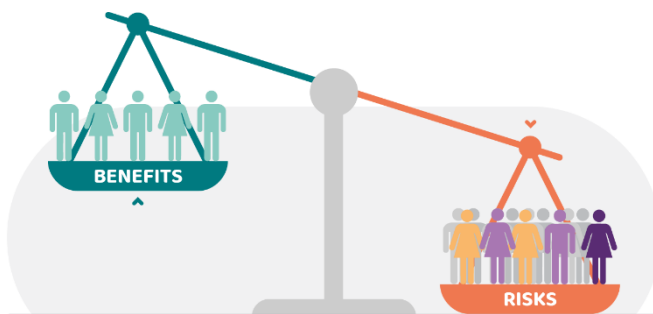**RESISTIRÉ**
Reducing gendered inequalities
caused by COVID-19 policies

Digital Transformation for an Inclusive Post-COVID Recovery

Recommendations to policymakers to mitigate the gendered impacts of Covid-19 based on RESISTIRÉ findings

BENEFITS

RISKS

DIGITAL ACCELERATION: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

The sudden acceleration of the digitalisation of public services, healthcare, work, education, and overall human interactions caused by the pandemic response has had an unequivocal impact on people's lives and especially on those most vulnerable.

On the one hand, digital acceleration created conditions for the formation of new inequalities and for the reproduction of existing ones, as many people were excluded from access to the tools and the knowledge required to utilise them and were therefore also excluded from the benefits of the digital transformation.

On the other hand, digital acceleration allowed people and communities to stay connected in a time of physical (social) distancing; it facilitated the continuation of activities carried out by civil society; it made some public services more accessible; and it provided an opportunity to re-think digital inclusion and the role of digital technologies in times of crises.

- ## Recommendations

> ### We recommend that policy makers ensure access to digital infrastructure and competence development. We specifically encourage:

- The development of education programmes and curricula for the enhancement of digital literacy and digital skills, while considering intersecting factors of income and educational levels, geographical positionality, and age, ethnicity, disabilities, and gender in their development;
- The assurance of equality in terms of the availability and affordability of digital infrastructure and connectivity, and doing so by addressing especially rural and urban divides and socioeconomic status;
- The funding of upskilling and reskilling programmes that help displaced workers find new job opportunities, while considering especially existing and intersecting inequalities in relation to age, ethnicity, disabilities, and gender.

> ### We recommend that policy makers consider equity and inclusiveness to be the most important cornerstones of digital policy decision-making and support for digital innovation. We specifically encourage:

- The promotion of polices to support collaborative and co-creative programmes and projects with the aim of developing ethically robust, reliable, and inclusive technologies;
  The development of holistic government approaches to inclusive digital policy- and decision-making and the promotion of cooperation between different ministries in order to address the complexity and inter-relatedness of policy areas influenced by digital transformation;
- The development of policy mechanisms to promote collaboration and exchange between different governmental entities, policy areas, business

sectors, and civil society organisations to ensure that digital equality and inclusive digitalisation are promoted within and across sectors;

- The promotion of European cooperation, cross-border information sharing, and closer collaboration with the private sector to minimise the risks of countries falling behind in the digital economy.

We recommend that policy makers intensify their efforts to explore the structural and systemic causes of widening digital inequalities in society. We specifically encourage policy makers to:

- Go beyond removing barriers and focusing on fixing specific groups of people. Digitalisation should be understood as an opportunity to review systems and policies in place and make them more inclusive beyond particular groups or characteristics. This would create room for new ways of mitigating and addressing existing inequalities beyond the digital divide.
- Challenge preconceived and un-reflexive assumptions about user groups in digital innovation and development. When digital solutions are implemented, the question of who may and who may not benefit from them needs to be given serious consideration. This goes beyond the question of who has access, as the consequences of digitalisation also vary depending on needs.
- Challenge the narrative of digitalisation as a 'universal good'. When digitalisation is treated as an end goal in its own right, rather than as a means to an end, it leaves the potentially harmful effects of digitalisation unaddressed.

• **Problem Statement**

What is the problem with digital inclusion?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid digitalisation shed a light on the problem of vulnerable groups and their access to and use of digital technologies. Billions of people across the globe went online to stay connected, yet almost half of the world's population lacked internet access at the beginning of the crisis. [1] Even in Europe, which in many cases digitally outperforms other parts of the world, rapid digitalisation proved to be unequal: almost half of the EU population lacked basic skills and 20% had none at all. Large differences were also found in terms of major intra- and cross-country disparities in Internet access and digital skills, especially between North-Western Europe and the other regions. These differences also reflect existing societal inequalities, where people who are younger, more educated, male, live in urban regions, and are either students or employed, have better internet access and digital skills than other demographic groups. [2] This tendency, where groups of people already privileged in other respects are also digitally privileged, is of major concern, since it reinforces and widens gaps related not only to what has been called the first two levels of digital inequalities (internet access and digital skills) but also to a third source of inequalities – the tangible and beneficial outcomes from digital usage.

The consequences of the digital divide and its relation to existing societal inequalities is, however, less discussed. [3] In recent decades, many governments across Europe have stepped up their efforts to promote the availability of digital technologies and build digital skills, with large improvement being observed in these areas. This development can lead to a false impression that the problem of digital inequalities has been fixed, while overlooking the considerable remaining gaps resulting from the intersecting factors of age, income, ethnicity, disabilities, and gender. The pandemic presented a window of opportunity to rethink the use of digital technologies in everyday life and highlighted the potential of digitalisation to address societal inequalities.[4] It is necessary to ensure that the lessons learned during the crisis will guide post-pandemic digitalisation policies.

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[1] World Economic Forum (2020). *Coronavirus has exposed the digital divide like never before*. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-digital-divide-internet-data-broadband-mobbile/

[2] van Kessel, R., Wong, B. L. H., Rubinić, I., O'Nuallain, E., & Czabanowska, K. (2022). Is Europe prepared to go digital? Making the case for developing digital capacity: An exploratory analysis of Eurostat survey data. *PLOS Digit Health 1*(2), e0000013. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pdig.0000013

[3] van Kessel et al. (2022); Lutz, C. (2019). Digital inequalities in the age of artificial intelligence and big data. *Human Behavior & Emerging Technologies*, *1,* 141–148. https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.140

[4] Perruzzo, F. & Allan, J. (2022). Rethinking inclusive (digital) education: lessons from the pandemic to reconceptualise inclusion through convivial technologies. *Learning, Media and Technology*. DOI: 10.1080/17439884.2022.2131817

Insights from RESISTIRÉ

## The importance of digital transformation in the post-pandemic recovery

As one of the six pillars of the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility, digital transformation is a central part of the recovery strategy. Among the expenditures outlined in the **National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs)**, 20% had to be allocated to addressing **the challenges and opportunities of digital transition**.[5] The NRRPs were mapped in the second cycle of RESISTIRÉ[6] (see also Factsheet Nos. 12 and 13). The analysis found that the NRRPs tended to treat digitalisation as a universal good, whereas the potential downsides were rarely mentioned. When the NRRPs did address digital inequalities, the solutions were mostly designed to provide **women and specific vulnerable groups with digital skills, devices, and infrastructures**. The root causes of digital inequalities were usually left unacknowledged. Although gender equality was established as a cross-cutting priority for the NRRPs, it was often poorly understood and implemented, including in the parts dealing with the digital transition. While many measures were aimed at supporting women's access to the digital areas of employment, the NRRPs raise the question of what is deprioritised when substantial funds are earmarked for (ostensibly gender-neutral) digitalisation. The overriding risk of most national recovery and resilience plans was that tech sectors – dominated by men – would be funded at the expense of sectors dominated by women, such as the care sector.

The challenges of the omnipresence of technology: the creation of new divides

As seen in the NRRPs, digital inclusion is often seen as a universal good that will be beneficial to all, including vulnerable groups. The negative effects of digitalisation, including its potentially negative impact on gendered and intersectional equality, are given considerably less attention. Digital inequality is often intertwined with other inequalities in society relating to age, disabilities, migration, socioeconomic background, and geographical location.

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[5] European Commission (2021). *Commission staff working document guidance to Member States recovery and resilience plans, SWD (2021) 12 Final*. https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/document_travail_service_part1_v2_en.pdf

[6] Cibin, R., Ghidoni, E., Aristegui-Fradua, I. E., Marañon, U. B., Stöckelová, T., & Linková, M. (2022). *RESISTIRÉ D2.2 Summary report on mapping cycle 2*. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6536060

INTERTWINED NATURE OF INEQUALITIES
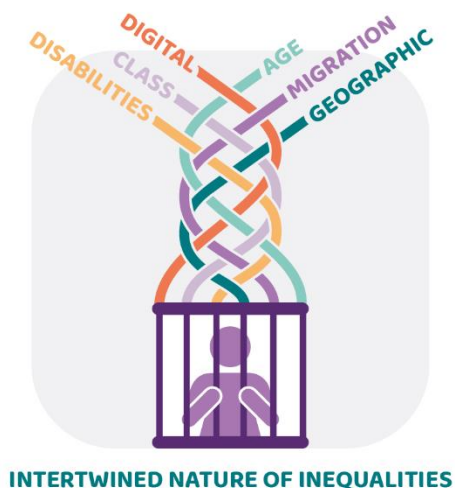
Data from RESISTIRÉ show how digitalisation during the pandemic increased inequalities in many ways, such as widening already existing gaps in education between children from different socioeconomic households (see Factsheet No. 11), increasing unpaid work hours for women when hybrid work was introduced (see Factsheet No. 7), or generating new means of control and abuse (see Factsheet No. 10). Other negative effects highlighted by RESISTIRÉ's data include the spread of misinformation online, the use of digital technology for surveillance, and the loss of valuable aspects of service provision when the service is moved online. [7] While some digital inequalities can be mitigated by ensuring that digital tools and the competence to use them are freely available to all, what these negative impacts show is that the 'solution' may not always be digital. When digitalisation is promoted uncritically, this point is rarely considered.

While the examples given below focus primarily on the digitalisation of public services, it should be noted that the risk of negative, and unequal, effects is apparent in other areas as well. The rapid digitalisation of the labour market is particularly noteworthy. Digitalisation experts consulted in RESISTIRÉ's research highlighted that a significant share of the population is at risk of exclusion from the labour market as digital skills are now deemed to be as essential as basic literacy and numeracy skills. Over 90% of professional roles already require some digital skills, and because digitalisation has spread far beyond traditional office jobs nearly all jobs may soon require some digital skills.[8]

- **Unequal access to essential services**

During the pandemic the need and demand for welfare services remained or even increased. This encompasses the provision of a wide range of public services, from health and education to policing and other social services. Interviews with street-level civil servants highlighted how **the rapid digitalisation of public service provision was not equally beneficial to all** and that the majority of those for whom digital technologies are designed have certain digital privileges. Access to services for those not in this privileged position was severely hampered as a result of several factors: poor infrastructure, especially in rural areas; digital systems that were not inclusive or user-friendly; the use of exclusionary language in digital applications; the considerable cost of broadband and digital devices; and the lack of opportunities for developing digital competence.

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[7] Sandström, L., Callerstig, A.-C., Strid, S., Lionello, L., & Rossetti, F. (2023). *RESISTIRÉ D4.3 Summary report on qualitative indicators - cycle 3.* Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7708724
[8] European Commission (2022). *Digital skills.* https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-skills

Equal access to essential public services is a human right[9] and when some groups lack the digital equipment and skills required to access public services, **digital exclusion becomes a human rights violation**. Since digital inequalities intertwine with other inequalities, those most in need of access are often also the ones most at risk of having their rights denied. Rapid Assessment Surveys across Europe revealed increased digital inequalities during the pandemic.[10] For instance, **accessing digital resources and knowing how to use them** was a key issue during lockdowns **that impeded older people's access to information, services, and social contacts.** Many older people were unable to book COVID-19 vaccination appointments as often the only way to do so was through an online booking system, while **economically marginalised groups** were **excluded from social benefits as online registration was required.**

Education was another area where digitalisation led to increased inequalities.[11] The woman quoted below lived as an asylum seeker in Sweden during the pandemic and her story illuminates how asylum seekers, whose rights to education were already severally restricted, were pushed further into the margins. Whereas adult asylum seekers rely on civil society initiatives to meet their education needs, minors have a formal right to education. However, due to the pandemic both her own and her teenage son's access to education was restricted:

> 'All classes were cancelled due to COVID. They said I could study using WhatsApp, but that did not work for me at all. It is just not the same as sitting next to a teacher and having them explain things to you. I think I understood maybe 20% of the online classes … I am sure I would have progressed much further if it had not been for COVID and online teaching.
>
> Access to the internet was another huge obstacle. Every month we bought 200 minutes of phone credit and 3 GB of data each … My son sometimes had to do online classes as well and one time he ran out of data in the middle of a lesson. I called the Migration Agency asking for help. They put me on hold, and after 15 minutes my phone credit ran out.'
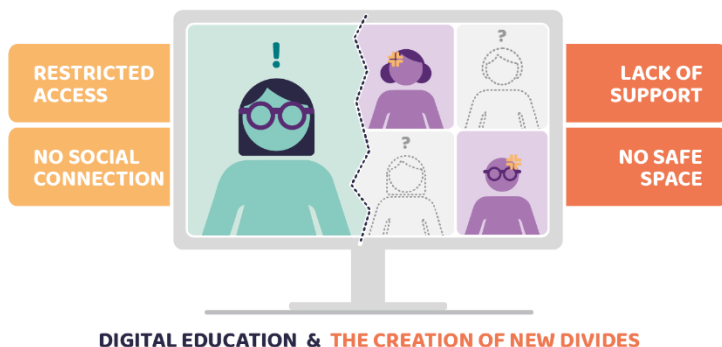>
> **34-year-old refugee woman living in Sweden**

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[9] Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

[10] Harroche, A., Still, A., Tzanakou, C., Rossetti, F., Lionello, L., & Charafeddine, R. (2023). *RESISTIRÉ D3.3 Summary report on mapping quantitative indicators - cycle 3.* Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7708668

[11] Sandström L., Axelsson, T. K., Strid, S., Callerstig, A.-C., & Bobek, A. (2022). *RESISTIRÉ D4.2 Building back better? Qualitative indications of inequalities produced by COVID-19 and its policy and societal responses. Second cycle summary report.* Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6517795

- **Digitalisation and the impact on the quality of services**

DIGITAL EDUCATION & THE CREATION OF NEW DIVIDES

The quote above highlight how the cost of broadband can prevent access to services, but it also raises the question of whether the same quality of service can be provided through digital means. Studies indicate that the quality of education declined during the pandemic: over one-half of respondents in the Global Survey[12] on 'Youth and COVID-19' reported to have learnt less since the start of the pandemic. This could perhaps be explained by the rapid pace of digitalisation and the lack of preparedness, but the RESISTIRÉ data also show that **schools have an important social function** that is difficult to replicate digitally. **Many students suffered mentally** from the lack of peer support when education was moved online and teachers reported that it was harder to establish a social connection with students, making it more **difficult to identify students in need of extra support**. Additionally, for some children schools provide **a safe space away from a difficult home environment**, and this, too, was lost when remote education was introduced.

- **Misinformation, mistrust, and surveillance**

Qualitative RESISTIRÉ data also show that **misinformation online was a widespread** problem during the pandemic.[13] Although the development of digital competence and critical thinking skills are important tools in determining the trustworthiness of information sources, the

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[12] ILO (2020). *Youth and COVID-19. Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being*. International Labour Office. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf

[13] Sandström et al. (2022); Sandström et al. (2023).

inclination of many to deliberately seek out alternatives to information provided by public authorities needs to be taken seriously. In some instances, this inclination was based on a well-founded **distrust of public authorities**. A **fear of surveillance**, whether well-founded or not, could also lead to a **reluctance to engage with digitalisation**. Authoritative control measures implemented during the pandemic, often using digital technology as a tool, helped reinforce this sense of distrust. The quote below, from a Cypriot woman, illustrates this point:

> **'I felt uncomfortable with one incident during the lockdown when we were forced to send text messages to be able to leave the house. We were allowed to send 2 SMS per day. We sent one SMS to go to the fields to cut the oranges … So we went in the morning and naturally this job lasted more than the 3-hour 'unwritten rule' for each message. When we were returning home a police officer stopped our car and accused us of using the SMS the wrong way because he said that a whole day of work in the fields was not a 'reasonable amount of time'. We started arguing and shouting and this made my husband and I feel very bad … I believe this is a dark area and obstruction of our human rights of freedom of movement due to the wrong interpretation of government measures..'**
>
> **65-year-old woman living in Cyprus**

Digitalisation as an opportunity for inclusion

The pandemic showed that when crisis responses are digitalised, this creates the risk of excluding large portions of already vulnerable groups. However, RESISTIRÉ's findings also highlighted instances where digitalisation had unintended positive effects on inequalities and revealed multitude innovative ways in which it was used for the purpose of closing inequality gaps. [14] These findings show how important it is not only to see decreasing digital inequalities as an end goal but also to recognise how digitalisation can in fact be used as a tool to address broader social inequalities.

• **Improved conditions for service provision**

In interviews with street-level civil servants, they highlighted several ways in which digitalisation could lead to more inclusive services. Some of the examples they gave related specifically to the importance of digital solutions for **keeping services going during a crisis**. For instance, online classes allowed students to keep up with their education despite the lockdowns, and hybrid activities allowed older people to participate in sports classes. However, moving activities online could also make services more inclusive in the long run and street-level civil

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[14] Sandström et al. (2023); Cibin, R., Ghidoni, E., Stöckelová, T., & Linková, M. (2023). *RESISTIRÉ D2.3 Summary report mapping cycle 3*. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7708631

servants reported that digital consultations had proved beneficial for some clients as they **enabled greater access to public services for clients living on the outskirts of the city**.

Digitalisation also improved communication in some instances. Using computer-generated SMS messages made **it easier for service providers to reach clients**, and other digital tools became useful instruments for **maintaining contact with the victims of gender-based violence.** Finally, the street-level civil servants found that digitalisation allowed them to save time on some tasks, whereby they were able to spend more time providing services.

Representatives from civil society organisations also described some aspects of digitalisation as beneficial on the organisational level and, as a consequence, it in a wider sense supported their work in tackling inequalities. [15] They, too, found that digitalisation could save time that could be used in a more productive way, as exemplified in the quote below from a representative of a Turkish civil society organisation:

> '**Since our work has been more digitalised with the development of a database with all the necessary data regarding the beneficiaries, we no longer have to spend too much time on the operation and delivery of in-kind support. Hence, we can spend more time on monitoring households and measuring the impact of our work, maintaining good relationships with individual donors (80% of the initiative's financial resources come from individual donors), and swiftly mobilising resources and channelling them to beneficiaries'**
>
> **CSO representative in Turkey**

Several representatives of civil society organisations reported that digitalisation had improved work processes and the internal sharing of information among organisations.

[15] Cibin et al. (2023).

Like the street-level civil servants, the representatives of civil society organisations also saw digitalisation as a means of **overcoming mobility-related and geographical** barriers and as a means of **improving communication**. Digitalisation made communication with various stakeholders easier and it enabled users to keep in touch with their initiatives and with other users. The representatives of civil society organisations also reported that digitalisation had enabled them to **create resilient networks** and it had increased opportunities for **advocacy and awareness raising.**

- **The future is hybrid**

Narrative interviews with members of marginalised groups showed that while the quality of the service sometimes declined, some interviewees actually stated a **preference for services provided online**. One example is provided by an Estonian student with an anxiety disorder and agoraphobia, whose appointments with her therapist and her psychiatrist were moved online during the pandemic, and she spoke of this change in positive terms:

> 'I managed to check in even if I was feeling terrible; surely if I had had to leave home at this point, I just would not have showed up. I realised that when I do physically show up in their space, it is more difficult to refrain from crying but actually easier to make myself 'feel different' – I can fake it better, just as I do in real-life social situations to appear more socially acceptable and do the visit in the right way. On Zoom, I was much more able to focus on myself, to notice where I was and what I was feeling.'
>
> **18 years old student in Estonia**

STRIKING A STRATEGIC, INCLUSIVE BALANCE

DIGITAL WORLD | PHYSICAL WORLD
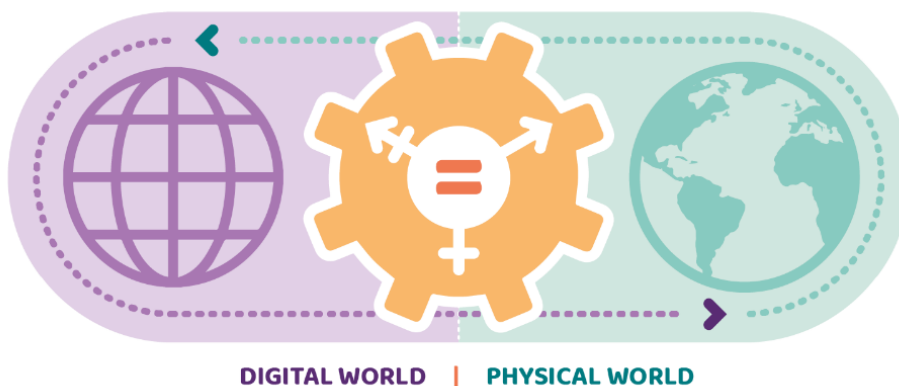
The importance of hybrid solutions has been a key message throughout the RESISTIRÉ project and a final quote from a representative of one civil society organisation shows that in order to achieve an inclusive post-COVID recovery through digital transformation, we need to find the right **balance between the digital and the non-digital**, always taking the needs of the individual into account:

> **'We will not completely return to where we were more than 2 years ago. Many sources of access for some women have been improved; many benefits arose during that time. However, online counselling is not always the only method. For example, there is the possibility of a combination of face-to-face and online counselling. Counsellors can consider together with the client which counselling method is best for the particular combination.'**
>
> **CSO representative in Germany**

• **Better Stories**

In RESISTIRÉ we use 'Better Stories', a concept borrowed from Dina Georgis[16], to refer to promising practices that identify how a given societal situation can be ameliorated to improve existing practices.

LITHUANIA

Lithuania ranks among the countries in which schools were closed the longest during the pandemic. During the first period of remote learning, a number of problems emerged: despite distributing 35 000 additional computers to schools, some children still lacked access to computers and the Internet; children who lived in small dwellings did not have proper space in which to participate in education; some parents lacked computer skills and could not help their children; computer/software infrastructure in schools was insufficient or outdated; and not all teachers were qualified to work with remote learning platforms. For this reason, a specific policy was put in place that aimed to support those who were digitally excluded, while also taking into account the broad ecosystem of needs that the education system caters to. The policy allowed children from socially underprivileged backgrounds and those without an appropriate home environment in which to learn to be taught remotely in schools using school infrastructure, but it also set out other related measures: the children received care and food services after classes; schools were provided with laptops that could be used for socially vulnerable children's remote schooling; individual consultations were offered to children with learning difficulties; and volunteers from NGOs were included to assist with the learning process at educational institutions.

FINLAND

In Finland[17], during the lockdown phases, the NGO 'Kansallinen senioriliitto ry' (the National Association of Senior Citizens) created different online activities to keep its members in contact and to prevent isolation. First, the NGO launched a new podcast series, which discussed the life of senior people during the pandemic. Then, since the association's members were spending a lot of time at home and could not meet each other as usual, their meetings were organised online through meeting platforms. For this reason, the NGO trained 33 'platform representatives' to create, help, and support the

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[16] Georgis, D. (2013). *The better story: Queer affects from the Middle East.* State University of New York Press.
[17] https://www.sttinfo.fi/tiedote/senioreiden-kansalaisjarjesto-on-tehnyt-komeita-digiloikkia-korona-kevaan-aikana-seniori-podcast-teams-palavereita-ja-youtubessa-rappia?publisherId=69817593&releaseId=69884285

implementation of remote meetings and activities in circles and associations using online platforms. In this way, seniors quickly adapted to new technologies.

POLAND

In Poland, the Association of Deaf People developed a video helpline to support its members. Translators of Polish Sign Language from all over Poland were involved in the initiative. They worked in shifts on smartphones or laptops with Internet access. A deaf person could call the helpline to obtain information about the coronavirus and how to proceed in the event of a suspected infection. The helpline could also be used by employees of healthcare facilities and emergency medical services, as it could facilitate medical interviews with deaf patients and accelerate possible diagnosis and treatment.

❯ About RESISTIRÉ

This factsheet is based on data collected in RESISTIRÉ's third research cycle, which ran from December 2022 to February 2023. In this research, 30 national researchers worked with the consortium to map policies, societal responses, and qualitative and quantitative indicators relating to the pandemic in EU-27 countries (except Malta), along with Iceland, the UK, Serbia, and Turkey. This research activity was accompanied by workshops and interviews with gender equality experts whose input informed the main findings from expert consultations.

RESISTIRÉ is an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project, the aim of which is to 1) understand the impact of COVID-19 policy responses on behavioural, social, and economic inequalities in the EU-27 (except Malta), Serbia, Turkey, Iceland, and the UK on the basis of a conceptual gender+ framework, and 2) design, devise, and pilot policy solutions and social innovations to be deployed by policymakers, stakeholders, and actors in different policy domains.

Find out more about the project and discover all other outputs at https://resistire-project.eu.

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❯ Acknowledgement and Disclaimer

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