that it was more difficult to build a mutual understanding with the clients and gain their trust, due to increased time constraints on appointments and the need to wear anonymising personal protective equipment (SLB_UK03). In Turkey, one street-level bureaucrat said that the pandemic exacerbated the conditions of shame and fear in which women live and which made them unable to disclose their experiences of domestic violence and sexual abuse (SLB_TR03).

Difficulties in rehousing domestic violence victims due to the housing shortages were mentioned by one street-level bureaucrat, who also noted more domestic violence being reported during and after the pandemic (SLB_IE03).

Enabling factors

One street-level bureaucrat highlighted a positive aspect in service provisions for victims of gender-based violence. The hotlines for reporting gender-based violence of the municipality and of a women's NGO were particularly helpful for women experiencing violence and unable to leave their homes. The municipality also has a women's shelter and the number of women applying for these shelters dramatically increased during the pandemic (SLB_TR02). Another street-level bureaucrat in Turkey mentioned that in recent years, the state institutions have stopped using the concepts of 'gender', 'gender equality' and 'equality between men and women', substituting them with a strategic language that would not 'offend' traditional structures and political authorities (SLB_TR03).

The changing conditions of service provision

The street-level bureaucrats' accounts of their work during the pandemic also includes descriptions of how the altered conditions of service provision affected their work and their clients. The following section describes how they experienced these. The different factors can both be seen as enabling and constraining for service provision.

Proximity - access to face-face and drop-in services

The lack of access to some primary services provided by the street-level organisations was reported in a few cases of different nature, all attributable to pandemic restrictions. In several countries, face-to-face services were interrupted at different points in time, making it difficult for people with less resources to access to alternative services (e.g., online or private consultations). This was reported, for instance, in Italy (SLB_IT01). A midwife working in Sweden reported a complete loss of contact with male clients because of the closure of open practice sessions, primarily affecting young people who often used this service as it needed no appointment (SLB_SE03). Similarly, a social worker primarily working with asylum seekers and recent immigrants found that the closure of schools on top of the closure of many workplaces created complicated work-life balance situation for many immigrant families and reported concern with schools not being able to adequately help these families in a time of crisis (SLB_CZ01).

The digital divide

According to the street-level bureaucrats, the switch to online has been a hindering factor for those who did not have adequate means to access online service. A digital divide has been reported by several of the interviewees, especially within schools. A design and technology teacher, for example, said that during remote teaching he was restricted by not knowing what resources students could access. He realised that many students did not have access to coloured paper for an art project (SLB_UK02). Another major obstacle that impeded equal access to online classes was digital literacy, according to the street-level bureaucrats. Not only had people different possibility to access digital devices, but they also had different levels of knowledge about technologies and how to use them. This was a problem reported both in schools and in other areas. An example from school is given by a UK informant: students were used to using a smartphone, but not a computer. They did not know, for example, how to type, how to store and access files, or how to use Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, etcetera.
A social class divide, however, cut through the digital divide: middle class students did not tend to experience this issue. They were also more often described as being more likely to receive educational support from their families (SLB_UK02).

The digital divide is valid for parents as well. During successive phases of online teaching, teachers received training, but parents found themselves in front of a computer without knowing how to create an account, enter the electronic register, the virtual classroom, etcetera (SLB_IT03). Two examples illustrate the situation from outside

the school environment. A Turkish street-level bureaucrat reported that it was a problem to register people to the online system for the social assistance card application. Only half of those who were supposed to receive the social card received it, because of the lack of digital literacy or appropriate devices (SLB_TR01). In Belgium, the Flemish Service for Job Placement (which helps people with finding employment) moved exclusively online for a period of time, and this prevented some of the vulnerable young people from utilising its services (SLB_BE02).

Shortage of staff and resources (including time)

A worker in a retirement home found that a shortage of staff made caring for their clients incredibly hard during the pandemic, on top of doing their best to preserve their health in a time of uncertainty (SLB_CZ03). According to the street-level bureaucrats, the lack of adequate resources and staff shortages were two of the most visible institutional obstacles, which some of the interviewed mentioned to have been a problem even before the pandemic. A Swedish expert, for example, said that clients could not be put in care facilities even though they might need it, because of at least two reasons: first, a lack of time due to an overburden of cases; second, financial resources are diminishing, and budget cuts had become increasingly common in the last years even before the pandemic (SLB_SE01). The UK expert referred that during the height of the pandemic, staff shortage was due to midwives isolating because of the virus. Later on, increased stress, poor working conditions and changes in policy were leading large numbers of midwives to leave the profession (SLB_UK03). Also in Italy, the centres for family advice had to close during the peak of the pandemic because individual protective equipment (such as masks and gel) was not available (SLB_IT01).

Bureaucratic rules

Experts in Sweden and Turkey also mentioned bureaucracy as a major institutional obstacle for the provision of service (SLB_SE01, SLB_SE02, SLB_TR01). One Swedish interviewee described bureaucracy as very time consuming and creating unnecessary hinders in situation where a simple installation of helping devices would have helped the elderly (SLB_SE01). Another Swedish expert reported that bureaucracy had been an obstacle for many who had to wait a long time for their employment benefits or work insurance (SLB_SE02). An interviewee working with asylum seekers reported that their clients lost jobs more easily and were not able to access the mandatory bureaucratic and medical services for their asylum applications putting them in a situation of stall during a delicate moment in their lives (SLB_IE02).

Information deficit

An expert said that due to a lack of information among certain communities, primarily families with a migrant background, but also to limited language capabilities, many parents were confused by what was happening with COVID-19 and did not know much

about the safety rules and regulations (SLB_BE01). Some experts reported that clients, especially young people, and people with migrant background, had difficulties to understand and follow the COVID-19 regulations (SLB_BE01, SLB_BE02). Not only individual factors were reported as sources of misunderstanding of the rules, but also institutional factors: during the peaks of the pandemic, it was hard to keep track of specific regulations governing social relations and gatherings, which confused the youth (SLB_BE02). One of the Italian street-level bureaucrats said that state had created such a climate of alertness that there was terror during street checks. They could not help anyone because there had been indoctrination from above about the danger each individual represented (SLB_IT02). (SLB_IE03).

Not following the rule and mistrust in the rules

Issues with individuals following rules or disregarding them during lockdowns were reported in different cases. A police officer found that people were much more inclined to commit petty crimes after long lockdowns and became more violent; people seemed to disregard rules as society went back to normal (SLB_IT02). Similarly, a schoolteacher found that parents, while concerned about the wellbeing and health of their children in the first part of the pandemic, stopped following health safety guidelines after a while. This behaviour put staff as well as other pupils in danger in a delicate period of the pandemic, something that affected relationship between parents as well as with teachers (SLB_IT03).

The strategic agency of street-level bureaucrats and their clients

This section provides a summary of the strategic agency utilised by both the vulnerable groups and the street-level bureaucrats to cope with aspects of marginalisation to make the best of the situation, and in imagining and striving for even better visions and situations in the future. Building on the framework of agency suggested by Lister (2004), described in the introduction, we use a four-dimensional taxonomy of agency. This taxonomy derives from the intersection of two different axes of agency: an everyday-strategic agency and personal-political agency.

With agency, street-level bureaucrats are able to make changes to their own and their clients' situation, understand what needs to be fixed, and try to improve the conditions or terms of services provided. Within this section, we try to identify how agency was able to allow change and enable an improvement.

Getting by

With 'getting by' we refer to the initial response and adaptation tactics which both street-level bureaucrats and their clients adopted during pandemic. Of course, due to the very different nature of all the professions explored and the diverse environments in which each interviewee acted, survival took on very different meanings, however some

recurring themes emerged. An interesting commonality is that all interviewee reported that they found a way to get by, despite the many obstacles they encountered. Several street level bureaucrats reported that the continuation of service provision was possible because of the willingness, passion and flexibility of the personnel. For their clients, heavier reliance on friends and family networks to do basic tasks, encountered particularly by workers in schools and retirement homes, was observed by some street-level bureaucrats as a way of adapting to the pandemic. Another interesting theme mentioned in some interviews was an increased reliance on institutions, particularly in situations where burden of care of older relatives or children became unbearable for some, or for accessing important health services. Day-to-day adaptation to new challenges was also mentioned as a way of surviving to the continuously changing situation created by the sudden public health emergency. On the other hand, street-level bureaucrats also had to adapt to new challenges posed by the way they provided their service. Some interviewees reported inevitably working longer hours (SLB_ES01) and doing more tasks beyond their usual duties to survive the first hectic months of the pandemic (SLB_IE01, SLB_SE03). Many reported how they tried to help their clients with basic provisions to enable them to better cope with their difficulties, such as in the examples (better stories) below:

- A single vulnerable mother of three children lost her job due to having to pick up her sick children from the school and nursery too often (which was a COVID-19 policy). She had a residence permit that needs to be renewed every 6 months and this is strongly dependent on whether she has a job or not. She also did not have the money for a doctor and medicine. The school helped her searching – together with a pupil guidance organisation – for a new job, which was ultimately successful. The teachers also banded together to find her appropriate second-hand clothes and shoes for her new job (SLB_BE01).

- *I remember that one Filipino woman was working in a house, she was a domestic worker, with no contract though. With the pandemic, she lost her job. She had three children at home. I contacted a local civil society organisation who helped them with clothes, food, etc. (SLB_IT01)*
  The street-level bureaucrat describes how financial and material support for the client to overcome her problems was provided and in working as a mediator connecting the client who needed help with a local civil society organisation.

- The informant had a group of clients from Belarus (who were granted asylum because they were part of the anti-regime protests) who had difficulties getting jobs. They used the heightened demand for food delivery services during the pandemic, and the whole group got involved in this line of work. They had difficulty finding jobs as many parts of the economy were shut down due to the anti-pandemic measures, and they did not speak the local language. The positions were below their qualification (they all had university degrees), but at least it gave them certain financial certainty (even though one cannot speak

about appropriate integration to the local labour market that would match their skills) (SLB_CZ01).

Getting out

Getting out refers to strategies, solutions, and alternatives found by interviewees and their clients to improve their situation. All street-level bureaucrats interviewed found some form of hardship in carrying out their job, often facing complex decisions and situations that arose from the restrictions imposed by governments to try to halt infection rates. A Spanish expert talked about a volunteering platform made by social workers, who also helped the elderly with technology (SLB_ES02). A teacher mentioned that faced with low engagement by stressed out parents, she tried to keep continuous contact with them by creating engaging learning activities outside of the classroom (SLB_BE01). This is the core of the creativity and role of these workers, who in some cases received little support at the beginning of the pandemic as their role and the institutions that they worked for were largely unprepared for a pandemic. Some solutions required small changes in everyday management, like letting children play more outside and organising lessons in the open in order to minimise risk of infection (SLB_LU01), or shifting more routine tasks to completely digital making their work effectively more efficient (SLB_SE01). In other cases, the street-level bureaucrats discovered new tools for their job, such as the experience of one police officer who said that while the pandemic brought an increase of gender-based and intimate partner violence, it also made the use of social networks a much more ubiquitous device to communicate with victims, improving their response times and ways in which they can help people in dangerous situations (SLB_ES03). Other strategies have been decisive in trying to reduce inequalities among vulnerable groups. A UK expert believed that the 'no cameras' policy of the school during remote learning enabled attendance, as students were not worried about being judged for their home surroundings (SLB_UK02). For many clients, switching to online or phone consultation was very helpful, as it was the case reported in Turkey (SLB_TR02).

However, not all those interviewed found their situation necessarily improved, with some of the street-level bureaucrats describing their environment still lagging in adaptation to the new normal brought by the pandemic. Other observed that while some of the solutions they devised in new contexts (like in online teaching and schooling) were a welcomed innovation in the profession and allowed a wider accessibility to their services, they fear these might also exacerbate existing inequalities in access, as they noticed that students were not adequately supported through this transition (SLB_IT03). From the interviews analysed, we derive that having the means of finding alternative and creative solutions on the job is only in part in the hands of street-level bureaucrats. Hindering and enabling factors in their work environment also play a major role in establishing the agency which these workers have, and from most interviews it emerged that changes in personal practices are truly effective only if paired with supportive institutions and policies. Some examples relate to co-inventions between street-level

organisations and clients relating to the particular circumstances of the pandemic. One example being how during the pandemic and in relation to the need of medical supplies, a larger number of women participated in different projects (embroidery of clothes, manufacturing medical uniforms and masks) which allowed them to earn an income to maintain their households (SLB_TR03). Another example was that the policy of keeping the windows opened at schools for air circulation – and thus creating cold classrooms in winter – brought to the decision of a parental council to provide free soup and bread every Thursday, which was suggested it could become an annual tradition in the coldest period of the year (SLB_BE01).

Getting back at

The experience of street-level bureaucrats was inevitably also faced with challenges by their clients, who perhaps did not follow rules, or offered a conflict to the interviewee. This type of agency, which we define as 'getting back at', presents dilemmas and frustrations of the work of the street-level bureaucrats, but can also cause fear and stress, especially in a dynamically changing situation like a pandemic. A policeman, for example reported a rise in micro-criminality and a complete disregard of the social distancing rules in the period of gradual reopening after a long lockdown (SLB_IT02). In another case, a teacher reported a complete disregard of the established protocol to keep children safe in school settings by parents, which led to some infections for which the teacher felt in some way responsible (SLB_IT03). A social worker working with disadvantaged younger adults reported helping some who did not follow public health guidelines of wearing masks and not gathering in large crowds and refusing to pay fines (SLB_BE02). Dealing with these types of problems is an inherent part of their work, but under special circumstances such as a pandemic, it risks exposing them to more health risks as well as make their job more stressful, something that almost all interviewees mentioned in some way. For this reason, intuitional support and clear guidelines are fundamental to protect and care for these workers. But there were also many reports of street-level bureaucrats themselves not following or bending rules and as such resisting the policies imposed. For instance, a midwife said that some appointments continued in person, largely thanks to their Head of Midwifery who was passionate about keeping things open (SLB_UK03). The same person mentioned that the dynamics and flexibility of the medical team contributed to accommodate client's wishes to give birth at home, because the husband was having chemotherapy and she did not want to go to the hospital, even if she was at risk because of the position of the baby. A Swedish employment officer describes how she regularly ignores the suggested matchings and decisions 'by the book' when not feeling that it would be beneficial to the client (SLB_SE02).

Getting organised

Finally, organisation and coming together between communities and colleagues is a fundamental way of getting through problems, and many of the most creative solutions

found during the pandemic came from the collective thinking and acting of different actors in a time of crisis. 'Getting organised' describes a form of agency which relies on group thinking to find a solution, or a new-found strength in the development of a tighter-knit community. Supporting each other through difficult decisions and tasks, findings way to help their community members by relying on the help of neighbourhoods and using their collective knowledge to face an unprecedented challenge. Street-level bureaucracy is community-based, and collective action is critical for it to thrive. Some interesting accounts arrived from those interviewees that worked in the medical field, who reported a much closer collaboration with colleagues to understand how to properly treat patients who were suffering from COVID-19 (SLB_ES01). Another great example of finding solution by working together came from social workers in NGOs, who reported a much tighter collaboration with other organisations as well as with governmental agencies to help their clients better (SLB_TR01, SLB_TR03). In another case, in order to better understand practices to help their clients getting through harder times, a street-level bureaucrat mentioned the organisation of common seminars with colleagues from other organisations to share best-practices and lessons learned (SLB_ES02). From the analysis of these interviews, it is clear that the cases in which these workers were able to organise and come together, they seemed to feel uplifted from some of the stress related to their work, and found inspiration for the collaborations. It is fundamental that collaboration in these contexts is enabled and encouraged, as this can help the management of a complex situation for both workers as well as institutions. In this sense, we observe that the individual agency is amplified and made more flexible when it is empowered by getting organised. However, many also reported difficulties in getting their voce heard when trying to report upward in the organisation e.g., on obstacles such as bureaucratic rules or difficulties in adequately provide service according to the needs of different target groups.

Lessons learnt

The majority of the street-level bureaucrats indicated that there has been a change in the way the service is provided, namely that the service is offered in a different way compared to before the pandemic, or that the pandemic has raised more awareness on some aspects of the services. In some cases, these changes were positive, while in some others they were negative.

Digitalisation of services – both positive and negative for service provision

One of the most recurrent changes was the digitalisation of the service provision, either in the form of online classes, online meetings, phone consultations, and so on. According to some experts, the switch to online/phone services was a positive change, both for them and for the clients. For example, online classes allowed students to keep up with education (SLB_IT03); phone/online consultations were in some cases defined as beneficial for the clients (SLB_CZ02), as they enabled greater access to the

municipality's services also from clients living in the outskirts of the city (SLB_TR02). The organisation of hybrid activities allowed to provide sport classes for older people, but also to reach out to all the clients in an easy way, through computer generated SMS (SLB_LU01). In very specific situations, such as in the case of gender-based violence, the digital tools became very useful instruments to keep contacts with the victims (SLB_ES03). From the street-level bureaucrats' perspective, digitalisation allowed them to save time on some services, as it was reported by the housing officer in Ireland: 'We probably do not need to be out as much. There was a waste in the amount of time that we just gave to tenants, for example tenants coming to our counter to talk to their patch manager about something that could have been easily discussed in one minute over the phone' (SLB_IE03). E-mail contacts with other authorities and offices – which was not possible before the pandemic – has facilitated the communication between the expert and other organisations (e.g., the unemployment office) (SLB_CZ01). And again, there has been more personal changes related to the use of online tools: an expert reported that telework and doing more online meetings has lessened personal stress and also made the work more efficient (SLB_SE01). Some street-level bureaucrats described how the implementation of online or phone communication has improved the relationships with the clients and the benefits they can have. For example, one street-level bureaucrat reported that the municipality used its website and social media accounts more actively and efficiently, learned how to reach their clients by using every method possible and interacted with them more transparently and effectively; it even launched a new website during the pandemic, in which all the data regarding the city (e.g. ongoing road construction, bicycle routes, transportation, social aid statistics, Wi-Fi zones, etc.) are shared with the clients (SLB_TR02).

At the same time, digitalisation of service was recognised to be a negative change, especially for the more vulnerable groups. Phone consultations constituted, for example, a major obstacle for clients with hearing problems or who could not understand a doctor speaking with foreign accent (SLB_IE01). Online education – as mentioned in the section on digital divide above – has exacerbated marginalisation for the children who were unable to participate due to lack of means or parental knowledge, or because they were in large families (SLB_IT03). Where digital communication was introduced, the expert mentioned that this was however not systematic, nor was there a policy-driven change (SLB_CZ01).

New professional knowledge gained

A raise in the awareness of clients' needs was highlighted by some experts as an improvement in the service provision. This awareness related to both material and emotional support. The negative consequences of COVID-19 measures triggered some (quick) responses by the organisations/institutions in which the street-level bureaucrats work. The digital divide, already existing prior to the pandemic, was highlighted. Families in disadvantaged socio-economic positions, for example, were provided with TVs so that children could follow live educational courses on a national broadcaster, as

well as with computers or tablets and internet package to support households with schooling children and youth (SLB_TR03). Regarding emotional support, this seems to have been more recognised and offered to clients. An expert had the impression that since the pandemic, more external support (e.g., therapists, bereavement support) was coming to the school, and a girl football team was set up, with the aim of giving emotional support alongside the recreational aspect (SLB_UK02). The raise in awareness of the needs of clients has contributed to provide the street-level bureaucrats with better perspectives of the clients. One street-level bureaucrat reported, for example, that the teachers have now a better perspective on how the families live at home and what happens in the home, so that they are better able to detect problems within families and to find a resolution (SLB_BE01). Another street-level bureaucrat reported a more practical way of preparedness: within the organisation, they have become much more sensitive towards not exposing people to contagion, for example by avoiding shaking hands to greet, keeping the distances, or staying at home if they are sick (SLB_SE01). This client-centred perspective has contributed to developing (additional) services to anticipate the needs of the clients, for example by organising training in online banking and computer/internet literacy for the older clients (SLB_LU01); or by providing emergency accommodation in hotels to homeless people (SLB_IE03). Furthermore, an expert believed that the organisation has gained experience in managing the crisis, realising that they had the capacity to reach their clients in different ways and they learned not to give up (SLB_TR03). Training provided by higher levels of the institution or organisations was mentioned as beneficial by one teacher (SLB_IT03).

Lack of crises preparation

Many of the street-level bureaucrats reported how the pandemic was unexpected, the staff (medical, healthcare, social assistants, etc.) was generally unprepared and it was hard for them to keep up without a plan. Also, the pandemic hit situations in which resources were already scarce, and situations were further aggravated by the staff that left, creating problems of staff shortage (SLB_UK01, SLB_UK03). An expert reported that crisis management plans and systems were not in place, and there was no mental health or other support for staff (SLB_CZ03). Other negative changes were directly related to the restrictions imposed during the lockdown. An expert felt that the residents of the asylum seeker centre were affected by the pandemic as they had limited access to health advice, and their asylum-seeking process was taking much longer due to delays caused by the pandemic (SLB_IE02).

These changes seem to have prepared both the street-level bureaucrats or their organisations and the clients to face possible future crises. Many of the interviewed street-level bureaucrats mentioned that the staff are now better prepared (SLB_IE01, SLB_IE02), and that the system is currently more dynamic, such as in the case mentioned by one expert in the UK. This expert sees that now people are more dynamic and flexible in the way they work, and teams are working together more, something that it was previously perceived to be very difficult to change because of bureaucracy, lack of

communication and lack of joined-up practice (SLB_UK03). Another expert believed that their organisation will plan more and be more systematic in the future (SLB_TR03).

Some experts reported that their organisations felt they were already prepared to face emergency situations (SLB_IE02), or that they had already capacity of adaptation – which is what is needed to be prepared (SLB_ES03). However, the COVID-19 situation was in a sense so extreme that they had to cope with new situations of emergency, and this brought them to a sort of re-adaptation.

One street-level bureaucrat reported that thanks to the increased use of digital technologies to access and engage with their clients, the organisation and the street-level bureaucrats increased their digital literacy, which will be very helpful in managing the crisis and continuing their work (SLB_TR03). In one case, the expert mentioned also that the 'modernisation of the office' remained even after the pandemic and this can be a good baseline in case of another crisis, because those who want to use digital technologies have a more flexible access to services (SLB_CZ02). Other experts reported that they became more 'phone friendly', better at digital communication overall (SLB_SE01), better at doing digital meetings, and they have even opened digital clinics (SLB_SE03).

While there are some positive lessons learnt in the words of the street-level bureaucrats, some of them did not report any significant post-pandemic changes nor preparedness to future crises. With other street-level bureaucrats seeming to be sceptical about the future. For example, in the Italian context there is a concern that the centres for family advice will disappear because of the reduction in the number of users during the pandemic, and they are seen by the national health service only as a 'drain on money' (SLB_IT01). Another expert emphasised the presence of a disconnection between the different parts of the organisations:

> *I am sure that there will be a fancy, glossy document going around that talks about 'the lessons learnt!', and what we have done better, and what we are going to improve in the future. [...] Some higher up person will get a pat on the back and they are going to present it in a couple of places [...]. That is not what is actually happening on the ground, and that is not what is actually coming through (SLB_IE03).*

Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of RESISTIRÉ is to understand the unequal impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak and its policy and societal responses on behavioural, social and economic inequalities, and to design solutions and innovations to work towards individual and societal resilience. This is done through a variety of research, both quantitative and qualitative, conducted over three cycles. Our research has in the previous cycles shown how already

vulnerable and marginalised groups have become even more vulnerable and marginalised; existing inequalities have increased, and new ones have emerged (Axelsson et al. 2021; Sandström et al. 2022). While other research has predominantly focused on problems, inequalities, barriers, and specific groups experiencing specific problems we have chosen to instead turn our research to what can be learnt by studying the more positive outcomes and the role of individual agency.

In the third and final cycle of qualitative research this is achieved through focusing on 'better stories' (Georgis 2013) and strategic forms of agency (Lister 2004, 2021) of marginalised groups during the pandemic. The research interest here is the lived experiences of individuals and their strategies to cope with crises, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to the first and second cycles, this third cycle analysis thus focuses on the individual agency of the informants during crises trying to learn future lessons from individual better stories. Street-level bureaucrats i.e., those that serve as the frontier of government response to crises and emergencies (Gofen & Lotta 2021) are important to understand not only what forms of agency and better stories can be detected, but also the conditions necessary for better stories to unfold. In understanding social exclusion and vulnerability as a practice and process rather than a condition, the role of both structure and agency is acknowledged. Earlier research has revealed how attempts of strategic agency can either fail or succeed depending on the responses from their social and structural contexts. When institutional practices restrict opportunities for strategic agency, a person will soon return to the struggles of everyday life, often with a growing resentment and cynicism towards the system. When, on the other hand, strategic agency is supported by institutional practices, pathways to transformation and resolution of tensions are more likely to emerge. For the implementation of institutional practices, street-level bureaucrats play an important role (Evans, 2010). Our focus on better stories and strategic agency is therefore key in understanding the transition from social exclusion and marginalisation and in supporting an individuals' ability to act and have an impact on society. In the following section we will share the most important conclusions from the research conducted.

Strategic agency of marginalised individuals and groups - coping, resisting, transcending and taking collective action

In the accounts of the empirical data in the report, we have described the result from our analysis using Listers four forms of agency. Staying with Lister's framework, this section will present the main findings from the analysis of the narrative interviews, outlining how individuals from marginalised groups coped and managed during the pandemic (getting by); how they practiced everyday resistance in the face of oppression (getting back at); how they found ways to transcend adversity (getting out) and how they engaged in collective action, either to offer support or as a way to effect change on a wider scale (getting organised).

Everyday coping and managing (getting by)

Lister's first form of agency, 'getting by', refers to the everyday strategies and tactics that individuals and groups use to survive and cope with their circumstances. Lister characterises it as 'the fight to keep going' in the face of adversity' (2021: 130). This every day, personal form, of agency often goes unrecognised as an expression of agency; it is taken for granted and seen as simply 'getting on with things' (Lister 2021: 130). For that reason, acknowledging 'getting by' as a form of agency can shed light on the effort it takes just to get through the day when the circumstances are difficult. What Lister calls 'getting by' is by far the most frequently occurring form of agency in the narratives and some common themes regarding *what* people had to cope with can be identified:

- **Fear, including** the fear of being infected with the virus.
- **Social isolation and loneliness**, often leading to mental health issues that had to be coped with. At the same time, isolation was in some ways a coping strategy for dealing with fear.
- **Constraints on relationships**, while loneliness might have been less prominent for those living with others, isolating together also put a strain on many relationships.
- **Inactivity and boredom**, partly related to the theme of isolation as well, people were coping with lack of stimulation.
- **Increased burdens of paid and/or unpaid work**, on the opposite end of inactivity and boredom, there were those who had to cope with increased level of activity.
- **Limited access to services**, many struggled with access to services, not least access to medical services.
- **Economic uncertainty and hardship** were widespread. For some, it meant already existing poverty was intensified. For others, economic precarity was a new experience.
- **Mental health**, a cross-cutting theme related to all of the above.

The individual narrators coped with these difficulties by drawing on the personal, social, and material resources available to them. Maintaining some social connections was central to coping with isolation, but social resources were also important in the sense that they could compensate for lack of material resources or lack of access to services (e.g. childcare). Although almost all narrators faced at least some of the above-mentioned difficulties, 'coping resources' were not equally distributed, and neither was the possibility to turn the situation around and make positive long-term changes to their lives.

Everyday resistance (getting back at)

'Getting back at' refers everyday acts of defiance and resistance. As a form of micro-political action, they offer a way for marginalised people to 'get back at' the more powerful and the system that oppresses them. Typically, they are individual acts but

there are some collective exceptions (e.g. riots). Forms of resistance include everything from the rejection of conformist values or negative labelling to doing unrecorded work or violating the regulations of the benefits system. Recurring themes in the narratives relate to:

- **A sense of anger and discontent with how the pandemic has been handled**, although a majority of the narrators can be said to have expressed some discontent, the sentiment varied in strength. Some believed measures were generally well-intended but were critical of how certain aspects had been handled, others had lost all faith in public authorities.
- **Questioning of *who* received support during the pandemic, and who was left without**, narrators expressed anger at being left without financial support and with limited access to healthcare and other services, including access to education and childcare.
- **Resisting the lockdown measures**, breaking rules in order to see other people was common. Many also noted that these measures had unequal effects.
- **Refusing to get vaccinated**, could also be seen as an act of defiance and a way to exercise agency from a position of limited power.
- **Discursive and psychological resistance**, examples of narrators rejecting categorisation and negative stereotypes can also be found. For example, older narrators who rejected the ageist stereotypes implied by the pandemic measures.
- **Resisting exploitation in the workplace**, small informal acts of resistance can be seen in the narratives, such as limiting the effort put into one's work. Another way of resisting exploitation in the workplace was to leave a job where working conditions are bad, although the narrators who chose to do so typically did not see it as a form of protest but a step towards something better (i.e., they 'got out').

In most cases, the anger expressed in the narratives did not translate into concrete actions but the brewing sense of resentment towards state officials, and the increasing distrust in their ability to handle the pandemic and its consequences in a fair and equitable manner could have far-reaching consequences in the long run.

Transcending adversity (getting out)

'Getting out' refers to individual strategic actions aimed at transcending adverse circumstances. It can be helped or hindered by structural and cultural factors and the ability to exercise this form of agency largely depends on the type of resources a person can draw on, as well as the constraints they face due to their social position. Examples include seeking education and training, finding better employment, or moving to a new location. Although attempts to 'get out' were not always successful, the pandemic did open a window of opportunity to make positive changes to several narrators' lives:

- **Pandemic as a push or catalysator for change**, there were those for whom

changing circumstances during the pandemic forced a positive change, usually by making a previously difficult situation unbearable. For example, some women 'got out' of abusive relationship as a result of the pandemic. Others got out of, or at least improved, the gender imbalance of unpaid work.

- **Pandemic as a welcome life-break**, although not all experienced a less eventful life as positive, there were those for whom the pandemic offered a welcome change of pace in life. They got a chance to re-evaluate life and reflect on what mattered to them, leading to decisions to spend more time with loved ones, changing jobs or seeking education.
- **Improved work-life balance**, many, though not all, who worked remotely during the pandemic stated it had improved their work-life balance.
- **Addressing mental health issues**, although the pandemic was the cause of mental health issues for many individuals, it also led to many people addressing both pre-existing and emerging issues. Some sought professional help, others practiced different forms of self-care that they hoped to sustain long-term.

Although there are examples in the narratives of people 'getting out' against all odds, the question of who benefitted from the pandemic remains central. For example, enjoying a slower pace of life usually required some form of stability: it is less likely seen as beneficial if the slowdown is the result of losing a job that provides one's only source of income. Also, while many benefitted from working from home during the pandemic, working from home is not an option open to most working-class people, which in itself points to a certain privilege. On a similar note, remote working did not suit everybody, especially when working conditions were less than ideal. For example, without a supportive employer, it was more likely to add than remove stress.

Collective action (getting organised)

'Getting organised' refers to different forms of collective action, including ways in which individuals and groups organise and mobilise to demand rights and equality on a larger scale. This can include grassroots activism, political campaigns, and social movements aimed at challenging systemic oppression and achieving social change. It refers to the ways in which individuals and groups work together to achieve common objectives and to build collective power and influence. Many of the narratives in the 'getting organised' category are examples of 'collective self-help' in various forms. There are examples of both formal and informal organisations of this kind and the stories are told both from the perspective of giving support and receiving support. Quite often, the narrator was both the giver and receiver of support. Some forms of organising stand out in particular:

- **Caring neighbourhoods**, the spirit of reciprocity and mutual aid is seen most clearly in the number of narratives that revolve around organising at the neighbourhood level.
- **Online support communities**, in addition to neighbourhood initiatives, online communities of various forms and scale were common. The results show how

digitalisation can both exclude and include. Whereas some struggled with the shift from offline to online communications, others found the shift back from online to offline difficult as it excluded them from participation (e.g., those with restricted mobility due to a disability or those living in rural areas).

- **Organising to change systematic inequalities**, there are also examples of narrators getting organised to effect change on a more structural level. Quite often, the starting point in these narratives is the narrator's own adversity.
- **Re-organising due to the pandemic**, a number of narratives deal with organisational aspects due to the pandemic itself: the obstacles they faced, how they attempted to overcome them, how they adapted to the pandemic, etc.

Helping others could be a way to help oneself such as in initiatives based on mutual aid or in narratives where the narrator acted on behalf of a group, they themselves belonged to. But seeing a need that was not being met and deciding to take action could also be beneficial to the person taking action in other ways. Several narrators stated that 'getting organised' gave them a sense of purpose and in that sense, it acted as a coping strategy for some. Not all initiatives were successful, however, and there were those who want to get organised but encountered institutional obstacles preventing them from doing so.

Support to marginalised groups in the pandemic

Both in the narratives and in the interviewed street-level bureaucrats we can find clues to the enabling and hindering factors that are essential for the better stories to unfold. They also provide insight into the obstacles that prevent better stories or even lead to the bad stories, i.e., those that uphold, deepen, or even create, new types of inequalities. The interviews with the street-level bureaucrats show how the conditions for street-level service rapidly changed when the pandemic spread across the world. These changes affected the possibilities to both provide and receive support to mitigate the negative individual effects of the pandemic and for more ordinary public services. Among the common themes were:

- **Proximity of services** – e.g. access to face-face and drop-in services, in several countries, face-to-face services including 'drop-in services' were interrupted at different points in time with many negative effects, but also some positive e.g. when digital interactions were seen as preferable by some clients.
- **The digital divide**, the switch to online has been a hindering factor for those who did not have adequate means or know-how to access online service often linked to socio-economic factors, but has also had some positive effects.
- **Shortage of staff and resources (including time)**, the lack of adequate resources and staff shortages two of the most visible institutional obstacles, which some of the interviewed mentioned to have been a problem even before but emphasised during the pandemic.
- **Bureaucratic rules,** bureaucracy has been mentioned as a major institutional obstacle for the provision of service leading to difficulties to provide support in

time or the right support.

- **Information deficit,** lack of, or wrong type of information to clients and for the service providers themselves, during the peaks of the pandemic, it was hard to keep track of specific regulations and news.
- **Not following the rules and mistrust in the rules,** issues with individuals not following rules or disregarding them during lockdowns were reported in different cases such as not following health safety guidelines after a while.

Besides the altered condition for the service provision that the pandemic caused, the street-level bureaucrats also reported how their clients faced new or increased problems. The interviews show that the most common challenges reported refer to:

- **Economic vulnerabilities**
  Issues related to financial instability, and other economic-related difficulties in finding a job, accessing unemployment benefits, or getting back on track after a period of economic insecurity, were described by many interviewees. Some street-level bureaucrats observed a social gradient in access to their service by clients affected by the socio-economic realities of their clients. Spiralling effects from the pandemic were mentioned, such as when pandemic policy measures affected the labour market and the availability of jobs, which then influenced clients' financial situation and in turn affected the ability to pay alimonies, debts and so on.
- **Isolation and fear, physical and mental health**
  Among the interviewed street-level bureaucrats, isolation is the most recurring theme mentioned as a challenge for their clients. This in turn is connected to fear, increasing mental health problems and also physical problems from not being able to get sufficient medical care.
- **Gender-based violence**
  Both negative and positive episodes were outlined by those interviewed. A major hindering factor was that the victims did not have the freedom to get help. Digital provision was on the other hand mentioned as a positive aspect in service provisions for victims of gender-based violence.

The strategic agency of street-level bureaucrats

Social exclusion, to quote Lister, can be understood as the 'practice of the more powerful which structures the possible field of action of the less powerful' (Lister 2004: 96). Street-level bureaucrats can be understood as the more powerful in their function as gatekeepers during the pandemic to a variety of resources, information, connections and so on. Yet, street-level bureaucrats are often themselves in a less powerful position, in fact many of the narratives in our study describes situation of persons working as street-level bureaucrats, as teachers, nurses and in counselling services. Like the persons interviewed for the narratives, street level bureaucrats also make uses of different strategies to resist, redefine, transgress, and collectively organise in order to cope with

and change the system or simply to get by and help their clients to do the same.

The description of the discretionary agency of street-level bureaucrats, i.e., the responses that the discretion power the system allows for, s, resembles Lister's framework in many ways. Others have found similar patterns when comparing street-level bureaucrats' responses during the pandemic as described above. In our analysis of the street-level bureaucrats interviewed we use Listers framework and expand it to include the agency of street-level bureaucrats during the pandemic, recognizing the precarious and vulnerable positions of street-level bureaucrats themselves and also their experience of their clients' strategic agency.

Everyday coping and managing (getting by)

The results show many accounts of actions by street-level bureaucrats to 'make do with what you have', i.e., what have been described as adaption or improvisation to the changing situation, being loyal to the organisation and adhering to top-down priorities while at the same time recognising the declining conditions to provide support to the clients. In the interviews with the street-level bureaucrats many adaptation tactics were described both in the work of the street-level bureaucrats themselves and in their observations of their clients. All interviewees reported that they found a way to get by, despite the many obstacles they encountered. Several street level bureaucrats reported that the continuation of service provision was possible because of the willingness, passion, and flexibility of the personnel. Many also reported how they try to help their clients with basic provisions to enable them to better cope with their difficulties. By helping the clients with basic needs, they argued that they would have a better chance in handling and also improving their lives e.g., 'getting out' strategies.

Redefining the terms of engagement (getting out)

A conclusion from the interviews is that 'getting out' for the street-level bureaucrats entailed finding innovative approaches to counteract the shortcomings of official policy responses and meet the changing needs of supported individuals during the pandemic. 'Getting out' in this context refers to strategies, solutions, and alternatives found by interviewees and their clients to improve their situation. All street level bureaucrats interviewed found some form of hardship in carrying out their job, often facing complex decisions and situations that arose from the restrictions imposed by governments to try to halt infection rates. The interviews report many instances of creativity and innovation. Some solutions required small changes in everyday management, in other cases, the street-level bureaucrats discovered new tools for their job, other strategies have been decisive in trying to reduce inequalities among vulnerable groups. Some examples relate to co-inventions between street-level organisations and clients relating to the particular circumstances of the pandemic. The interviews show how finding alternative and creative solutions on the job is only in part in the hands of street-level bureaucrats. Hindering and enabling factors in their work environment also play a major role in

establishing the agency which these workers have, and from most interviews it emerged that changes in personal practices are truly effective only if paired with supportive institutions and policies.

Transgressive practices (getting back at)

A conclusion is that the strategy of getting back at is common and practiced by both street-level bureaucrats themselves and their clients. It entails resisting by not following the rules or finding ways to work around them. The downside of the strategy is that many street-level bureaucrats become subjects of clients' 'get back at' strategies, when they break rules or display frustration and anger over flaws in the system which they many times recognize but have little power to improve. This type of agency presents dilemmas and frustrations for the street-level bureaucrats, but can also cause fear and stress, especially in a dynamically changing situation like a pandemic, it can also become a personal risk such as in situations of treats or violence directed towards street-level bureaucrats out of clients' frustration with their situations, or personal risk of infection when clients refuse to use protection. For this reason, institutional support and clear guidelines are fundamental to protect and care for these workers. But there were also many reports of street level bureaucrats themselves not following or bending rules, and as such resisting the policies imposed. The street-level bureaucrats and clients also in several cases cooperated in this type of overt resistance and broke rules together in informal agreements to the benefits of their clients which also expose the street-level bureaucrats to the risk that breaking the rules entails for a civil servant.

Collective action (getting organised)

A conclusion is that relating to street-level bureaucrats this means to voice the concerns either within the organisation or outside, but for most of them to engage in collaborative initiatives with colleagues in a community of practice type of structure. Organising and coming together between communities and colleagues are fundamental ways of getting through problems, and many of the most creative solutions found during the pandemic came from the collective thinking and acting of different actors in a time of crisis. Many examples were shared in the interviews such as supporting each other through difficult decisions and tasks, findings way to help their community members by relying on the help of neighbourhoods and using their collective knowledge to face an unprecedented challenge. Street-level bureaucracy is community-based, and collective action is critical for it to thrive. It is clear that in the cases in which these workers were able to organise and come together, they seemed to feel uplifted from some of the stress related to their work and found inspiration for the collaborations. However, many also reported difficulties in getting their voce heard when trying to report upward in the organisation e.g., on obstacles such as bureaucratic rules or difficulties in adequately provide service according to the needs of different target groups.

The good, the bad and the better story

To conclude, both the narrative interviews and the interviews with street-level bureaucrats contain examples of what can be seen as good, bad and better stories. Below are some of the most noteworthy:

The good: The pandemic shone a spotlight on mental health. On the negative side, it caused mental health issues that many live with to this day. One a more positive side, it created an awareness that others were suffering too. In many cases, it fostered a spirit of compassion and solidarity, an openness to talk about mental health issues, and a willingness to 'share the burden' with those struggling. As a result, many have addressed both pre-existing and newly emerging mental health concerns.

The bad: The pandemic increased inequalities, deepened marginalisation, and exposed and widened fundamental gaps in welfare systems around Europe. As a result, those with limited personal, social, and material resources that could compensate for these gaps were left without little support. Combined with pandemic measures that were often-times authoritarian in nature, it left many in a despondent state with little faith in public authorities' desire or ability to help them.

The better story: Although there were those that found themselves without support from both public authorities and more informal support networks, the spirit of solidarity is strong in many of the narratives. What they show above all is that the pandemic was something we got through *together*: people exchanged information and offered each other material, social and emotional support through neighbourhood networks; street-level bureaucrats relied on collegial support to get through the working day and to establish new, better ways, of working; through helplines women gave other women a way out of violence and through online communities, young people who were coming to terms with their gender identity found much needed support. Many of these initiatives take the form of collective support and perhaps it is not surprising that mobilising during the pandemic focused on meeting immediate needs as there were so many urgent needs to be met. While examples of mobilising to demand rights and equality on a larger scale do exist, they are rarer. Yet it is important to make these better stories of solidarity visible, as they provide a 'counter narrative' and insights into acts of support and into the ability to act and have an impact on society. They show how it is possible to exercise agency to counter-act shaming and othering of vulnerable and marginalised groups. As such, they can be seen as starting points for the formulation of collective political claims and for practising strategic political forms of agency.

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Table 8: List of researchers conducting the expert interviews and writing the individual reports

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Table 9: List of researchers conducting the narrative interviews

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