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RESISTIRÉ

Reducing gendered inequalities
caused by COVID-19 policies

RESISTIRÉ Dataset: Narratives on inequalities caused by policy and societal responses to Covid-19 in Europe – third cycle

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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.¹

This dataset contains 289 narratives, including keywords and specifically telling quotes. It is the third of three sets of narratives collected and analysed in RESISTIRÉ. These narrative interviews were conducted in national languages by the consortium partners and a network of national researchers covering the EU27 (except Malta), and Iceland, Serbia, and the UK in September-December 2022.² Narrative interviewing is 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. 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 informants were recruited and interviewed by native language researchers. The data collection, training sessions and monitoring were coordinated by Knowledge and Innovation, Italy. All researchers were provided with guidelines and templates for reporting, developed by Örebro University and University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Informants were recruited using selective and purposive sampling. 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.³

¹ See the RESISTIRÉ community on Zenodo for project deliverables and reports: <https://zenodo.org/communities/resistire/?page=1&size=20>

² For an analysis of the narratives, see Sandström, L., Callerstig, A-C., Strid, S., Lionello, L., & Rossetti, F. (2023). RESISTIRE D4.3 Summary report on qualitative indicators - cycle 3. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7708724>.

³ For a full methodological description, see Sandström et al. 2023. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7708724>.

Table of Contents

Summary	4
Narratives by country.....	7
Austria	7
Belgium.....	28
Bulgaria	41
Cyprus.....	56
Czech Republic	71
Germany.....	81
Denmark.....	99
Estonia.....	114
Spain.....	129
Finland	143
France	161
Greece.....	185
Croatia	195
Hungary.....	209
Ireland.....	228
Iceland	248
Italy	265
Lithuania	280
Luxembourg.....	300
Latvia	310
Netherlands.....	333
Poland.....	347
Portugal.....	370
Romania.....	380



Serbia	401
Sweden	413
Slovenia	432
Slovakia	452
United Kingdom	467



Narratives by country

Austria

AT01

Title: Kristin, 37, fights for proper inclusion, and thus consideration of people with disabilities in society, especially in times of crises.

Narrative: I am Kristin, 37 years old. I am a woman with disability. I graduated in special and remedial education and since 2016 I work for an organization that supports self-determined living for people with disabilities. We offer peer counselling and thus support people to help themselves. We also fight for the rights of people with disabilities.

I do not live in an institution for people with disabilities but in my own flat and have a personal assistant, who supports me with my daily routines.

In emergency situations, such as the pandemic, people with disabilities are not taken into account. This shows, for example, with the distribution of vaccinations: Initially, people who do not live in care homes have been overlooked, so they gained access to vaccines much later. Once, they were eligible for vaccination, the vaccination facilities were not always barrier-free. I was not able to use vaccination facility close to my home, but had to drive all over town to use an accessible, barrier-free facility. Also testing facilities have not always been accessible, which force people with disability to drive to facilities much farther away and exposed them even more to the virus.

People with disabilities who do not live in care homes have caregivers and assistants - these employees were also overlooked. There was a lack of PPE (personal protection equipment). This was an issue throughout Austria, especially during the first month of the pandemic. It took until the summer in 2020 that a 'pandemic stock' was established to supply all who need it with PPE.

At the beginning, there was no information available in sign language or simple language. Private initiatives assisted by translating important information into simple language. But actually, this would be something that the state should provide for everyone. Access for all people to all information is important to ensure agency.

The health care system was overburdened, as a consequence treatments or surgeries have been postponed and people with disabilities did not dare to undergo routine examinations as they have been afraid of catching Covid.

People with disabilities who live by themselves, have more self-determination and

agency compared to peers who live in care facilities. They are employers, choose and instruct their assistants themselves. We had a big problem because we didn't know what to do in case our assistant got sick or didn't want to work due to fear of infection. For the past two years, it has been very difficult to find new assistants in this sector, and this 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.

Personal assistants are absolutely relevant for agency and self-determination. There is hardly any self-determination in care facilities, you cannot decide whom you are living with, who cares for you or what you get to eat. Moreover, there have been cases of violence – as documented in studies and reports. In one drastic case, they even used tear gas against people living in the care facilities. So, for me it is important that I can live by myself, in a self-determined way. Yet, finding employees as personal assistants is not easy either, as personal assistance is not really recognised as a profession.

It was easy for me to handle the restrictions at first, as I am very independent and could work from home. After a while, however, it became exhausting and I missed my friends and family. We did have game nights via video call and celebrated my birthday that way, but it is not the same. I myself have been vaccinated four times and recovered once so I'm not really afraid of getting sick myself, especially since the course of the disease wasn't that bad. But I'm constantly afraid of infecting friends, family and colleagues. This is a strong emotional burden, still.

A positive effect of working from home is that I have more energy since I don't have to commute two hours a day. And I've started writing again; I like writing horror stories. Online events, furthermore, enabled me to attend conferences which I could not do otherwise, because of the traveling. It was and is important to me that I have a job. This helped me to structure my day. I would not have kept it up otherwise. The weekends were a bit more boring. Again, I have the privilege of owning two computers, being able to work from home, and being able to handle the technology. But that doesn't apply to everyone. Not everyone can afford it and not everyone has the necessary equipment, e.g. voice input for people with visual impairment. This also has to be considered much more, as digital exclusion can also result in social exclusion.

Emergency management plans need to take disabled people more into account. This, actually, already starts with inclusion in kindergarten, school and the work environment. One big issue here is the existence of special needs schools, because once you are in one of these schools your career is already predetermined and limited. My mother really fought so that I could attend a regular school, otherwise I would not be where I am right now, working in a self-determined way.

If people with disabilities would be more normalised, we would not have to remind policy makers over and over again. I wish that people with disabilities would be taken more seriously and treated the same as people without disabilities – these are basic

human rights.

Specifically telling quotes: “People with disabilities have to be included in all aspects of social life, from the beginning.”

“Corona could provide us with the possibility to start thinking about things anew.”

“Although we can work from home and wear the mask at work, the ghost of Corona is permanently hovering over me and I am afraid of infecting someone.”

Keywords: Human right, self-determined living, inclusion, education, people with disabilities, working from home, accessibility

AT02

Title: Nathalie, 55, lobbies for the interest of elementary educators, who have often been neglected and underrated during the pandemic.

Narrative: My name is Nathalie and I am the chair of a society dedicated to representing all professions engaged in elementary education, such as kindergarten teachers, child-minders, or assistants in day care centres. Elementary educators so far do not have their own union, unlike teachers in primary or secondary schools, but are organised in different unions depending on their employers. Hence, there is a fragmentation in representation, even though there are common aims, such as the recognition of this work as part of children’s education (and not just childcare) or the overall working conditions, which need to be improved. Fragmentation furthermore shows in that there are different rules regarding training or working conditions depending in which region you are in, as all nine regions have their own legal framework.

We feel that elementary education is not taken seriously. We try to raise awareness with policy makers. But, there is a lack of understanding that elementary education is education. Often the work of educators is neglected, for instance that they do not only take care of kids but train them; that they talk to parents and provide feedback how their kids are doing compared to others in the group; that they have regular meetings to attend, reports to provide, etc. An increasing number of parents need educational guidance, which is also provided by elementary educators. This work is often overlooked. Moreover, there is scarce discussions about training of elementary educators, or about the importance of elementary pedagogical concepts. Overall, there is a lack of recognition.

We sent letters to the minister for education, the regional government officials. We sent letters by mail, as we feel they are taken more seriously than emails, and indeed we received responses. We actually also travelled to the regions to meet in person. We also manage to get some publicity for the issues in elementary pedagogy.

We try to nudge unions to take up industrial actions so that the needs of elementary educators are taken more seriously, e.g. when it comes to working conditions and

wages. I would be happy, when more employees in this area would go to marches and protest against the overall conditions.

One key take-away of the pandemic, for me, is that politics reacted always too late, after people got hurt. We asked the government to have uniform measures in elementary education institutes, like there has been in schools, which had clear rules about testing or who should/could participate in work. This was not the case for institutes of elementary education. There have only been some recommendations and each region had their own rules. Especially access to testing was complicated in all regions except of Vienna, where testing was often possible directly at the workplace. But even in Vienna, in some cases people had to go to testing centres and it was unclear whether this is part of the paid working time or their unpaid recreation time. This was an issue especially when testing was compulsory. Also, there was little support to have testing for kids in elementary education institution.

There has also been a difference between public and private institutions. While public institutions received materials such as FFP2-masks and disinfectants, private institutions had to organise and pay everything by themselves. Due to the additional costs for disinfectants and masks some facilities went into debt, or even bankruptcy - which at the end of the day means that there is a supply shortage childcare and elementary education. Some facilities were forced to close due to staffing shortages, because of educators falling ill. In other cases, the facilities did not pass on a pre-agreed bonus of 300 EUR to educators, as they did not have the funding to pay for it.

The different measures resulted in additional workload. But there was no additional staff, supporting this extra workload. Assistants, e.g. could help in cleaning the facilities or preparing the meals. But, that kind of support is not available. There was a shortage of staff on all fronts. Such positions already exist for schools.

For kids this whole situation was burdening, not just when the education institution was closed but in general. For instance, when they were not allowed to mingle with other kids on the playground. We now know that the spacing hygiene and closure measures have an impact on the children in terms of their language and social development. There were relapses in this regard and after the hard lockdowns, it was necessary for some families to work through an acclimation period again. Children actually played 'pandemic' and expressed fears. Sometimes, educators tried to mitigate the downsides of lockdown. For instance, there have been reports of educators who, during easter lockdown, went to the kids houses and delivered easter eggs, to stay in touch with the kids. Others put together some learning packages and mailed it to parents, to support the children's learning.

It is difficult to say what lessons could be learned from the pandemic. I think that both society and politics became aware of the importance of elementary education. Now, after much protest, politicians manage to call us elementary educators - before that we were, wrongly, labelled kindergartner.

Specifically telling quotes: “Elementary educators show far too little resistance and ultimately disappear from the labour market instead of fighting for better working conditions.”

“Because of the fragmentation regarding the employers and trade unions, it was necessary to have an organisation that stands up for the concerns of elementary educators. Because no matter where they work, the concerns are always the same. We have nine different laws [one for each region] and different responsibilities, but there are problems that can be traced back to a common denominator, and that is the lack of recognition and appreciation on the part of politicians that elementary education is education.”

Keywords: elementary education, kindergarten, lack of funding, lack of recognition, care gap, education gap

AT03

Title: Climate advocate Verena is excited about the increased networking and professionalization of her non-profit.

Narrative: I'm Verena, 25 years old and a Master's student of Sociology in Sweden. Since three years I am working in my organisation and I am mainly responsible for the internal and external communications of the organization. Our organization thrived, especially nationally, through regular face-to-face meetings to discuss, formulate and work on political demands, for example. We all enjoyed it very much when we could meet each other in person. During the pandemic, everything took place online. We noticed that we got a lot more done as a result of meeting online. Simply because it was so easy to switch rooms with a few clicks. If we meet in person, then travelling over distance takes time and so on. What I really like is that we were able to network much better, especially internationally, because everything took place online. So sometimes we just met online to chat and so we were able to get to know each other much better on that level as well. A Filipina once said she would like to have the “Friday's networking of 2021 and the vibes of 2019”. Locally, and depending on the current state regarding measures or lockdowns, fewer actions were possible, of course; although we were able to network better online. For example, we hosted a webinar that probably would never have been hosted before. This gave us the opportunity to invite various speakers and hold panel discussions. In the last few months, international activities were reduced again, simply because everything is back to the way it was before and you meet in person, which also means there are travel times and travel expenses. It was quite difficult to keep the topic “climate” in the spotlight or in the conversation next to Covid. We tried then in various actions to make clear that a pandemic is very much related to climate change, but people probably just didn't have the resources to deal with two major crises at the same time. Everyday life and the Covid measures associated to it occupied people too much. Our

rallies could also not take place. It was especially painful that we were not able to hold the big global demonstration. We then put down a sea of signs, so we didn't need so many people, but we could still represent the people behind it with the signs, and we then did the demo online. Of course, it doesn't have the same impact, but I have the impression that we now work according to the motto "now more than ever". We also noticed that compared to 2019, the baseline of interest for climate change is higher now. It was very painful that the 2020 demos could not take place like that, because demonstrating together with thousands of people on the street gives back so much. We put a lot of work into it, all voluntarily and unpaid, and then, when a rally is cancelled, it hurts a lot. Many of us missed this feeling of rallies very much. And the preparation costs a lot of energy. Some have quit, simply because the workload, in addition to school, with 20h for the organization was simply too energy intensive. We have always supported the given measures, because we believe in science. We also bought masks, disinfectants and gloves for rallies. To let rallies take place in such a way has of course not had the same influence. We also criticised measures at times, when they could not be justified by science. For some, it was very difficult, when their parents drifted into esotericism. Then you constantly have this conflict. Some of them solved it by moving out or leaving the association at some point. Compared to the time before Covid, I can say that we have become more professional, especially in terms of planning, technology, communication (internal/external) and also in terms of the organization of the association, i.e. we are now a registered organization, which also allows us to handle financial matters. Internationally, we have set up an internal space on our website, through which we can now save and share documents, something we didn't have before. Processes are now clearer and almost part of everyday life. We know what we have to do in different situations. For example, it's much easier for me to give interviews now, because I've done it 15 times and I know how to do it when it comes to the club, internal structure and so on. What's really cool is that it's so much easier for people who have been here for a while to help those who have only been here for a short time, because we have our own internal processes and rules and it's good if we can help each other.

Specifically telling quotes: "It was quite difficult to keep the topic "climate crisis" in the spotlight or in the conversation next to Covid. (...) people probably just didn't have the resources to deal with two major crises."

Keywords: climate activism, crisis, efficiency in communication, forms of organizing, international network, digitalisation of communication, new processes, overcoming barriers

AT04

Title: Britta's work ensured access to up-to-date information for many non-native speakers, which fosters language learning and integration.

Narrative: I am Britta. I work since several years, on the development of our app. The

app provides interactive subtitles in 13 different languages to up-to-date video material, such as news reports, made available by the Broadcasting Agency. The aim is to facilitate language learning and simultaneously promote integration. Next to collaborating with the broadcaster, we are also engaged within the education sector. Schools can use our app, we even got a certificate by the ministry of education for our app. We strive easy accessibility, to bring the service up to as many people as possible.

In January 2020, we thought this is something that only effects China. A few weeks later, we started to think, if this is indeed something that will also come to Austria the public authorities might get a problem in reaching out to the people who need information. We then started to create a video channel, for news on Covid, which can be accessed internationally, as a preventive measure. Shortly thereafter, user numbers exploded, and we had some troubles to cope with these high numbers as our servers did not have the necessary capacities. Before the pandemic, our app was only used in some language courses, but with this need for information we kind of had an exponential growth ourselves. Pre-pandemic, we updated our content only once a day, but with the pandemic this did not suffice anymore, so we had to enter new content for up to nine times a day. Especially during and after press conferences, the number of hits on our site was huge. At that point, we tried to rely more on automation processes, but we can't just rely on machines, algorithms, and AI; we also review and edit manually to make sure the language has the appropriate meaning. Especially, because the pandemic also led to new, unused vocabulary, where we strongly relied on native speakers to help us identifying the best way to translate these new terms appropriately so people could understand it.

Overall, the pandemic was a challenge, not just technologically speaking. We ourselves got Corona, so this was a challenge. But also financially, it was quite difficult as we had to upgrade the sever capacity. We obtained some public funding for our project, prior to the pandemic. And when the user numbers exploded, we asked several times, for an increase in funding - but did not receive any compensation for the increased demand. We managed to raise funds by spreading the word about our project, e.g. through media and private supporters. This also helped us to reach our target groups, especially women who were sitting at home isolated, learned about our app and really used. And we can see, some of these users are still with us. We also saw an increase in some languages like Farsi and Arabic, which still are important user groups for us, next to English which many use as a kind of 'bridge-language' for users whose first language we do not offer.

It looks as if politicians do not understand our app - often they believe you just have to programme it once and then it is done. But that does not work for us. Moreover, our low-threshold concept does not fit to several funding schemes. Often funding relies on indicators, such as graduation quotas - which we cannot show. We document user numbers, but we cannot prove that using this app helps the users with their language exams, as we refrain from collecting too much data to maintain the low-threshold access (usable without registration).

We now stronger focus on obtaining funding through our education work, and dropped applying for funding from integration offices. The current federalism is an issue, as regional governments do not want to support work that goes beyond their borders, while at the same time our internet offer does not stop at the border. Even cooperation with different regional governments is complicated as one region argues why they should pay the same amount if there are more people living in another region. Moreover, people tend to underestimate the maintenance cost needed for such an app. We are constantly updating the content and languages. We offered virtual internship, also with students living in Ukraine, so this fall, for example, the Ukrainian, subtitles will be added. Also, due to some European funding, we will be able to add Hungarian and Croatian subtitles to our videos.

It helps to receive recognition by other institutions, so we applied for an award, and were actually quite surprised when we got this award. Also, it helps to continue our work, when we receive feedback that our app helps other people in learning languages.

Specifically telling quotes: "(...) we abandoned the idea of being supported by integration offices, as for several offices, integration stops at the borders of the region."

"We want to provide access to news and entertainment as low-threshold as possible, simply to facilitate learning the language and make it easier for people to arrive here."

Keywords: Integration, language learning, digitalization of language learning, everyday language, underestimation by policy makers, obtaining funding

AT05

Title: Margarethe, 53, uses creative, participatory processes to find ways to counter-act social divisions.

Narrative: I am Margarethe, social cultural and anthropologist, head of an NGO for urban work and research in the city. We co-create activities and participatory projects with third parties for everyone who uses the public space, from children to senior citizens.

During the first lockdown, it was of course difficult to realize co-creative and participatory projects. Nevertheless, we tried to continue or work on improving residential street life's, e.g. by producing short videos explaining the benefits of using residential streets. We called for people to use residential streets, for walks or brief workouts. This was just a small, simple activity to show people how they can use the public space 'residential street' in front of their houses even during covid.

As a team, we had to find new forms of collaboration, like using video conferencing and working from home, while at the same time we also had to manage home schooling and

taking care of our kids. Even though working remotely from home went well, we made our way back into the public space quite quickly. For example, we played a little with the spacing rules, drew circles on the floor to indicate spaces where people could stand and have conversations whilst maintaining distance; or went for a walk with Hula-Hoops around ourselves to talk to each other whilst maintaining distance. Couples or people who lived in one household were allowed to be within one hula hoop, everyone else had their own. And when we then walked around with these rings around ourselves, people started smiling. We also played with the hoops and the corresponding distance: let them swing, let them roll. And those who have been involved or bumped into us - there was no public call to participate - had a smile on their face and were really happy. This was good to see.

So, we took it as our job and responsibility to counteract social atmosphere we perceive; to show it is possible to have diverging opinions while collaborating and empowering each other. Our maxim was, not to focus on the prohibitions, but what is possible, e.g. that it is possible to meet in the public space whilst maintaining distance with your own thermos flask and have a coffee, to do some sports and strengthen your immune system. We, as an organisation, used this time to continue various former projects. For example, in cooperation with the Municipality, we painted flowers on a residential street. We also revamped our website. When we celebrate such projects, we usually provide a small buffet at the table in the celebrated public room. That was not possible, so we used borrowed shopping carts from a supermarket to set up a mobile buffet from which residents of the flower-street could take packaged muffins, granola bars, a banana, or similar items. Another project involved the expansion of a showroom that originally could only accommodate twelve people. Since this was hardly possible with the spacing regulations, we extended the exhibition space during the vernissage to the residential street in front of it, placed deck chairs between cars and used the public space here as well. All in line with the traffic-code. This way, we expanded the showroom, and more people were able to attend the exhibition in an enjoyable environment.

In a later phase, we contacted musicians who were also sitting at home due to the pandemic and asked them to hold their rehearsals of about 90 minutes in the public space. Under certain conditions, e.g. without amplifiers and loudspeakers, this is possible in residential streets. For many musicians it was also a great opportunity to get out and we received feedback that they would like us to continue this format. We had a lot of genres, from classical to country. Of course, it wasn't the right format for every musician. Some were irritated because there were always cars driving by, others, however, were absolutely immersed in their music. We still continue with this format of street rehearsal, and actually conquered new space within the city.

We noticed that some people had a lasting fear of contact: there should not be too many people in one place. ... We aim to counteract this fear and enable new forms of encounters.

In another project, we collected fabrics. There we had everything from baby bodysuits,

work coats to Egyptian dresses. From this we sewed a large carpet. We also interviewed the people who donated the fabrics about the stories of these fabrics. We made a sound collage out of these interviews, which is still available. These are some opportunities on how to create connections despite a pandemic and distance rules.

We observed many positive responses to our activities, for instance we saw a lot of people smiling, even if they were just walking by. We notice now, people tend to appreciate public space more than before the pandemic. It's now an option to take your coffee in a thermos and drink it with your friend in the park; before, that was more of a less popular choice.

We seem to have inspired others with our projects: an elementary school teacher told me she is using the residential street in front of their school as a break room for the students. A director of a retirement home told me that the constant testing was really exhausting for the residents which is why several residents took their meals alone in their rooms instead of using the cafeteria. As a consequence, many residents felt lonely. We then used the residential street in front of the residential home, as a meeting place: there was music (an opera singer, living in the residential home, performed), physical activities such as a walker parcours; readings of self-written stories or table tennis. The residents even baked cakes and shared them with everyone.

Of course, the pandemic also had negative sides: working with masks, less contact with the team. Basically, working together and in person is simply better. The atmosphere online is simply different and creative potential differs as well. For me as a team leader it was challenging to get the flow of ideas going. Over time we got used to it and also used a hybrid models, so people could participate even when they were worried about the risk of infection during in-person meetings. Those who were still afraid of infection simply participated online. We constantly evaluated the possibilities, how we could work well together, and also used our own concepts and worked outside.

Specifically telling quotes: “We felt it was our task to form a kind of counter-movement to the social division that came into being - who thinks what about the pandemic - to show that see ourselves as a group who has heterogenous opinions within the team, but still tries to form a kind of counter current, to empower people, to see what is possible within the public space to amplify social cooperation. And not only to proclaim what one is not allowed to, but also what is allowed”

Keywords: Social connection, freedom vs. Lockdown, co-creation, participatory projects, public space, residential streets, working with measures

AT06

Title: Eva, a retired lawyer, was ready to fight for her rights, as well as to protect others.

Narrative: My name is Eva and I have been a lawyer until 2014. I have four grandchildren whom I enjoy taking care of in my spare time.

I am active in various organisations. One is an association which raises awareness of the issues related with political right-wing movements; another one is dedicated to raise funds to provide scholarships for school students who want to spend some time abroad. This gives me the opportunity to work with this generation, mostly they are between 15 and 17, and to understand them.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I became fairly quickly aware about the privileged position I am in, since as a retiree I did not have to worry about my job, nor did I have to juggle home schooling and home office. I am 67 years old and was socialized in a generation where women's movements and especially women's economic independence became focal. Yet, the pandemic also provided some difficulties for me, especially during lockdowns, when I felt locked in, which was quite restrictive. The rule, which stated we were allowed to leave our homes for physical activities, did help me a lot. I was consequent and went for a walk through the forest every day, or I went hiking along the city hiking trails together with my friends, at least with those who were mobile enough to do so. Accordingly, I was unable to meet and exchange ideas with those who were no longer fit enough. That was a burden. We talked on the phone, which helped a little.

The first phase of the pandemic, with the hard lockdown, was a phase of uncertainty for everyone. No one knew how the virus was transmitted. At the beginning, I followed the measures to the point. After three weeks, however, I reflected and weighed the risks whether or not to visit my grandchildren. I then decided to do this again several times a week and I also met my significant other, who is living by himself, regularly. During that time, I occupied myself with fundamental rights and decided, I would fight a legal case, if I were to be fined and if someone were to prohibit me from meeting my grandchildren or partner. Therefore, I kind of lived my daily routine. I love to go to the theatre and concerts, and one famous local theatre shared recordings of old performances to their website, which I enjoyed watching.

At the same time, my sister, who is a physician in a hospital, told me about Covid cases from the hospital, which motivated me to be cautious, so I did not catch Covid before I could get vaccinated.

The pandemic put my engagement within the NGOs to a hold. All student exchange programmes were stopped, and students had to return to their home. 2021 was then very chaotic, and students who would have been eligible for exchange programme could not participate anymore as they did not meet the requirements for visa. I feel that teenagers were very much affected by the measures.

If you look at the latest election, it is interesting to see the polling results on who obtained how many votes. I wonder, to what extent this is due to the pandemic, the war in the Ukraine or the energy crisis. What I find frightening, though, is the democracy-fatigue

which is documented by several surveys; as well as the mistrust in the government's capability to find solutions for the big issues.

Some things were emotionally difficult for me. The empty city centre and the fact that I could only talk on the phone to some of my friends, for instance. In particular, the first hard lockdown reminded me of my boarding school days, when I felt similarly locked in.

I also found the rise of anti-vaccination and right-wing movements very inconvenient. It was scary who is participating in these movements. I once tried to talk to a woman who was going to one of these marches, and I realised it is impossible to start a conversation. For instance, when she was asked to put on a mask, she said that she knows people who had suffocated wearing a mask. There was no way of articulating that Covid is an illness which people die from.

For me, vaccinations mean progress. For instance, if you take polio: my aunt died on polio, and one of my primary school colleagues actually was paralysed on one side, due to polio. So, vaccination is progress. Therefore, I have problems with people who claim vaccinations kill people and march against vaccinations.

Specifically telling quotes: "During that time, I occupied myself with fundamental rights so that have been ready to legally fight for my rights if I had been sanctioned."

Keywords: retirement, teenagers, student exchange, vaccination, awareness, activism against right wing politics, economic security

AT07

Title: Ingrid,67, a retired physician, advocates for reflective thinking and against right-wing politics

Narrative: I am part of an activist group against right-wing politics and Anti-Semitism. Our group of activists met regularly, once a week. Last summer, when we learned about the demonstrations against covid measures, and when we learned who was going to give speeches [remark: known right extremist], I wanted to organize something. So we did a silent vigil, standing there with masks etc, while the march passed by. We were the only ones, about 25 people, opposing these huge marches. The police asked us to stand at a specific place, so that they could protect us if necessary. Some people tried to provoke us, during our silent protest. They aimed to hackle us by asking questions like whether we already have refugees at home.

When I realized that some of my friends attended the marches against the covid measures, I asked them how they could march with right wing groups, such as people from the Identitarian movement. But I did not want to fight all the time, so I told them that we will put our friendship on hold.

Contrary to those who opposed the measures, my family and I took it seriously. My daughter, grandson and I agreed not to meet each other at the beginning, later we met outside. My daughter also insisted that I skip grocery shopping. Yet, I went outside every day and met with friends outdoors.

Before retirement, I worked as a physician in a hospital and after I retired, every now and then, I visited my former colleagues to see how they are doing. This was not possible during the pandemic, obviously, which is a shame.

Once the vaccination was available, I expected everything gets easier - which it did to some extent. However, I just didn't expect these reactions [of resistance]. I did not expect it, because when the polio vaccine was introduced, back when I was a child, we were very happy. And now, with all this pseudo-information available on the Internet and this terrible right-wing trend ... I am critical about the government; this is why I am part of my activist group. But, I think that the government did the right thing, by alerting the public and introducing the measures. So, to me it is a bit incomprehensible why people oppose the vaccine. There are decades of research behind the vaccines. That's why I got the vaccine.

I think, the vaccine mandate was a mistake, because if I want to prevent something from happening, then I force people to do this thing and they will find ways not to do it.

Even though we know more than at the beginning, there are still a lot of things unknown, e.g. when it comes to Long Covid.

Currently there are several ongoing crises: we have covid, the war in the Ukraine and the climate crisis. And these insecurities and all the things you see on the media - e.g. how in crime series mass murders are depicted - this makes something with people. Only recently, my neighbour told me, she cleaned out her cellar compartment so she can stock food and drinking water. That is the panic. And many people are panicking.

We, my group of activists and I, are holding a small demonstration every other week. And people do notice us. But it is complicated now to start a conversation with people passing by. To me it seems like the majority of people do not know what is going on in the world. They are turning to fake news, superficial information and some media scare people. Aggression levels are rising.

What I try to do, and what I always did, is to help people when they are sick. For instance, when my neighbour had a positive covid test and some severe symptoms, I put on my mask, helped her and then called the ambulance. But also educating people about what is possible to do, how to protect oneself and what can be learned from a situation. We also learned from other situations, like HIV. To this end it is also important to show respect, to listen to another. In every crisis situation it is important to first take pause, to apprehend what is going on and then act. And when there are experts, like for instance firefighter, who tell me what to do when something is burning, then I trust them. Because

they know what to do. This is true for every crisis.

Specifically telling quotes: “Because if I want to prevent something, I force people and they will find ways and means not to do it.”

“The crisis is an opportunity to learn something from it. And if we don't use it, then the next one will come to learn something from it.”

Keywords: Crisis as a learning point, political activism, crisis handling, protest against right-wing politics, respect, friendships

AT08

Title: Irina, 63, is worried about the social division during pandemic, which shows amongst others in ageism and the devaluation of some people.

Narrative: I am 63 years old an artist and writer. I distinguish between the consequences in my private life and at work.

As an artist, I was affected by the financial consequences, how to deal with events being online, how to deal with the insecurities, the fear of getting infected. I obtained some public subsidies, so the financial worries were absorbed.

Privately, I am quite concerned about the different valuation of human life, due to ageism and ableism. Although, no one said anything to me personally, I felt that often people insinuated that we shouldn't make such a fuss about Covid, if only elderly people die of it. This attitude, of valuing people's life differently, depending on whether they are old or have an underlying health condition - this stroke me as really displeasing. I am deeply concerned about this, also because some people, even elderly people themselves, have incorporated this way of evaluating human life differently.

This kind of thinking also shows in categorizing some professions as system-relevant and others not. I do not like the term 'system-relevant'. Of course, people need bread to live, but they also need flowers. The feminist movement calls for bread and roses, so it is not just about getting the bare minimum to survive but also about joy, dancing, music and art. It does not help to define art as 'system-relevant', because every profession is done by people, and I do not want to put a value on people. That wearing a mask is a matter for those who fear contagion is a questionable approach and less an individual problem than a social one. When the decision for mandatory masks was lifted widely, which is questionable, I observed joy and celebration on the train as individuals ripped the masks off their faces. They celebrated their Freedom Day and forgot what it actually stood for. We are a pretty pampered pack, I thought to myself.

We are privileged and can afford to get rid of the masks because we have a well-established and functioning health care system. However, awareness of this does not seem to be everywhere. With vaccination, the situation is roughly similar. Not all

expectations have been met, but we are in the position of having vaccines compared to other societies.

The consequences of the discussion about the vaccine, including the conspiracy theories, are even worse, reaching into interpersonal relationships and possibly causing them to break down, or even the growth of affiliation with politically right-wing groups. I, too, had to say that contact with such people was no longer possible for me when they compared the pandemic situation with a dictatorship. In the meantime, events are held in person again and with more or fewer restrictions, depending on the federal state. In such occasions, too, individual responsibility and needs became visible, when some provinces acted as if there had never been a pandemic: with small rooms, people close together no ventilation etc. But this also put me in moral dilemmas, for example in the case that someone didn't want to wear a mask or wanted to present a test. Should I have called the police then? However, the political side and the virologists' communication also needs to be criticized. They lacked self-criticism and reflection on their decisions. These actions led to contradictions and mistrust within society.

Even though I'm a bit more relaxed about a lot of things, my first priority is that I don't want to be responsible for infecting another person with Covid. It's a balancing act between realistic assessments and personal preferences. This also includes the fact that some people are single and without a family. It is more than reasonable that they would at least want to meet their friends. Social contacts were taken away from everyone and the consequence was that a lot of loneliness occurred. This in turn can become such a heavy psychological burden, that these people need professional help - which is often hard to find.

Solidarity is another important aspect to me. Solidarity means to also look out for people beyond family and friends. At the moment, solidarity seems difficult to establish and it remains an open question remains as to what a solidaric society might look like. Especially, because there aren't hardly any public spaces, like parks or benches, where people of can meet without having to consume anything. Hence, there is a decline in mutual human encounters, not just since the pandemic. Now all that is left are "hot spots" and other people are only depicted as those who potentially cause problems. I would like to see a countermeasure in that there are once again more parks and benches where people can meet, have a bit of small talk or exchange ideas.

Specifically telling quotes: "I felt a kind of devaluation because the question arose who is worth to be mourned, or do people say, yes, of course, this was an old person anyway and I'm young and nothing will happen to me."

"Even some elderly people were saying: 'Well, what would be lost if I die? It'd be better if young people can go out and life', hence this idea of how much am I worth infiltrated people."

"Even people of advanced age or with pre-existing illnesses can enjoy life and participation."

Keywords: Ageism, Discrimination, solidarity, division of society, mutual respect

AT09

Title: Florence, 47, found a way to help many self-employed and small companies through bringing forward a legal case regarding rents

Narrative: I am Florence, 47 years old, a union activist and self-employed journalist. When the pandemic started, I was quite alarmed. I find new situations often scary, but then I always try to take control, by assessing the situation and develop potential scenarios. This way, I get the feeling I can do something.

I was not really concerned by the Lockdowns, as I work from home by myself most of the time anyway. But I saw other people struggled. And I was worried because of the increasing polarisation of our society. So, I was looking for ways on how to help other people and how to do something against this increase in fear and insecurity.

One thing I did, was to reach out to city council, and produce a podcast for them. With this podcast, I aimed to capture the overall mood, to provide something for the mental hygiene of the people. This was one of the first podcast published to discuss Corona. It provided a platform for people, from kids to senior citizens, where they could voice how they felt. It was an incredible spectrum of different reactions. In the same vein: To me it is important not to propagate fear and contribute to the polarisation. Therefore, I am very careful on what I post on social media. But, I also think it is important to be realistic in your assessment. I feel like, in the beginning of the pandemic, the government did not pay enough attention to the long-term effects for society, how to hinder the polarisation. People got disappointed, month after month, as every time we were told it is over, it was not. I do get it is not that easy to manage this on a state level when there are so many needs to consider. Yet, I feel it would have been better if communication had been more honest and open. If you take Long Covid, for instance, they could tell people that there are different forms of therapy available, instead of leaving this kind of information vacuum which is filled by fears and insecurities. Hence, I try at least on my own platform and with my friends and acquaintances not to engage in fearmongering but to offer support and my realistic assessment of what is going on.

Another thing I did, was to organise a class action suit, so that self-employed people and small enterprises did not have to pay rent for their rented premises if they could not use it due to lockdowns. I realised that this was a big issue for small enterprises and self-employed people, that they have to pay rent even though they are not allowed to do any business. So I looked up the law of tenancy, which is around 120 years old. The law states that the rented object belongs to the landlord and a tenant only has to pay rent if they can use the object for the aim it is rented for. So if the tenants cannot use the premises as it was intended, they do not have to pay the rent and the risk of this sits by the landlord. Once, I realised this, I was thinking that's actually quite smart. So I organised the class

action suit in front of the constitutional court. There is little risk associated with a class action suit in front of the constitutional court: the lawyer has to produce only one type of complaint for all cases, and then the court decides by themselves. So, I started to do some media work informing newspapers and media outlets about the initiative. I also distributed handouts, by walking through different shopping streets, putting a leaflet under the door of each closed shop. The leaflets had some basic information and a phone number and contact email address. Then we were overrun by all the people who called us, hundreds of people who jumped at it. Three people were sitting on the phones and answered the calls for days. To be honest, quite a lot of people did not join, though. Perhaps, they had internalised this notion that tenants have to pay a rent if they want to keep a roof over their head, even though we explained the legal situation to them. But, you cannot force people. In the end, the court decide we were right. and it is the landlords' risk; they have no right to collect rent of the premises cannot be used as intended in the renting contract.

To get this legal suit going, was quite a lot of work, but very satisfactory. At the same time, this was a very effective act. I used like two days to go through the main shopping streets and put a leaflet under the door of every closed shop. This was a pragmatic, and effective approach. We helped many people.

I was supported by the union initiative for self-employed people. At that time, I was also in the board of this initiative. You have to understand, that self-employed people are not organised in unions, but in the Chamber of Economics, where membership is compulsory for any business, including self-employed. Therefore, the initiative I cofounded is not a Union in the strict sense, but an union imitative.

Specifically telling quotes: „I am a crisis person. In a crisis, I am driven to fight for the best possible outcome.“

“It is very meaningful that you can be of support for someone. And if everyone is supporting three to four people so that they don't have to make a decision in fear, then that's good, I think.“

Keywords: Precarity, class action suit, self-employment, rent, mental hygiene, podcast, polarisation

AT10

Title: Ariane, a 53-year-old single mother is fighting for her rights and those of other single mothers.

Narrative: My name is Ariane, I am 53 years old and a single mother with a 17-year-old daughter.

As a single mother, the pandemic was extremely challenging, both emotionally and financially. To begin with, I was unemployed, and my daughter's father refused to pay (more) child support. We desperately needed the money, as I also had to equip my daughter with laptop and everything, for home schooling. The issue of alimony was always complicated, even before the pandemic. The legal battle lasted five years and was exhausting. This whole battle started before the pandemic, but due to lockdowns and court closures it was prolonged even longer. In the end we got justice, however the whole process and my ex-husband's lack of cooperation was very burdensome. Also, the patriarchal structures, the misogyny that I experienced from judges and case workers was really hard to bear.

I applied for additional funding by the public authorities to provide my child with the equipment for home schooling, but my request was denied. I only received double child allowance once ...

You have to keep in mind the care performance of single mothers. Many have had to give up their jobs and livelihoods to provide home schooling and care for their children. It is truly frightening. So, to double child allowance only one time does not go a long way. Rather, this should be raised permanently.

During this time and especially in times of hard lockdowns, I went for very long walks very often. Fortunately, I have a huge park nearby, which I visited every day. And I picked and processed bears garlic - until it was up to our necks.

It was all very stressful. My child also became quite isolated and ultimately her school performance decreased. As a mother, there is only so much you can say to your teenage daughter... I could only remind her to do the schoolwork, but whether it is ultimately done or not is her responsibility and she has to bear the consequences. In the end, she had to re-take exams in order to pass the grade. It was a difficult time, also for a teenager.

Nevertheless, we got along quite well, although I never really saw my child because she had withdrawn so much. My godchild developed severe depression and ultimately dropped out of school because she was bullied; she actually got medication prescribed to help her with her mental health. A side-effect of this medication was weight gain, and my godchild did not feel well. So, eventually, the treatment was discontinued.

I have been looking for a job and actually obtained a part-time position, where I could, also work from home. Luckily, my employer provided the technical equipment.

I have been talking to one of my psychotherapists very often during my walks. I have two psychotherapists, to get my frustrations off my chest, to somehow come to terms with the alimony lawsuit, the lockdown and its aftermath. That's been really good. I have to say that one therapist works in a social counselling center and I didn't have to pay much. Otherwise, of course, I would not have been able to afford it. But I've also known this counselling service for a while and we recommend it to other women as well. Also being

able to get off the ground with my NPO (non-profit organisation) was a real relief. And a distraction. My NPO exists since 2019 already. I established it because I noticed in the course of the legal dispute with my ex-husband how difficult it is for single mothers. I used the lockdown period to push my association to the next level. At some point, we acquired some government funding. Two other women are working with me in this NPO. I am the chairwoman, a friend takes care of everything around marketing; the third woman takes care of financial matters. I ended up hanging out in online meetings every day and catching up with single moms, lawyers, and other people. That really helped me and was a good distraction. So I was able to establish a lot of things, including a network of people with whom we now work very well. This includes, for example, female lawyers who understand our concerns and support us with their advice and knowledge, especially in legal matters. My NPO gave me a lot of support and I had the feeling that I was doing something meaningful.

Specifically telling quotes: “Walking in the park every day, collecting bears garlic and processing it until we couldn't see it anymore helped me a lot. ”

“Working for my association didn't just keep me busy as the lockdown brought the walls closer. I've been able to network, share ideas, and also felt less alone with my worries.”

Keywords: single mothers, alimony, gender care gap, economic insecurity, mental health

AT11

Title: Erika, 47, builds on her experiences and established routines to support other women.

Narrative: My name is Erika, I am 47 years old. I work in a non-profit organization, providing empowerment and counselling for women with disabilities since 2006. We advise women, helping them in all areas of their daily life. These women have very different needs, some live in residential care homes others by themselves relying on personal assistance.

The first lockdown changed a lot, both privately and at work. Privately, I had to juggle different responsibilities, as did many other women. This is a gender-specific issue - a lot of responsibility is put on women's shoulders. At work, we managed to adapt quickly and offer counselling by phone and via Zoom. Luckily, we can be flexible, as we have enough established routines, such as supervision, and are highly motivated.

The pandemic really highlighted systemic issues. Both, for the caregivers and the caretakers. There was basically no information for people with disabilities or in simple language. There was a lot of insecurity which led to fear. There was a lack of personal protection equipment (PPE). Caretakers did not know how to protect themselves and the people assisting them, or how to find a replacement if a caregiver had to skip a shift. Care facilities, on the other hand, also did not know how to deal with this situation. There

was a lot of anxiety. In some residential care homes, this kind of created the vibe of a prison with little freedom for the women living there. Then again, there have been assisted living institutions where the caregivers did a really good job and provided some new opportunities for their residents, like they could decide on their meals or whether or not to participate in an activity. In these cases, the situation was much more self-determined than prior to the pandemic.

Other facilities had to cut their offers, due to the lockdown. Often personal contact was replaced by phone calls, which does not always work. One extreme case is that of a woman, who almost died due to an ingrowing toenail, as it got infected, and no one realized what was going on. Normally, the women would have attended a regular pedicure, but due to the pandemic this was not possible. And she did not know that an infection could have such a consequence. She ended up at hospital and now still is in recovery. And whilst this is an extreme case, others also struggled.

To me, the pandemic created a collective overload for the whole society, and it became clear that in areas where resources have been stretched too thin - like in care facilities - then they cannot cope with an unexpected crisis, unless the caregivers and social workers go over and beyond themselves.

We can still see the effects of this. Care facilities are struggling to find enough caregivers, which impacts the quality of care. We see that many of our clients need more support from us, not just during the pandemic. Just to give you one example: Many services have been digitalized and office hours were not available. Fair enough. But, if a woman does not have a computer or even an email-address, we had to meet with her in person, scan her documents, set up an email account and so on to help her with the task at hand. Before that we just had to give her some advice on whom to contact and what to do.

While it seems as for many people now it is business as usual, I cannot say the same for us, our clients or the care sector in general. We still waiting for the easing of the tension. I have been feeling overwhelmed for a very long time. It helps to work on something I feel is important and that this is exactly the kind of work that is needed.

Nevertheless, we managed quite well within our NPO. All of us are quite flexible, so we could adapt our offer to what is needed. We also obtained some additional funding, so we could hire another counsellor. We managed well, because we could rely on our well-established system of supervision and continued training. This way, we keep up our resilience.

Going digital allowed us to maintain our good networks. Actually, this also enabled us to extend our offer, so now we also have counselling via Zoom, which more convenient for women with physical disabilities, then in person-meetings; although something is always lost online.

Providing the technical infrastructure was challenging, mainly because of all the logistics. At the beginning, some of our team used their personal equipment. But I managed to buy webcams for all who need them, and now some have even two webcams, one for the office and one for working from home. Finding the funding to provide for all the necessary equipment can sometimes be a bit tricky, because not all funding agencies

cover also equipment. Luckily, our NPO has some assets we can use for that, but that also consumes a lot of cognitive energy - finding the resources, keeping a tab on who needs what kind of equipment when and where, and so on.

In general, more is needed to facilitate a self-determined living for women with disabilities, especially in light of the fact that Austria signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The political will, to indeed change something within the system structurally, to invest the money that is needed, is missing. This was highlighted by the pandemic. In the future, people with disabilities should be included in all decision-making processes. Consequently, committees drafting policies - like all the covid measures - have to include representatives of people with disabilities. This has to be self-evident from the beginning.

Specifically telling quotes: "Of course, if the demands increase everywhere at the same time - then it becomes difficult.

I am indeed, and this is also connected to the pandemic, very overwhelmed for a very long time and I don't yet have a sight of a way out and I absolutely need a way out."

"It gets tight as we noticed that when the burden on the women increases, the burden on us increases. Because if we as counsellors normally have some cases where it is very tight and then have other cases where counselling is exactly the right offer and then it can be solved, this is something else to when these cases where it is very, very tight increase. By very tight I mean when the women have a concern that cannot be solved through counselling, but where the concerns and problems are in the structure, like "I have too little care support"."

Keywords: Women with disabilities, overwork, care system in distress, care deficits, intrinsic motivation

Belgium

BE01

Title: Charlotte's Struggles and Successes During and After the Pandemic

Narrative: My name is Charlotte and I am a 34-year-old woman from the Philippines, living in Brussels, Belgium. Before the pandemic, I studied in Antwerp for about a year. Around the start of the pandemic, I became undocumented and was not able to pursue any further studies here like I originally intended. I also wanted to stay here with my Belgian partner and I am horrified with the current political situation in the Philippines. I struggled to make ends meet and was very worried about getting kicked out of my apartment or being hospitalised with Covid. Eventually, after a lot of time, pressure and anxiety, I found a job that I really like with an international organisation. I started living together with my partner who is from here and we applied for legal cohabitation. When we received that recognition, I was able to apply for a residency permit, which changes everything. For example, it gives you the right to work and to travel. In September (2022) I finally received the permit and it was a huge relief. I still have a lot of unprocessed grief over this whole process, but now I know that I can visit my family again without having to worry about getting back to Belgium. While still difficult for someone who speaks English, I am now less anxious about navigating the health system than before, thanks in large part to the health insurance card for newcomers (that I am now aware of) and also due to my partner who can speak Dutch. In general, I was (and still am) greatly helped by other people with foreign backgrounds who live in Belgium, as they shared a lot of strategies to navigate life here (during and before the pandemic). For instance, I am part of a specific Facebook group where people can share their experiences and ask each other for advice. Moreover, I have two friends from the Philippines who also live in Belgium and who have previously gone through a social integration course. As a result, they were able to explain several practical things to me. While being here, I gradually came to realise that the Belgian bureaucracy is enormously convoluted and that many of its different branches just don't communicate with each other. For example, you can declare that you are undocumented and have no income, but then you still have to pay into the local health fund. In the beginning, I had no money at all, so how was I supposed to even do that? Despite all of these factors, I was able to cope with the effects of Covid and of my undocumented status once I started earning an income. From that point onwards, I vowed to not deprive myself of anything that is necessary to me and to give back to myself. However, I still realised that I am in a relatively privileged position, as I am not from a religious minority, I'm not black, and my partner is very supportive (while a lot of other women can fall very easily into domestic abuse this way). Therefore, I am looking to work with more organisations that help undocumented people (most likely on a volunteer basis).

Specifically telling quotes: "Because you're far away from home, you play out all these scenarios like: what if members of your family die? Are you able to leave? Which is one

thing I feel lighter about now that I have the residence card.”

“What will be the impact of Covid should you have it? What if you get hospitalised, how does that work? How to deal with a foreign health system? If you don't know the language, navigating this can be quite overwhelming.”

Keywords: Undocumented, migrant, anxiety, healthcare, getting out

BE02

Title: Jasmine's childcare struggles and socially conscious labour

Narrative: I am a 36-year-old graphic designer, photographer and art educator living in a large city in Belgium with my husband and my two young children (respectively, five and three years old). I am half self-employed, half working for a self-managed cooperative (focusing on urban environments and public spaces) with flexible hours/days and no central authority; these work arrangements allow me a great degree of flexibility in taking care of both the work that is expected from me and taking care of my children. Before Covid, I was not yet working for the cooperative and half of my income came from the work I did for the local photography museum (for example, organising workshops, providing promotional materials). When the first lockdown was imposed, this source of income largely fell away as the museum was only 'open' digitally. My husband is self-employed and kept working full-time, so I largely cared for both of my sons (which I thought was an unfair arrangement) as the school closed and the rehabilitation centre became an unrealistic option. My youngest son normally goes to such a centre because he suffered from meningitis at a young age and is now, as a result, underdeveloped for his age. When the pandemic first hit, he initially kept going there with very limited opportunities for us to visit, but his group was quickly put under quarantine and therapeutic practices essentially came to a halt. There was no point in keeping him there and so we brought him home for about three months. It was a tricky puzzle to figure out how to compensate for the centre's therapies and, at the same time, juggle the work I had left and the care for my other son. I basically had to become a speech therapist and physical therapist in very short order, but managed to do it through a bunch of trial and error. I also reached out to the rehabilitation centre, informing them about the things I was trying out and they gave me some tips. I'd say it worked, and my son actually learned how to go upstairs during this time. During those three months, I also applied for and received partial unemployment benefits, which was not easy to navigate administratively as I was still working part-time. After my kids could go to school and the centre again and the grandparents could babysit weekly again, I found a job at the cooperative through my personal network. My husband and I try to split the care/domestic work more evenly, though I still do more than him. I love the variation in my current job, so I don't mind working late after the kids have gone to bed. This usually happens about three times a week. The cooperative also engages in activism which is important to me: we participate in not-for-profit projects with local organisations. For

example, we have created a safe space with the local library for women, mostly women with a migration background and/or limited knowledge of Dutch. They can access a dedicated space in the library's garden to mingle with each other and to collectively work on a modest spice and vegetable garden. We have some ideas for expanding to other public spaces as well and have an ultimate goal of making the city a more woman-friendly place. These plans are not explicitly linked to Covid, but the need for them would have been there regardless of Covid.

Specifically telling quotes: “[During that time], I was speech therapist and physical therapist and everything else at the same time [for my youngest son], so those were three intense months.” “Together with the library and other social organisations, we've tried to create a safe space for women, and we now have a group of women (...) that received ownership over the garden. But it's only one place and we're trying to expand it to other parts of [the city].”

Keywords: Disabled child, care gap, socially conscious work, safe space

BE03

Title: Sarah's renewed lifestyle and positive changes since the pandemic as a woman with schizophrenia

Narrative: My name is Sarah and I'm a 57-year-old woman living alone in an apartment in a large Belgian city. I suffer from schizophrenia, which is tough mentally and also prevents me from having a job. Instead I receive a monthly allowance from my health insurance fund to make ends meet. I have a lot of free time, so I try to keep busy most of the time. I regularly go to a local meeting centre, which is also a mental health centre, where I engage in a variety of activities with other people. Before the pandemic, I actually went there less, as the activities were tailored to larger groups and I prefer smaller groups or even individual activities. The centre was closed for six months since the first lockdown was imposed, but afterwards it started offering opportunities that are actually more interesting to me than before Covid. They are tailored to smaller groups because of the requirement (back then) for social distancing and they are more creative, which brings out my creative side in turn. For example, we make our own postcards and bags with colourful patterns on them. We are able to take these home afterwards or sell them as a group on the local flea market. Since last year, we are also provided with painting classes with lots of different types of paints and a very capable teacher. You do have to pay a small fee to participate - never more than five euros - but the pandemic has actually saved me money as a lot of cultural events I normally go to with my friends were cancelled. These activities have also proven a great place for socializing, which is good for my overall mental health. I've also begun walking more often, usually in nature, which is good for both my physical and mental state, though I have developed a swollen foot recently and am getting it checked out soon. I read more now than I did before the pandemic too, subscribing to a newspaper and going to the library more often (as soon

as it was open again). I saw one positive initiative pop up during the pandemic too, when the virus was not as prevalent, though I'm not sure if it is organised by the city authorities or by some other organisation. It is a place where you can go to eat most days of the week at a very low price, so that lots of different people from different backgrounds can go there. I sometimes talk with other people there too.

Specifically telling quotes: "There's a new place where you can have dinner in my area for a very low price. It was set up about a year and a half ago and it attracts people from all over the neighbourhood." "I was very glad to hear that the groups [in the centre] were now smaller and the creative exercises we do there have helped me be more creative at home too."

Keywords: Mental illness, schizophrenia, creativity, social life

BE04

Title: Melanie's pregnancy benefits and struggle.

Narrative: My name is Melanie, I am Belgian, Ivorian by origin, 26 years old and I was working as a housekeeper. At the beginning of the lockdown, I was in the early stages of my pregnancy. We all had to stop work, I stayed at home. In May, work slowly resumed and I had to go back to work. At that time, it was not clear whether covid was dangerous for pregnant women or not. In the meantime, the husband of one of the elderly couples I was working for contracted covid and died. As I had worked for them the week before, my boss called me and told me to stay home and get tested. I was negative, but my boss decided to put me on Covid unemployment benefits until the end of my pregnancy. I was very lucky to have an understanding boss who didn't want me to put myself and my baby at risk and who kept me out of work. Then I had my maternity leave. It was difficult not to see anyone for the first three months, especially my father who is living alone and not in good health with a low immunity. My partner worked all day and did the shopping. There was no physical contact with people, it was hard. I went for a thirty minute walk every day because my gynaecologist told me it was important as I have a bad back. So at least I had that, even though I hardly saw anyone on the street, I breathed clean air. My only visits were to the hospital because my pregnancy had to be closely monitored. My partner couldn't come with me anyway, it was the rules like that. I took pictures during the ultrasound, tried to record the heartbeat of the baby so that he could participate but he would have liked to participate, he was deprived of something. But for the delivery, we were lucky because at that time the dads could come to the delivery room. We had to sign a discharge at the hospital and then the father could come. When I started working again, there was also a system in place, in case the clients had the covid so that we didn't have to work but we were still paid (by unemployment). I had the covid at one point and as I was positive I immediately went on unemployment and got paid. I don't have very good memories of this period, even though in the end everything went quite well for me.

Specifically telling quotes: J'ai eu de la chance d'avoir une cheffe qui était compréhensive et qui m'a dit non ce n'est pas possible, on va t'écarter et tu bénéficieras du chômage jusqu'à tes huit mois de grossesse. I was lucky to have a boss who was understanding and who said no, that's not possible, we're going to put you on leave and you'll be on unemployment until you're eight months pregnant.

Keywords: maternity protection, unemployment benefit, father, hospital

BE05

Title: Julia's Transition to a Life Without Her Husband During Covid

Narrative: My name is Julia and I am a 73-year-old woman living in a big city in Belgium. I am retired and have multiple children, one of whom lives in the house next door to me. I used to be fairly active before the pandemic, engaging in various hobbies and activities as well as supporting my grandchildren with theirs. Approximately one year before Covid took over our lives, however, my husband passed away and I lost the companion I'd had for multiple decades. This took a huge toll on my mental health and I am still processing his loss, though I feel a lot better nowadays than back then. To grieve properly, I reduced my social commitments during that time, only continuing my volunteer work and signing up with a collective grieving support group. My volunteer work consists of helping out at a local centre where people with early-onset dementia can go for support, and I kept at it because I think I have an important contribution there. About a month or two before Covid appeared on the scene, I slowly started going out more again, joined up with a reading group and slightly increased my volunteer work. This all stopped again when the pandemic broke out and we were all obliged to stay inside as much as possible. Though not being able to meet up with friends in bars or restaurants was quite isolating and lonely for me, I could still count on my family next door for emotional support and we had quite a few fun evenings with the five of us (three grandchildren, my daughter, and I). We saw a lot more of each other because my daughter started working from home and the children couldn't go to school. The only other social interactions I had were at the grocery store. In the beginning, when I thought it was only going to last a few weeks, I thought the pandemic actually had a positive side to it: I still needed a lot of time to myself to process my husband's death and to think about how I was going to organise my life from now on, and this gave me the perfect excuse to not go out and socialise while I was actually in a depressed mood. When we passed the two-month mark, however, I reached the point of fatigue like many other people and ached for a return to normal. During that time, the volunteer work had stopped completely and would not begin again for many months. The grieving support group did move online, but because a lot of the participants are on the older side we struggled to communicate via Zoom and it was just not the same. To satisfy my need for some social interaction, I went on walks with friends in the park, which was allowed, but I have to admit that I sometimes did meet up with them in their homes, which was not. I

think this allowed me to preserve my connections with the outside world, as I would've turned too much inwards otherwise. Now, two years later, I'm engaged in more activities again: I'm still doing the volunteer work and the grieving group, and I have returned to the council of the local theatre group where I helped out some years ago. I am also very thankful for the Covid vaccine, as I caught Covid after I had been vaccinated and it still made me sick for more than a week.

Specifically telling quotes: "In the day [during the first lockdown] I usually kept to myself, but most evenings I did spend time with my grandkids next door. We had some fun game nights together, more than normal." "I can handle a computer, but a lot of people my age in the [grieving] group don't really know how it works, so our online meetings went very slow."

Keywords: Elderly, grief, social isolation, family, volunteer work

BE06

Title: Diana's Work and Family Life as a Single Mother

Narrative: My name is Diana and I am a 51-year-old single mother of two children, living with them in a large city in Belgium. There is a big age difference between my two children: when the pandemic broke out, my son had started the fourth grade (10 years old) while my daughter had just begun to work (20 years old), though she still lives with us. I myself work at an association where people in poverty can find support and can voice their perspectives/issues. I work specifically in the childcare part of the association and we have a central location where people can go to for help. In the beginning of the pandemic, I thought it was actually pretty cozy to stay inside for a while with my family and I thought that we would all be back in school and work after the Easter break. In the meantime, we played board games, baked, sat around in our garden, cycled and walked through the neighbourhood... I don't generally need that much social contact, so it wasn't very tough on me, but it did make trips outside of the house more exciting and special. If I didn't have a garden though, it would've been a totally different experience. We did, however, have one major concern during those first lockdown weeks: my daughter worked a temp job back then in the childcare wing of the local hospital. The first cases of Covid in our region went to that same hospital, which worried me about her and us getting infected. There was very limited PPE back then as well, because of supply issues but also because face masks (outside of hospitals) were not deemed necessary back then. We ultimately did not catch the disease, as her contract expired after a while and she was not re-signed. In the autumn of 2021, however, after vaccination, all three of us in my family got Covid and I was pretty sick for about a week. My kids didn't have any serious symptoms, and I luckily did not have long Covid afterwards. As for my job, I was never put on temporary unemployment like a lot of other people: there was some flexibility on our part as we worked from home for a little while (mostly calling people up). We also made parcels to send to the children instead of people coming to the centre

directly, which filled my house up like a post office for a while. But I was glad to be busy with something meaningful and important. After a few weeks, I already returned to the centre, though we did have a lot more digital work and meetings for a long time afterwards. I find it terrible and I got help from my daughter to navigate my way around the tools I now had to use. At this moment, I'm kind of familiar with them. I did call my work for help with the digital aspect, but we're a small team so there was not always a lot of support. Simply the way you meet and talk to people online is horrible, it is not comfortable for me: a lot of people have bad internet and they constantly disconnect. I got a laptop (that we already had in our association's supply) to work from home, but before the pandemic I did nothing for work at home. There was a clear distinction, and I didn't appreciate it that those boundaries were blurred (for example, I had to help my son with homework, while at the same time answering phone calls from people). But now it is back to normal. Dealing with social distancing and other sanitary measures, I was still able to do my job in a relatively normal fashion: we picked up kids at their homes and played with them, but not in big groups anymore. This allowed us to keep in contact with all the families that come to us. One other thing during those first months when I returned to work at the centre was that my job was deemed an essential job by the government, which was very lucky for us (and surprised me a little) as it meant my son could still go to school for 'daycare' along with a handful of other kids during the height of the pandemic. This was not the case for most other parents, as schools were actually closed. This gave me the time to focus on work and also meant that he could still play with kids his own age, as he doesn't have siblings his age.

Specifically telling quotes: "[Before the pandemic] I sometimes did overtime at our centre, but I never worked at home. That was strictly separated for me. I didn't it very pleasant to combine the two."

"I'm lucky that my son was able to still go to school, even though they were closed for most other people. I think we were recognised as providing some kind of healthcare, which is why I we had an exemption for this."

Keywords: Single mother, digital skills, childcare, poverty centre

BE07

Title: Gabriel truck driver fearing to transmit the virus to his family

Narrative: At the beginning it was difficult with what we heard on the news because we were forced to continue working. On the one hand, it was good because we didn't lose any salary, but on the other hand, we were afraid to go to work because we didn't know how serious the virus was at the beginning, so we were afraid for our children, for our wives and for our family. We had sick colleagues, we kept our distance, we wore masks, it was mainly at the beginning that we were afraid, but afterwards it got better. The company I work for here has set up a system so that there are no gatherings, once you

arrive you start working and once you finish you go home. Everyone in their own truck, no canteen, so that we don't have too much contact. If there were two of us in the truck, sometimes it was necessary, we put on the mask and left the windows open. It was hard to go to work with fear. We were always able to keep the same hours, because even if we had absent colleagues, we still had less work, because some shops were closed and people stayed at home. The first two months were difficult, with the fear of contaminating the family when I got home. I felt responsible for not contaminating the family and then we thought it was a virus like any other, we were able to go out again, the children to school... Between colleagues, it was difficult because we started to be "afraid" of each other, not to greet each other, not to see each other, to have to keep a distance. Today there are still people who are more fragile or who are afraid for their family, and who keep their distance. This has changed working relationships. What was positive was that we were more together with the little family, no pressure to run, the kids at home, we have a little garden so we were lucky, we watched films and did things together. In relation to my mum, I was the only one who went to her house once a week, it was difficult to stay away, not to give her kisses, fortunately we made videos with the family, my brothers. I had my sister who was seriously ill and we couldn't go to see her, to visit her. We phoned her husband. She didn't want to go to the hospital, which perhaps made things worse, the doctor came by, but she stayed at home. We had a hard time, also because she is younger than me, she was 35. This gave us a certain phobia in the family, even though we resumed our habit of seeing each other fairly quickly, we kept our distance. What was positive was that I was able to keep my salary and see more of the family. I think the media played a negative role, they reinforced the fear with the information all the time. I know people who worked in the health sector or colleagues, who stopped working for fear of being infected, and that also made it more difficult for the patients who had less help. The state helped a lot of people during the covid but now they are taking money from people's pockets with price increases etc. Everything that has been given, must be taken back in another way. We are coming out of a crisis and we are falling into a more serious crisis, into poverty, a crisis that is not well managed. My experience is that during the covid I was not affected financially but it is afterwards that it becomes very difficult, everything increases, rent indexation. I used to enrol the children in sports activities, but this year I couldn't because of the prices. I am not going to take a credit for that and create more problems. I think the government could do better than taking money from the pockets of people who work. We really feel this increase and this difficulty for everybody and we are worried for us and for the future generation.

Specifically telling quotes: "The first two months were difficult, with the fear of contaminating the family when I got home. I felt responsible for not contaminating the family. My experience is that during the covid I was not affected financially but it is afterwards that it becomes very difficult, everything increases, rent, etc. I am not going to take a credit for that and create more problems. I think the government could do better than taking money from the pockets of people who work. We really feel this increase and this difficulty for everybody and we are worried for us and for the future generation."

Keywords: anxiety, government support, finance, salary, family, time

BE08

Title: Teachers at the front line but not considered a priority population for preventing measures such as vaccination and teleworking.

Narrative: At school, very few of us went back to work in May-June 2020, there were only a few classes, we had to evaluate and graduate on the job aspect, there were 6 classes maximum and everything was done to reduce the risks as much as possible, one student per bench, etc. We were arriving at the school at different times, no one passing each other. I think that in terms of safety, this was certainly what needed to be done, but in terms of social relations, it was a total dehumanisation. At the level of the pupils, at that time, there was not really a problem, because they knew that the year would be simplified and that we would be benevolent (which was requested by the educational authorities). The pedagogical side of things went out the window a bit, so it was a bit easier. The next year (2021), which was complete in terms of covid, I think it depends on the students, but some were suffering because of the lack of social contact. Today (2022), the most difficult thing that we can objectify, is in terms of coherence in learning. For two years it was easier, the class councils were benevolent, there are students for whom it is difficult because the basics have not been acquired. There were also difficulties in finding work placement for an internship and difficulty of managing internship placements with absences and illnesses of the students and on the places of placement. It wasn't easy because we had very few guidelines, we had students who were on placement just before the start of covid, we didn't have tests yet, we had to monitor the symptoms, phone the wards they were in to see if the patients they were looking after were covid cases to see if we could confirm the diagnosis. We had many meetings with the works council. On the other hand, the occupational health department put things in place, but it came too late. In terms of distance learning, we discovered another way of doing things, we discovered the students differently, at the beginning it was really a contact, we didn't really have in mind to have an efficiency in the course. We saw the pitfalls, because giving a lesson at 8.30 a.m. means that the pupils don't put the camera on, because they haven't washed, they haven't got up, they're in bed. So in the end, it was also health education in terms of taking charge. In the end, it was quite comfortable for everyone, the pupils were happy with it and the teachers too. And perhaps we could have changed the way we teach, by keeping one day completely at a distance, for example. We could have chosen, on a voluntary basis, to have some teachers give certain courses only at a distance, in order to have a comfortable life like the people who have continued to telework. It's a shame we didn't do it. We couldn't impose it because we probably had people who were less at ease with the technique, but there were some who wanted to do it and we could have done it. Because afterwards we had to manage when there were forced quarantines, in relation to the comfort of certain people who remained in telework for two years and the

fact that we were on the front line with young people and families who didn't respect the rules, and that finally we fell ill because the rules were not respected, they were ill and didn't stay at home, had family parties, invited friends. While we were very strict at home, we were still contaminated because not everyone was playing the game, and this impacted our health. We realised how comfortable we were, but the authorities never considered extending distance learning. The school was, at least indirectly and we experienced it that way, the means for parents to telework and not have their children at home. We have remained in a very traditional education, and I don't think that's going to change. Teleworking was introduced to reduce the risk of contamination; it is a public health issue and everyone must make an effort. It's a pity for those professions that were on the front line and didn't have access to priority vaccination, it was a nonsense. On the positive side, we had a good social cohesion in the group of friends, colleagues, there was a common sense, a willingness to respect the rules, saying that if you respect them well you will get out of it faster.

Specifically telling quotes: "Perhaps we could have changed the way we teach, by keeping one day completely at a distance, for example. We could have chosen, on a voluntary basis, to have some teachers give certain courses only at a distance, in order to have a comfortable life like the people who have continued to telework. It's a shame we didn't do it. The school was, at least indirectly and we experienced it that way, the means for parents to telework and not have their children at home. We have remained in a very traditional education, and I don't think that's going to change."

Keywords: health, contamination, vaccination, respect of rules, teachers, teleworking, parents

BE09

Title: Dominique starting with a feeling of holidays and then felt boredom and depressed.

Narrative:

I'm single and I'm going to be 60. I work in the gardens under a special scheme because I am unemployed. I lived in a small flat in the centre, I used to walk with my dog but he died before the covid time.

The first period of Covid went relatively well. Before, the clients used to come and get me by car, but as they are older or have health problems, they were afraid, and I understand them. I said well that's fine, I'll stop working and I said to myself that it will last for a month or two and then we'll get back to our normal routine so I'll take a month or two off. At the second covid I said to myself, you can't go on like that and not work that, it's not possible. No socialising, boredom, and even shopping, with the mask on, you can't smile and so on. Everything was destroyed. I used to go to another department stores' as well but people didn't respect the rules, so I didn't go there anymore. It took me half an hour, an hour to do my shopping and no socialising. It was really weighing

on me. I was in pyjamas all day, getting dressed to go shopping and then coming back. It was very lonely. I didn't want to go for a walk on my own, and even in the street, you had to wear a mask for a while because I lived near a school, you had to wear a mask. I told myself that I wasn't going to walk around with a mask. I'm starting to get a kind of bore-out. To get around during the pandemic, as my clients were no longer coming to pick me up by car, I asked a friend who runs a bike repair shop if he could help me out. One Saturday, he made an appointment with me and said, "Here, I've prepared a bike for you. Thanks to the loaned bike, I was able to start working in the gardens again, but it was always outside, at a distance of one and a half or two metres, and I was wearing a mask, so there wasn't much risk. However, when I started working again, I didn't feel like it any more, I said to myself that I was fine at home in my pyjamas. It's because I like Mrs X's garden and Mr Y's pigeons that everything started again, otherwise it was a kind of lassitude, boredom, no longer wanting to do anything. Then there were the floods, I'm quite a strong character and normally, the floods wouldn't affect me. But if it had an impact on me. A friend whose wife is a psychologist who has known me for a long time and who told me to consult a psychologist she knew. So I only had two interviews but it helped. At that time you could get help from the commune, it was free, you didn't have to pay. In fact, nothing is like it used to be. I'm not talking about the floods, but what we are experiencing has made all social relations completely different. Whether this is good or bad, the future will tell, but in principle all relationships, human and social, even at work, have been turned upside down. During the Covid, I started an internet course. At first, after the first basic cycle, I wanted to continue with the specialisation, but then this boredom, this bore out, fell on me and I didn't even follow the course anymore. What I found very positive for the vaccines is that Europe took care of everything to make group purchases, I found that very good even if it took time to set up. You know, there is a big difference between the two disasters, covid and the floods, because the floods provoked a lot of solidarity, whereas covid distanced us. The municipality helped a lot the people who had to remain isolated. I'm thinking of the elderly who can no longer do their shopping, we took care of them, either their meals or their shopping. And after the floods, they continued that too. I think this is a positive point. I am active in an association and we have regular meetings. We had to confine ourselves and we did everything by videoconference. A lot of volunteers left, we were only six left. So, some people broke down and did other things. We have a lot of projects a sort of table d'hôtes, the idea is to prepare cheap meals with the unsold goods from the market or the department stores'. Before covid we had 30 volunteers, and the last few times there were three. People don't come to eat any more either, we just had two-three homeless people. We also discussed creating a solidarity fridge with a shopkeeper a little further away who sells organic produce and all that. And then as we couldn't meet during the confinement, this beautiful project fell through. And the problem is that while we wanted to get things going again after the covid, we had the floods, and now we have the energy crisis, and everything is falling apart. It is really difficult."

Specifically telling quotes: "You know, there is a big difference between the two disasters, covid and the floods, because the floods provoked a lot of solidarity, whereas covid distanced us. When I lost my flat, everyone was helpful but if my problem was due

to covid infection, no one would be there.”

Keywords: mental health, gardening, mobility, volunteers, support from local town, education, unemployed.

BE10

Title: Fear to be sick, cleaning but also developing new cooking skills.

Narrative: I got pregnant during covid, although I didn't want to, because I am afraid to go to hospital with covid. If I am sick, I want to stay at home. 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. I was afraid someone would get sick. I did the shopping, because I'm very careful, I didn't want to let my husband do it, because I'm afraid. And when I go home, I also put my clothes in the washing machine, I'm very careful because there could be sick people shopping and you could catch the virus. It's the same thing for the children when they went back to school, I washed the clothes directly and they went to the shower. It was clean clothes every day. I used the washing machine and the dryer a lot! The children stayed at home, I did activities with them, it was better that way because at school there was a risk of catching the virus. The school organised distance learning once a week, which was not a problem. It's difficult to live like this, we didn't go out with the children for the first month. We used to go to my mother-in-law's house on Fridays, but that all changed. We used the phone more with WhatsApp. I didn't stay like this and do nothing during the corona, I prepared a lot of organic things, bread, biscuits, my natural yeast, I wanted us to have good food. As I didn't go out, I did even more things, I made beautiful things, I developed talents. Today I still make things myself, but less than during the corona. I used to make juices and all that to give me strength, so I wouldn't get sick. When I was pregnant, I went to the hospital for the follow-up, but I was afraid to go alone. When I went to the doctor, I was alone, and the window was left open to air out. I was afraid for the baby, not for myself. I needed my husband next to me, but I was alone, that's a lot of changes. For the birth, the father came. And what was difficult about being pregnant was having the mask on all the time, even during the delivery, only at the end I could take it off because I needed oxygen. I did the Covid test when I arrived at the hospital, I still had the mask on for 5 hours and then as I was negative, I could take it off. There are women who had to keep it on because they were positive. I stayed in hospital for two days, I don't like to be alone, I'm afraid, I wanted to stay at home with my family and my husband. Among us Muslims, when the newspaper comes out, we don't just talk about the virus. In Arabic, we say that we should not make things bigger so as not to increase our anxiety. Here we have given too much importance to the virus. There are people who got sick and not from the virus,

but who had depressions, even today, there is still, no kissing, etc. Covid has left a scar on people. I know people who died in Morocco because they were diabetics or asthmatics. Today I am still at peace. During the virus it was hard. We can go out again, see our family, we need that because there is a lot of stress here in Belgium. I hope above all that there will be no more deaths.

Specifically telling quotes: I prepared a lot of organic things, bread, biscuits, my natural yeast, I wanted us to have good food. As I didn't go out, I did even more things, I made beautiful things, I developed talents. Today I still make things myself, but less than during the corona. I used to make juices and all that to give me strength, so I wouldn't get sick. I don't like to be alone, I'm afraid.

Keywords: fear, media, cleaning, cooking, healthy food, pregnancy



Bulgaria

BG01

Title: A lesbian manages to turn her fears and anxiety -- from being alone, from her parents dying, and from not having a job and money -- into a carpe diem approach to life.

Narrative: "I'm a 34-year-old woman from Sofia. I studied and lived in England for a long time, but I returned to Bulgaria in 2016. I have lived alone in a rented apartment since then. My parents live in Sofia also. I have an elder sister who is married and has two children - they also live nearby. I'm a healthcare practitioner with my own practice.

Just before the pandemic, I had started a new relationship with a woman. It was going well, but the new circumstances put a lot of strain on the relationship. We couldn't date outside, so we could meet only at home. All other social contacts were limited because of the lockdown, so we ended up spending a lot of time together. Lesbians anyway have the tendency to get very close very quickly and even to move in together soon after they start dating. The pandemic intensified things even more, which probably also caused our relationship to end rather quickly afterwards. With my next (and current relationship), I have taken a slower approach and it is working in a much better way for now.

Since I am a self-employed health practitioner, the lockdown brought a lot of uncertainty in my life. I experienced strong anxiety and stress about the future of my work and my financial situation because for some time, I couldn't work at all, so I had no income. The state did not provide any financial support. I had to take a loan from my parents, but I was lucky that I had them as a backup.

After this initial shocking time, I made a decision that I can't live like this anymore – one day feeds the next one. I made a promise to myself to finally collect some savings, so they can serve as a cushion in a crisis like this one. I decided to save enough money to be able to live half a year on them if I can't work. I also decided that I have to repay all my debts and start clean. So within the last two years, I managed to do that. Now I am trying to fulfil the plan to have money for six months, and I'm almost there. Instead of wasting money on small things, I decided to invest and have a pension fund, rather than satisfying short-term whimsical desires. I tried to come up with a plan B of what I could work in case I can't practice my profession.

From a psychological point of view, I also made a big shift. I was very worried about my parents dying during the pandemic. My fears were so strong that I finally had to accept that eventually my parents will die, whether from Covid or from something else, so I just understood I have to stop worrying about this. I don't think it would be easy to accept their death, but I can't constantly worry about it. So the pandemic actually made me be happy about each day my parents are alive and I can see them. This is actually a good

thing now, with the fear of a World War III and use of nuclear weapons, war in Europe... the world has gone crazy, so I have to be stable on the inside, and I can't rely on anybody else but myself. I try to turn my worries into happiness from the present moment in which we are all alive and well.

As for the LGBT perspective, instead of being angry that in Bulgaria I can't get married to my girlfriend, I realized that after all, here I can see her every day without being afraid of getting beaten up and without hiding. There are much worse places for LGBT people. So I'm also trying not to worry about what may happen or what I don't have.

The pandemic taught me to be happy about the things I have because everything is so quickly disappearing anyway."

Specifically telling quotes: "the world has gone crazy, so I have to be stable on the inside, and I can't rely on anybody else but myself."

"The pandemic taught me to be happy about the things I have because everything is so quickly disappearing anyway."

Keywords: financial problems, loss of work, social isolation, anxiety, happiness in the moment, accepting change, having a backup plan

BG02

Title: In the peak of the pandemic, a young woman escapes a toxic relationship with the help of a supporting organization

Narrative: "I'm 32 years old and I'm from Dimitrovgrad. For the last 14 years, I've been living in Sofia. I finished my university education in Sofia. I'm working in the IT sector. I'm now living with my new boyfriend after the toxic relationship that I ended during the pandemic lockdown. The rest of my family consists of my parents and my brother, but I don't live with them.

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.

I got in touch with the organisation EMPROVE who helps victims of domestic violence around 7-8 months before I escaped, which was in January 2021. I saw a post on their

Facebook page about the first signs that a person might be a victim of violence – and I recognized myself. I sent them a message that I thought that I was being psychologically abused. I got connected to a mentor and we started writing online. But at some point I decided to stay with my ex-partner, so out of shame I stopped writing to her for some time. Then in December 2020 I wrote to her again that I wanted to leave him. The day I met my mentor was the day before I left the relationship. She allowed me to leave my luggage at her place while I got myself together.

So despite the fear and the panic from the pandemic, I managed to find a way to get out of the abusive relationship. The way I did it was: I lied to my ex-partner that I have to go to my dentist in Sofia, so I managed to get there, even though it took a long time to persuade him to let me go. I took a bit more luggage in case I found the strength to escape while in Sofia. So I managed. I slept at a friend's place who agreed to take me in for a night despite the pandemic. I then returned to my mother's place using a train, even though I was in a huge panic that I might get sick with Covid-19. I said to myself: You're either getting sick now or remaining to be tortured forever. I boarded the train, stayed with a mask for hours, almost suffocating, but I reached my mother's home.

All of this cost me a lot. For a long time after I escaped, I was feeling miserable, I was doubting myself. I kept going on despite all of it; and gradually it started being easier. I was working with a psychologist from EMPROVE who helped me a lot when I was having panic attacks that I can't manage alone. I was getting by, day by day.

I never called the police or social care because I was afraid that even if I call the police, they will laugh at me, or that my ex-partner will persuade him that I was crazy and that I was the one torturing him. I never felt I could trust the authorities to help me.

As absurd as it may sound, the pandemic led to a huge improvement in my life. When you're in a huge stress as the one caused by the pandemic, you realize you're not in control. So you see that in such critical moments, it's better to be surrounded with people who love you, not with people who abuse you and put you down. It matters a lot who is next to you.

When I left the relationship, I had a lot of anger. Anger towards myself that I wasted 5 years of my life; anger towards others who didn't tell me earlier to leave or didn't come to pick me up. I had a lot of anger towards my father – maybe because I thought he is somewhat similar to my ex-partner, he has some of his features. So I didn't want to talk to my father for some time. I worked with a psychologist and only then I could move forward, otherwise I wanted revenge on my ex-partner and on my father. At one point I just stopped thinking of him and writing him angry messages. I realized I just have to move on.

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. My current partner knows my story inside out and he helps me a lot and supports me for being a part of EMPROVE – this helped me a lot to get stabilised and move on, as I saw there are also normal men.”

Specifically telling quotes: “As absurd as it may sound, the pandemic led to a huge improvement in my life.”

“I never called the police or social care because I was afraid that even if I call the police, they will laugh at me, or that my ex-partner will persuade him that I was crazy and that I was the one torturing him.”

“I said to myself: You’re either getting sick now or remaining to be tortured forever.”

Keywords: toxic relationship, gender-based violence, psychological abuse, social isolation, abusive partner, social isolation, civil society organization, psychological care, empowerment

BG03

Title: A pensioner finds new strength to continue living by travelling and by overcoming the social stigma of being old and weak.

Narrative: I’m a 68-year-old woman and I live in Sofia in my own small flat. I’m a pensioner. My husband died many years ago. My son is grown up and he lives away with his family. I have a boyfriend with whom we see each other rather often.

When the pandemic started, the international travel company I was working at fully stopped its activities because of the lockdowns and the closed borders. I immediately lost my job, which made up half of my monthly income (the other half is my pension). This was very tough because I couldn’t find another job – because of my age and because of the state of the economy, as companies were not hiring. Only now the travel company started operations again, so sometimes I work for them on a contract basis. During this time, nobody helped me – I couldn’t count on the government or other state bodies for financial or other support.

One of the hardest things for me during the pandemic was that I had to stop socializing. This was extremely tough for me because I’m a very outgoing person. I can’t just stay at home and fear the virus. So I kept going out every day, I didn’t close myself. I was taking walks outside all the time, even if I couldn’t meet friends. I had to keep going, otherwise I would have gone crazy. Some days I was just wandering around, shopping, or just sitting in the park alone.

When the worst lockdown was over in 2020, I just decided I have to travel as much as

possible. Traveling was my saviour – not to stay alone at one place. I really started traveling a lot in 2021. This was my way to compensate for the lost time in 2020. I turned traveling into my way of living – as much as I could in Bulgaria, but also a few trips abroad that I made in 2021 and 2022.

During the pandemic, one of my biggest worries was about my parents. I was so scared that they would get infected and hospitalized, that I wouldn't be able to help them, that I can't count on the hospitals here... In the end, both of my parents died in 2021, but not from Covid-19...

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 generalization 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.

Overall, I didn't take this pandemic seriously, I took it as a challenge. I believe we are young if we are young on the inside, not only on the outside.

Specifically telling quotes: "Overall, I didn't take this pandemic seriously, I took it as a challenge. I believe we are young if we are young on the inside, not only on the outside." "During this time, nobody helped me – I couldn't count on the government or other state bodies for financial or other support."

Keywords: job loss, poverty, care for elderly parents, social isolation, frustration with inadequate measures, stress, travelling as a coping mechanism, embracing life

BG04

Title: A gay man comes out to his parents who don't accept his relationship, but he anyway starts living with his partner happily during the pandemic; they both struggle with social isolation and negative effects on physical health.

Narrative: I'm a 42-year-old male. I have lived with my boyfriend since the beginning of the pandemic (April 2020). He's 28, so we have a significant age difference. We are engaged but we can't get married in Bulgaria because of the Bulgarian law that doesn't allow same-sex marriages. I work in pharmaceuticals, and I'm doing remote management. I work on the international level and in German. I'm from Sofia and we live here. My parents also live in Sofia, so we are close by. But we stopped having contact already just around the pandemic, after I told them about my same-sex relationship.

The pandemic was a very interesting situation for me. When I understood we'll be

working remotely from home, I was actually quite happy. I really like my home, so I was enjoying the idea of spending more time with my boyfriend, my cats, and my big collection of vinyls that I could listen to. I was happy with the home office – with an official shirt up from the waist and a tracksuit, as the joke goes. So while we were all worried about the pandemic, about people dying, from an egoistic point of view, I was satisfied because it was almost positive for me to be more at home. Workwise, I'm much more productive from home. I'm much more organized and can achieve more because I'm more motivated to optimize my work and focus less on distraction. I'm much better at my work now than at the beginning of the pandemic. But that comes at the cost of not socialising with people in the office.

From a relationship point of view, it coincided with a big clash with my parents. I finally told them I'm in a relationship with a man, which led to a big breakdown. We haven't been in touch since then.

A month and a half after the start of the pandemic, we started living together with my partner. This helped us a lot to get close – we were spending a lot of time together, working together at home, doing everything together. So, I would say that for us as a couple it had a positive effect.

The negative effect on both of us was that it became easy to slip into the idea 'how comfortable it is at home' – you don't need to go out from home for days or weeks and you talk to people only online. This was fine for two-three months, but after that we started feeling this is not natural. We really started suffering without real contact with others. The lockdown allowed us to get a break from people and from the world, but this gets tiring also.

After the fear of getting infected subsided, we started looking for ways to be with others more, while also following the pandemic measures. We tried to be outside and with people as much as possible. We realised human contact is super needed, even though we are a couple who enjoys being together a lot. I saw that my single friends had a really hard time being alone, for example. Throughout this period, I would support a couple of my friends who had depression because of isolation and loneliness.

The other big issue was that I started realizing that I didn't move so much anymore. I didn't go to the office, I didn't walk; I suddenly saw I have gained a lot of weight and didn't feel good about it. I keep struggling with this to a certain extent because I became lazier. Only now, two years later, I am pushing myself to go out on purpose and to move – this is the biggest challenge. I never had an issue with that before, but now I realize I have to fight it. I used to do sports actively before the pandemic. I'm trying to make myself do sports actively now. I also realise that since I keep working from home, just having walks is not enough. Home office (that I liked so much) actually made me move less and had a bad effect on my health and well-being. I gained weight and lost my shape, so from this perspective, it was not good for me.

My partner felt the same effect on his health. We had the same experience of being very comfortable at home. At one point, we both realized that we should do something about it. Our way to deal with it is to talk about it and try to motivate each other to move more and to motivate each other to do sports. It is not easy, but we have each other as a support for that also. "

Specifically telling quotes: "I'm much better at my work now than at the beginning of the pandemic. But that comes at the cost of not socializing with people in the office."
"At the beginning of the pandemic, I finally told them I'm in a relationship with a man, which led to a big breakdown. We haven't been in touch since then."

Keywords: gay couple, social isolation, family issues with same-sex couple, physical health issues, gain weight, problems with well-being, professional improvement

BG05

Title: "An experienced freelance film professional struggles with poverty because he can't work during the lockdown and is pushed to take loans and to work in risky conditions."

Narrative: "I'm a 46-year-old man and I have three kids. I'm divorced with the mother of the first two children, and they live in a different city (in my hometown). My profession is freelance cinematographer and film director. I live in Sofia in a rented apartment with my current partner.

The lockdown that was enforced at the start of the pandemic was a very difficult time for me. My profession is such that I have to work with people in person – it's not possible to do it remotely and without actual physical presence. So this meant that I could not work for 3-4 months at all. I had no savings, so I had no money whatsoever – I make my living by working month for month, and it has always been like that in my life, regretfully. I had the luck that my partner could work remotely from home, so this helped, but of course not fully, plus it put a lot of strain on our relationship that I wasn't contributing to the family budget. I had no way to make money, at all. This meant that I had to take loans for months – I couldn't even pay my social security payments every month, which I have to pay because my work status is a self-insured person. I couldn't give enough money to my ex-wife for the child support of my two elder children. I didn't know how I would pay my rent every month. This was a really horrible and stressful time, and it continued for a very long time, long after the initial few months.

There was no financial help from the state for people like me because I'm not an employee. I own my own independent business and I'm self-insured. This was really very difficult because the state imposed these strict rules during the pandemic – and didn't take any care of me, let alone of anyone in the art sphere in Bulgaria.

Since I live in Sofia and my two elder children live in another city, I also had difficulties seeing them during the lockdown. I intentionally broke the rules to take my daughter to Sofia for a few weeks, since we were not allowed to leave the city for any reason. So I passed by the police and had to lie to go to the other city and come back to Sofia with her. But I had no choice – I had to see my children, and especially her, since she is younger.

Regarding my work situation, after the first few months of strict lockdown, the measures became a bit less strict in the country. So many TV and film productions started being shot again. However, there were barely any safety measures. I was tested for Covid only once before starting to shoot a film series. This meant that all of us were risking our health, working in small spaces with tens of people. If any of us got sick, nobody would pay us for the days we wouldn't work. On top of this risk, some producers in the field reduced the daily payments of professionals because they knew people needed work and would work for less money, just to have a job.

I'm still struggling with financial issues until this day – I still haven't managed to return all my loans, social security payments, etc., so I keep finding new and new ways just to get by. I know one thing – I can rely only on myself. "

Specifically telling quotes: "I intentionally broke the rules to take my daughter to Sofia for a few weeks, since we were not allowed to leave the city for any reason."

"I know one thing – I can rely only on myself."

Keywords: poverty, unemployment, financial struggle, psychological strain, no state support, risky work conditions

BG06

Title: An elderly pensioner woman who has cancer faces the reality of the Covid pandemic in cold blood and decides not to change her life because of fear.

Narrative: "I'm an 83 year-old woman. I live in Sofia alone in my own apartment. I'm a pensioner. I don't have children, but I have a brother and I often meet with his family, grandchildren, and so on.

I had cancer years ago, and I had an operation back then. Before the pandemic had started, I got the news that something is going on there again. I rejected all the treatments that they were offering me and I continue to do so now. I'm treating myself with a good diet and lots of movement, so I'm looking for my own ways to live with cancer and to heal myself. I used to do a lot of sports when I was young.

I almost didn't feel the pandemic. I didn't change my lifestyle because of it. I was going

on my daily walks in the park. I tried my best not to get panicked and shocked by the pandemic. I was following the rules (I used a mask in public spaces, etc), but I didn't get too scared. I didn't see a meaning in many of the measures they were imposing.

I lived absolutely normally. I used to visit my friends also. Because of my age my social contacts are anyway more limited, but I never consciously limited my contacts with people. If people were more scared, I would of course respect that.

I also had a curious situation -- a close friend of mine was in hospital for an operation and then she got Covid but I didn't get it. When people kept asking her how she went through Covid, she didn't remember she had it because she also has Alzheimer's disease. I actually think this helped her survive it. When you're not super focused on a problem, it doesn't become so big of an issue. I also didn't share a lot with people around me how I felt about the pandemic. I think most people didn't share my opinion and were just in panic which I don't think was healthy.

I didn't get vaccinated. I'm not an anti-vaxxer, but I think everybody should have the choice what to do. I haven't had Covid until now.

I went to see my brother who was sick with Covid – and I didn't get it. His grandchildren were more scared than me from the illness.

I would not put on the TV to listen to the number of people who died each day. I didn't want the constantly negative news to affect my psychological state. Also I think a part of the reported dead people didn't die because of Covid but from other diseases, but that's my personal opinion.

I live with my cancer, but I feel good. I actually have found a way to live with it. I take a lot of care of my health, as much as I can. I'm super happy that my feet are holding me and I can walk – this is great. Many of my friends can't move because they have serious health issues and can't walk. So I would go and help friends who need support. I was doing this during the pandemic, but I keep doing it afterwards too.

I think it's better to be fearless than to constantly fear different things. My belief is that all the fear and panic that was created in the public space was not necessary."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: elder woman, living alone, pensioner, socialization needs, fearless, cancer, against panic, physical movement

BG07

Title: A young Roma mother manages to finish her high-school education despite the

difficulties caused by the pandemic and the pressure from her husband's parents.

Narrative: "I am a 22-year-old woman and I live in Sofia's biggest Roma neighbourhood. I have a 3-year-old daughter and I live with her father, my partner. My parents live in another city together with my other siblings. My partner's parents live in the same neighbourhood, but we are not in good relations with them.

During the pandemic, I did not struggle so much as all my other relatives – in terms of money. I wasn't working because I'm taking care of my child, but we were lucky as my partner didn't lose his job as did many of our relatives and friends and many people in our neighbourhood. It was horrible in our neighbourhood. People were without money and desperate, and there were a lot of scandals. Also the police locked down the neighbourhood at some point because they were saying we Roma are spreading the virus too much.

My main struggle was that I was studying to finish my high school degree. My dream is to become a teacher and I didn't want to give up. So my first step was to complete that degree and then try to continue my education. But it was very difficult to continue studying during the pandemic. I was alone with my daughter all day long. I couldn't focus well, but I kept going. I even had to go to all the school exams with the child. There was nobody to help me with her. My parents live in another city and they couldn't come to help.

Additionally, my partner's parents are against me studying and getting an education. They live next to us in the Roma neighborhood so they could have helped me during this period, but they didn't. They don't approve of me studying, they say it's not important and it's not for me because I'm a woman. They say I have to take care of the child. They don't want me to waste my time on this and they don't want to spend time with the child while I study. We had a lot of arguments. My partner supported me anyway, so I continued my studies. It was difficult to combine taking care of the child and continuing, but I managed and I got my high school degree this year.

Besides this, I also had to help my younger brother with his education. He found it very difficult to study online. He was lagging a lot behind other students because he couldn't understand the lessons when they were teaching him online. I had no choice but to go help him because my parents couldn't cope with the computer and everything. And because nobody else could take care of my daughter, I got the bus and travelled to my hometown with my daughter during the pandemic. I stayed some time with him and was explaining the lessons to him in person because that's the only way he could understand them. Even though it was all very difficult, he continued his studies. I hope he is not lagging anymore now, when they are studying again in person. "

Specifically telling quotes: "They (her partner's parents) don't approve of me studying, they say it's not important and it's not for me because I'm a woman."

"It was difficult to combine taking care of the child and continuing, but I managed and I got my high school degree this year."

Keywords: Roma, prejudice, school problems, unfair lockdown measures, childcare, family issues, education

BG08

Title: A Syrian refugee, widow with three children, finds a way to overcome financial and practical difficulties to subsist her family on her own.

Narrative: "I'm 34 years old and I'm from Syria. My husband was killed in the war there, so I had to flee. I came to Bulgaria four years ago with my three children (13-year-old daughter, 11-year-old son, and 8-year-old son). Now I have a job in telecommunications with my language skills in Arabic and Turkish.

After I lost my job at the beginning of the pandemic, I was desperate. For six months, I couldn't find anything. I was really having a difficult time because I had almost no money, and nobody from my family could help me financially. My children depend only on me, so the stress was enormous. I had to find a job as soon as possible, so I could buy food for them and keep paying the rent of our apartment.

These six months really were a big trial for me, but I survived them, and we all survived them. I found the strength to keep looking for jobs, and I found one finally, which is a good job. I work with my language skills in Arabic and Turkish, which is great, instead of a job like a maid or in retail.

The moment I got the job, I mobilized fully and started working as much as I could. It was still in the pandemic, but despite the fear of the virus, I had to go to the office. Just my job is like that – I cannot do it from home. So I just told myself every day that I should think the best and not fear, not start thinking what could go wrong, like if I get ill and nobody is there to help my kids.

During this period, I also had to quickly improve my Bulgarian, and I just went ahead and did it. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to help my children with their studies. They were starting to have a lot of trouble because they were studying online all of a sudden, and in Bulgarian. At first I didn't understand the language so much and I was not able to assist them. But I saw that nobody else can help them. The teachers could do only so much in the online environment. They also didn't understand how difficult it is for my children who are not Bulgarian. So I had to mobilize for this also, just to get it done as soon as I could, so I could teach them whatever they didn't understand in the online classes.

I had to learn through this painful experience that even as a woman refugee, a widow

with three children, I couldn't count on any support from anyone, even from the state where I escaped. My family couldn't help me much; and here nobody could help me much either. People didn't discriminate against me, but they didn't provide me with much support. There was no state funding for people like me, in absolutely difficult situations and with children. But I decided I will stop feeling like a victim and will just find a way. What else to do when you have to go on for your children.

I'm planning to gradually find a way to move to another European country where I could get support. My siblings are in Germany, so I am considering moving there. Doing this would not be easy either, but if it would help offer a better future for my children, I will do it eventually."

Specifically telling quotes: "So I just told myself every day that I should think the best and not fear, not start thinking what could go wrong, like if I get ill and nobody is there to help my kids."

"I had to learn through this painful experience that even as a woman refugee, a widow with three children, I couldn't count on any support from anyone, even from the state where I escaped."

Keywords: refugee, poverty, single mother, three children, loss of job, difficulties with children's education, unemployment, new opportunities

BG09

Title: An elderly pensioner joins an informal mountain lovers club to fight the loneliness and keep his spirit high, as well as his body healthy.

Narrative: "I'm a 73-year-old pensioner. I live alone in my flat. My wife died a few years ago, and our children are grown-up and live abroad. I subsist on my pension which is not very big, and I also do contractual work as a construction engineering consultant from time to time to earn some extra money. I love trekking in the mountains. I've been doing that since I was very young.

I hated the whole drama around the pandemic. This was really a horribly managed crisis. I was of course worried about the virus and about getting sick, so I was taking care to protect myself, but I really didn't understand why they had to close down parks in the cities. There were some very ridiculous policies that were enforced. I don't know if the politicians were in a panic or were just trying out how much they could play with our nerves.

Due to the pandemic, I couldn't work anymore, at least not a lot. The company for which I am doing consulting reduced its amount of work, so they wouldn't call me for a long time. So I was left only with my pension as a means of subsistence, and this was difficult

for me. My children supported me a bit at times.

I understood why some of the pandemic policies were put in place, like closing down bars and so on. So I respected this. But I didn't agree with limitations on my free movement in the city, on not being able to visit a park or to go to the mountain. So these measures I didn't follow. I just went for walks, often alone, because I couldn't stand sitting at home all the time.

After 2-3 months, I really started struggling with my psychological state. I felt I was going crazy from being alone for so long, from not having a normal social life, not being able to see people. I was sick and tired of listening to the number of dead people on the news and how I should be afraid nonstop. So with a few old friends, we decided to start going on mountain treks together and just feel good about life. We would organize ourselves every week and we would go to the nearby mountains. We didn't do anything ambitious because we're all over 65 years old, but we would hang out in nature together. This saved me. I wouldn't have survived otherwise because I need people and I need nature in my life. I'm not ready to be buried yet. So it was good that there were other people who shared the same feelings as me. We felt a bit like kids who run away from school and have to hide and not get caught, but maybe this was also refreshing us in some way.

As a whole, I was very frustrated with the way that we elderly people were treated during the pandemic. I was fed up with hearing how if I'm above 60 years, I have to lock myself at home and never show myself ever again because I will die immediately. There was a ridiculous rule that people my age can go in the shops only at certain times of the day. I never followed that rule, it was stupid and offensive. The state didn't help elderly people with money or other services, but they kept creating the idea that we're about to die any moment now and have to be restricted to stay at home only. You can die from loneliness too!

Specifically telling quotes: "You can die from loneliness too!"

"As a whole, I was very frustrated with the way that we elderly people were treated during the pandemic."

Keywords: pensioner, loneliness, social isolation, pensioner club, resisting policies, mental health, prejudice against elderly people

BG10

Title: A young LGBTQ+ person finds a way out of depression and loneliness through taking part in an informal group

Narrative: "I'm 18 years old and I live in Sofia with my parents. I'm a student in high school.

I struggled a lot with mental health problems during the pandemic and especially during the lockdown. This was an extremely difficult time for me. I have been having episodes of depression in the last few years. When they said we have to stop going to school, even though it's not so easy there, I was shocked. I couldn't imagine how I would be staying all the time at home, with my parents in the other room. I cried a lot.

I had no private space somehow. I felt very bad and wanted to be left alone. Some days I didn't even feel like getting online for my classes. I was staying in bed, in pyjamas all day, and just putting on my microphone, so the teachers wouldn't bother me. I felt it was pointless to be a part of this online education. It was just a waste of time. The teachers were pretending they were teaching us something, and so we had to pretend we're there and so on.

I never liked to be part of such groups, but at some point, a friend of mine offered me to join a LGBTQ+ group. It felt strange to me because it sounded like these funny self-help groups that I've seen in films and I would hate them. So this group started meeting online during the lockdown, where people would just chat and share how their days were going. At first I wasn't very active in this because it was another online meeting, just like the online classes. I joined once or twice and was about to stop.

But in the summer the pandemic measures were eased up, so the group started meeting from time to time. This felt better and I started going to the meetings. It wasn't like we were planning some big action, like to protect our rights or anything like that. It was just to be together after months of isolation and all this fear that other people had from the virus. Also because as a part of LGBTQ+ we anyway have some fears and worries, difficulties in society, so this was good to share with other people from that group.

I know that some people from the group also met in other smaller groups, like people who enjoy certain sports, and so on. Altogether there were about 30 to 50 people at different times. But we didn't want to call ourselves in a certain way or to become official. It was just among ourselves, just to feel good, to feel understood.

Two years later, I feel that becoming a part of this group saved me. I have many new friends that I wouldn't have met otherwise. I also feel that this inspired me a lot for my future plans. I know how difficult it can be to be an LGBTQ+ teenager. So I was thinking that such community groups are very important. I think I might want to work in this field after my university education – to create or lead groups for mutual sharing and support. Or somehow get involved in helping people who struggle with their identity and with mental health issues because of that and because of social isolation.”

Specifically telling quotes: “It wasn't like we were planning some big action, like to protect our rights or anything like that. It was just to be together after months of isolation and all this fear that other people had from the virus.”

Keywords: LGBTQ+, student, young person, social isolation, depression, mental health problems, group action



Cyprus

CY01

Title: Crawling back to normality

Narrative: “Oh you want to know how old I am? Without summers? (informant laughing) I am 84. I feel younger though. I fell strong. I actually feel stronger after the covid-19 situation, even though my legs cannot support me all the time and I have to hold a walking stick. I feel stronger inside. Through this situation I understood how resilient my family relations are and how much my children love me.

I am married and I have 5 children. My husband suffered a stroke before covid-19 and he now stays at a retirement home nearby. I live alone. I do not work anymore. I get the housewife pension. I get 367 euros as a pension and 100 euros for being a mother of 5 as an allowance. This does not allow me to have a 24hour helper at home, unless I pay from my savings or unless my children pay for the help. But I do not want to have another person living with me anyway. I cannot sleep when a stranger lives in my house. I got robbed twice. And one time I trusted a girl to care for my husband and I, she just left us one day. So I prefer to be strong and stay home alone.

Everyday life during covid-19 situation was not easy one time I had a toothache. It was morning. All my children were at work. I do not drive or own a car. I had to visit the dentist urgently. So I decided to walk. I took my p-walking stick and started walking. There are no benches to rest apart from the one at the bus stop. It was sunny and really hot. It was hard for me. It took me more than an hour. But I could not wait until the afternoon I was in pain. After the dentist treated me. One of his colleagues brought me home because she felt sorry for me. She was so kind. I cherish the moments of kindness in my life and thank God and Holly Mary for their help.

Another incident was when my doctor was on holiday and another doctor gave me pills to sleep. I suffer from depression, and I do not sleep easily. I took this new pill and went to bed. At some point, I needed to visit the toilet. On my way to the toilet, I got very dizzy and fell on the floor. I could not stand up. My legs were not strong enough to lift me up. So I had to crawl from the bathroom to the corridor, to the living room to lift myself by holding the couch. I was lucky for not breaking any bones. God helped me again. As it turned out, the pill was too strong for me. This situation made me more patient and stronger. Now I am very careful, and I abstain from taking pills at any chance.

I found many ways to get by and face the negative times of the pandemic with success. First of all when I got sick with covid-19 I took some medicine, but I was lucky that I did not have to be hospitalized. It was hard because I live alone, and I was alone for 11 days at home. My children brought me food and supplies outside the door. I could not visit my husband at the nursing home. But I had help from my family.

My life during the pandemic was lonely, I coped by reading religious books, watching

TV, listening to the radio, caring for my chicken which provide me with eggs. Now it is much better. I can visit people and I see my husband and children more often.

I tried to knit a pullover but my hand hurts.

My strategies for coping were mostly practical. After my crawling accident we installed a special handle at the toilet, I hold my walking stick, I do physiotherapy. I visit people and get visits which makes me less lonely, and I go to the doctors.

I know living alone at my age is risky and difficult. Yet I do not want to be a burden to my children I want to be independent. I am scared to bring a stranger caregiver in my life. What if they have covid? What if they abandon me again like the last time?

I don't mind the hardship. I can do it. I survived war and occupation I will stay on my own as long as I am healthy and when I cannot live alone anymore, I may go to the nursing home. I see the future optimistically."

Specifically telling quotes: "I feel stronger inside. Through this situation I understood how resilient my family relations are and how much my children love me."

"I could not stand up. My legs were not strong enough to lift me up. So I had to crawl from the bathroom to the corridor, to the living room to lift myself by holding the couch. I was lucky for not breaking any bones. God helped me again."

"I don't mind the hardship. I can do it. I survived war and occupation I will stay on my own as long as I am healthy and when I cannot live alone anymore, I may go to the nursing home. I see the future optimistically."

Keywords: Strong, old, woman, importance of family ties

CY02

Title: Lying to survive

Narrative: "I am 35 years old, married with 2 children. I live in the town suburbs. I am from Syria and I came to Cyprus around 15 years ago, to work and live in better conditions. I am not a refugee or asylum seeker, but my family in Syria suffered and suffers from the war. I send them money and try to help as much as I can. My children are 3 and 6 years old and they go to school. My wife is a housewife. She looks after the children and does the housework. I have two younger brothers who also came to Cyprus to work.

I am a builder. I started as a worker in construction, which is the lowest paid-skilled job at construction sites, with a salary of up to €800 per month. Then after some years of experience I became a skilled worker (Mastros), with a salary of up to €1600 per month. Now I also have my own employees, ten in total. I bought my own van and I supervise them. To survive, I cannot resister all my employees at Social Insurance Services. I know this is illegal, however I need to survive for my family and for my employees. If I apply the law and pay all the contributions, I will have to raise my prices and then, I will lose

jobs.

Being in this sector, things were very hard during covid-19 lockdowns, as well as now during the war in Ukraine creating economic crisis.

My main struggle during covid-19, both lockdowns and during the restriction measures are first of all that during lockdowns and when we were not allowed to get out and work, I could not apply for the covid-19 allowance for my non-declared employees. For myself I could get the minimum allowance -35% (because the allowance was 65% of our salary percentage). But for my non-registered employees I could not apply for any money so we illegally went out and work. That was the only way we could get by and survive, because we had to feed our families and ourselves as well as to send money back to Syria.

How did we organize? During the 1st covid-19 lockdown, it was difficult. We had to send an sms and lie if we were caught. But then, during the next lockdowns, the police were not so many so we could just work after hours and get paid. Another setback during covid-19 was when one of the crew got sick with covid-19! Even if one got sick, we all had to stay home. So we lost the job and some other Mastros got it and the money. So we got by, by lying. If we had covid-19 but no or limited symptoms, we just went to work because we could not afford losing the money! I know this is bad. But what could we do? What would my family and me eat if we lost the job? Fortunately, we never got caught. When I was sick, I was ok. And I did get some allowance from the government.

On the bright side, when I was on lockdown, I had the opportunity to see my children and wife, to spend quality time with them and to get some rest. My usual life is to leave home at 6:00 a.m. and get back at 19:00 p.m. I also work on Saturdays and Sundays. My life is hard.

Now we got back at our normal before-covid-19 life, however, we have to struggle with the aftermaths of Ukraine war crisis. Everything is more expensive. Especially the price of fuel. I drive to my different construction sites all day long to supervise my builders. I spent a lot of money for fuel."

Specifically telling quotes: "To survive, I cannot resister all my employees at Social Insurance Services. I know this is illegal, however I need to survive for my family and for my employees. If I apply the law and pay all the contributions, I will have to raise my prices and then, I will lose jobs."

"My main struggle during covid-19, both lockdowns and during the restriction measures are first of all that during lockdowns and when we were not allowed to get out and work, I could not apply for the covid-19 allowance for my non-declared employees."

"If we had covid-19 but no or limited symptoms, we just went to work because we could not afford losing the money! I know this is bad. But what could we do? What would my family and me eat if we lost the job? Fortunately, we never got caught."

Keywords: Reality, foreigners, lying, illegal practices, survival

CY03

Title: Finally getting a good job

Narrative: "Hi. You can call me Hope. I am 38 years old. I am single. I don't like being single. My mother hates it too. My younger brother got married last June. Everybody on the dancefloor got sick with covid-19 during his wedding! My mother, father and my grandmother. Also the bride and groom. I was lucky. I had already had my turn with covid-19 before the wedding. It was practically like a rough cold. I was vaccinated. Actually when I did my first vaccine, I fainted! I was scared I think.

I live in a flat above my parents' house. I have friends but no boyfriend. I had a boyfriend before, yet now with the lockdowns and all it was very difficult to meet a guy. I want to meet a guy. I really do. I feel old. My mother is nagging all the time that I will stay single and die alone. It was really hard when I had to listen to her all day long! When I was unemployed or when the lockdowns forced us to stay home.

So yes. Covid-19 time was hard for me. Life was hard for me always. I was always picked at, at school because I am very tall, very thin, a bit... slow to respond. I sometimes cry alone. But I manage to cope. I study a lot. I love history, I love politics and now law which is my second degree. I guess studying and hoping for something better helped me get by.

When I finished law, I applied in 17 jobs. At companies and law offices. Most of them don't even reply! I did go to a couple of interviews but with no success. No I don't like the courts.

I like to be in an office. I managed to get out of lousy jobs like working at a bank to update customers data for less than 800 euros per month, by applying to any job I see. I also do exams. I managed to get a government job by contract 2 months ago! I feel so lucky to be able to get back at the labour market. I just hope I will not be abused again.

At my first job, before I study law, I was kicked out. First I was bullied. I suffer a lot during my periods. I need to stay home for at least a day. But they wouldn't let me. And then when I was at the office I was picked at. Mainly by other women. They would gossip about me being dirty and many nasty stuff that I don't want to remember. That is mainly why I studied law.

But I was not so lucky at my first job as a lawyer either. That was during covid-19. So I got a job at a small law firm. Only one female lawyer, the owner, a secretary, another lawyer and me. She had her office full of cats. The cats were everywhere! On the files, eating from the floor, peeing, and pooping on the floor. It was disgusting. She used me to drive

her to court because she couldn't drive. She never drafted me a contract, she didn't pay me or even give me money for fuel. She didn't even let me have a proper lunch break. I left in 3 weeks.

So I feel so lucky to have found this job. I will still look for a better job. I did another 2 masters in the last 3 years so I feel that something will come up. I feel stronger. I just wish there was help when I needed it."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: Young woman, mild disability, optimistic and persistent, overcoming past abuse

CY04

Title: Philosophy to the rescue

Narrative: "I am 64 years old, happily married with 3 children. One of my daughters is married, the other engaged and my son is open to opportunities. (laughter) He is single. Currently I am a multitasking entrepreneur. Today for example I was cooking, sawing baby clothes for a baptism and working for my family company at the same time. I have always been a multitasker. Now I can do up to 3 things at the same time.

Our family small-sized enterprise (SME) creates artificial rocks and waterfalls, we build wooden houses and generally decorations of internal and external spaces. We also do architectural designs since my husband is an architect and I am an interior designer.

I generally enjoy creations. I am very fond of philosophy and art and tradition. Hence, I try to include Cyprus culture, cooking, voufa/loom (traditional cloth making) in my everyday life. I also live gardening. Therefore, during the lockdowns when we were forbidden to go out, or work it was one of the best times of my life. I got to spend time with my family, gardening, expressing myself through art. I had the opportunity to cut unnecessary weed, to fertilize my flowers. I planted new flowers and vegetables like onions, spring onions, tomatoes, and other eatable plants and herbs. I also had the chance to clean my house! I cleaned the kitchen and tidied up the closets. I washed my curtains and cleaned everything very thoroughly. It was a chance for me to enjoy my house. Under normal circumstances I do not have the luxury to spend so much time at home.

Another important event of my life during the lockdown was the wedding of my younger daughter. We planned to do a big Cypriot wedding with all the relatives and friends. However due to the restrictions we had to perform a much simpler ceremony at the mayor house. We are planning to have the church wedding when time is right soon.

During the lockdowns our expenses were not as much as before. I was not home all the time to eat but when I was, I ate what I had at home. I didn't order food. I had the time to cook for my family. So it was much better economically wise. We had less income, but we also had less expenses, so it was ok. We did not have economic difficulties because we were not extravagant.

Another important issue in my life is rheumatoid arthritis. This health issue is autoimmune. I try to get by and go through this disease without medication. I don't like medicine due to side effects. I believe this autoimmune disease is connected to psychology. Instead of taking medicine, I registered at practical philosophy classes. This helped me very much even during the lockdowns because we had online classes. At this course we read and explain wise people and philosophers or saints' texts. We decide to embrace the quote we select as a class for a week, and we discuss it during the next class. The most important thing we do is "pauses" to our thoughts and actions. We also practice meditation. Last time we had a text on the sun's reflection on any objects (trees, lakes, mirrors). If this object is blurry, it doesn't mean the sun is blurry. It is how we see things. We need to see things with their true shape and value we will see everything as simpler. My teacher is very friendly and positive to listen. She helps us during the class to see clearly. She helps me. Nevertheless, I don't find it easy to talk and open up to strangers.

Due to my problem with cancerous thyroid, I go to the oncology center. Although there were restrictions with covid-19 I could still have my appointments with my doctor. At some point the doctor announced that it was time to operate. I selected a private clinic to a specific doctor that helped me and satisfied me. My doctor was not in GESY so I had to pay all the expenses. His price was sensible. I am happy with the doctor and with the clinic. It was an overall good experience. After the operation I changed oncology centers and I go to the one in Limassol. I had to do iodine treatment. The first time it was good. The second time when I had to stay alone for 10 days away from everyone, I wrote a lot of chapters from my book.

When I got sick with covid-19, at the end of the 2nd year, I was affected where I am very sensitive, at my bones. I had terrible pain and vomiting. I could not get out of bed I was exhausted. When I went to the first aids, my daughter took me there and asked for help. They denied me entry. They did not take me to the covid-19 ward. They did not check my oxygen or help me in any way. They just told my daughter to give me a Panadol. They were not humane. I felt so helpless and furious. So again I had to go to a private clinic and stay for one night. I paid more than 1000 euros. And I don't even know how to claim them back. "

Specifically telling quotes: "I generally enjoy creations. I am very fond of philosophy and art and tradition. Hence, I try to include Cyprus culture, cooking, voufa/loom (traditional cloth making) in my everyday life. I also live gardening. Therefore, during the lockdowns when we were forbidden to go out, or work it was one of the best times of my life."

“They just told my daughter to give me a Panadol. They were not humane. I felt so helpless and furious.”

Keywords: Autoimmune disease, practical philosophy as a medicine, women empowerment

CY05

Title: Escaping death because of a friend

Narrative: “I am married yes. I got married at 40 I think, yes. And it was right after a gut operation. I remember my wound was hurting during the church ceremony. My wound was “juicing” under my wedding dress. We only had a few guests because my husband was on his 2nd wedding. He is around 20 years older than me. He already has 2 children and a very nasty ex-wife. I am now 55 years old. I am overweight, as you can obviously see (haha), but I don’t care to lose weight. Yes my doctor said to lose weight but I told him that my mother cooks so much food that I cannot stop eating! Some of my health problems (and I have a lot) come from that. I am a Greek language teacher. I work at the Ministry of Education. I hold a PhD in gender studies, and 5 masters. I am currently on my 6th! I am doing an MBA now. I love studying. It gives me life and a way to meet people.

I have a sister who is divorced. Her son, our only child in the family, had problems with behaviour and drugs in the past. Now he is ok. He is studying to become a doctor! His father is weird. He rented him an apartment downtown to live alone. When 2 neighbours of him were murdered, he decided to come back and live with his mother and grandmother. We all live close. I take loans to support my sister and my parents who need financial support. My husband is rich, but we have separate accounts. I am poor!

I am a cancer survivor. I was very lucky that one of my friends who is very keen to doctors and reads a lot about diseases, noticed I was pale. She insisted in me taking some tests. At first, I refused. I never sleep or eat consistently so I thought it was that. However, after her long persistency I visited my personal doctor, and he wrote some tests. And my friend was right! I had 3 really huge cancerous cysts in my ovaries. They had to operate immediately. I went through 3 operations in total. It was not so straight forward during the covid-19 restrictions. I had to be alone most times and suffer without my loved ones by my side. I was lucky to be able to get support through the government health system because I could not take another loan to do the therapies. In the past, when my younger sister had cancer, during her divorce, I took a loan to pay for her treatments. We had to keep them a secret. We didn’t want her ex-husbands lawyers to use her cancer against her to get her sons’ guardianship from her.

I am trying to forget the bad things. This is why I disappeared from social life and friends.

I had a terrible time, but I was saved! I had good friends next to me, my family and of course my employer, the government gave me all the time I needed to struggle with my health issues.

What is more, after more than 10 years of legal battle at the Administrative Court, I won my final case and EDY (the Committee for Government Appointments) finally promoted me!

So, I had to deal with a new job, new environment, new colleagues and a different type of work at the Ministry. I am happy though. I am happy that I went through this situation, amid the restrictions and difficulties of covid-19 and I came out stronger.

Yes, I did get sick at some point. Of course, I am vaccinated. I had to be due to my health problems. It was a difficult type of flue. I cannot describe it differently. I had fever and cough, but I survived. I am ok. "

Specifically telling quotes: "I am a cancer survivor. I was very lucky that one of my friends who is very keen to doctors and reads a lot about diseases, noticed I was pale. She insisted in me taking some tests. At first, I refused. I never sleep or eat consistently so I thought it was that. However, after her long persistency I visited my personal doctor, and he wrote some tests. And my friend was right! I had 3 really huge cancerous cysts in my ovaries. They had to operate immediately."

"I am trying to forget the bad things. This is why I disappeared from social life and friends. I had a terrible time, but I was saved! I had good friends next to me, my family and of course my employer, the government gave me all the time I needed to struggle with my health issues."

Keywords: Cancer, treatment, good friends, persistency

CY06

Title: The healer: A young female entrepreneur during covid-19 and beyond

Narrative: "My work and life are focused on providing support to others. To do this I need to be in contact to people, my customers, or patients, if you like. I am 34, in a relationship. I met the love of my life quite recently, just after covid-19 restrictions were lifted and we got engaged last Saturday! I am part of a big family. My parents are happily married. My sister is married, and my brother is single now. I have many aunts and uncles; cousins and I generally like to connect with my family.

I studied biology and then did a specialization in genetics. However, I never liked working in labs away from people. I don't like medicines or the tendency in Cyprus to do cesarian sections. Natural birth is the best. I believe connecting with people is real empowerment. I used to work at a clinic that offers IVF and fertility treatments. I didn't really like what they were doing there, so my love to children and babies especially, drove me to discover and explore my ability to offer services and support to pregnant

women. I am a trained doula and I specialize in couples therapy and support from the moment of conception until after birth. As I said I am pro natural birth so I try to help both the future mummy and her partner to succeed. I have had situations where women (usually not Cypriot) decided to give birth at home, without a doctor present. I was there for them and the doctor was stand-by.

I am also a specialized Tandra therapist. Perhaps one of the few in Cyprus. Tandra is still a bit of a taboo here. So working in this area for a young entrepreneur like myself who is struggling to get funding and organize a small business is a challenge. Imagine how difficult it was when the covid-19 restrictions were in place here in Cyprus.

I am not officially registered at the Social Insurance. So I could not benefit from any allowance policies. I don't pay taxes because my income is really low. I am a bit undercover to be honest. This is until I have enough money to set up a formal business... If I ever get this chance. I work with sexually traumatized people and getting paid is not so easy when it comes to private individuals. But I try my best.

I suffered discrimination and prejudice during my work. Not only from strangers but also from members of my family at first. They didn't understand my type of work. Well it makes sense because when your family members are doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants and you get to be a Tandra therapist, it's not mainstream, so you may be frowned upon and "bring disgrace". But after my mother opened her mind about it and started loving me for who I really am, then everything got better.

My main struggle through covid-19 period was economic and also work-related. When I started my Tandra sessions and group therapy, I offered services to both women and men. I got so many calls from men who thought I was a prostitute! They used to call and ask for embarrassing stuff and misunderstood my profession. So my strategy/response was to limit my therapy offer to women. I work with sexually abused women who want to get back with their sexual life and discover their sexuality. Through our sessions I may discover even rape cases where the woman was sexually abused and raped at an early age, she then deleted or blocked that memory and it starts getting back to deal with it during our sessions. I couldn't stop providing for these patients just because the government decided to apply restrictions! So I continued illegally. I didn't really have a choice anyway. I could either starve or borrow money from my parents.

What was really upsetting for me during covid-19 was the pressure we got from everyone to get vaccinated. I hated it to be the "unvaccinated" one who was mean to the society. Yes I got sick with covid-19 and it was bad. I had to move with my parents at that time and they took care of me. I was in my old room of course and they brought food and vitamins to me. I was very lucky to have them at that time and every day in my life. That was a good experience. To see how much you can be supported from your family. I guess this is one of the best features of Cypriot culture. Family matters and we are very connected. Or maybe just my family I don't know."

Specifically telling quotes: " I don't like medicines or the tendency in Cyprus to do

cesarian sections. Natural birth is the best. I believe connecting with people is real empowerment.”

“My main struggle through covid-19 period was economic and also work-related. When I started my Tandra sessions and group therapy, I offered services to both women and men. I got so many calls from men who thought I was a prostitute! They used to call and ask for embarrassing stuff and misunderstood my profession. So my strategy/response was to limit my therapy offer to women.”

Keywords: Tandric therapist, young woman, struggling to survive, supporting victims of abuse.

CY07

Title: Fighting mental health problems at my own pace and space

Narrative: “I am 34, living with my parents at our home in a village., with our 2 dogs and 1 cat. Our cat is free. Sometimes I feel so jealous of her. I am half Cypriot. My mother is from another EU member state. She and my father met when my father was studying in her country. They fell in love, got married and he brought her to Cyprus. I have a brother. I am not single or strictly speaking in a relationship. Its complicated. I live with my parents to save money. Both are retired now. Well, my mother was a housewife. Still is. My father used to work as a vet assistant but then, the chicken factory was shut down due to a virus and he lost his job. He was between jobs working as many hours as he could and now, he is retired. So, I save money by staying home and not renting my own apartment. But I also contribute economically to the home income, and I pay for groceries and everyday expenses to support my parents.

Living with my parents during the lockdowns and now is hard. They exercise control over me. I also feel obligated to inform them of my whereabouts and movements. I had many struggles during covid-19. Not only work-related but also with my mental issues. At first it was ok for me. Then everybody started getting so stressed about the virus and made things bigger than they were. Do not touch, wear gloves, wear masks, stop kissing and seeing people.... The TV, my parents, everyone was stressing everyone out. It was difficult to handle at first and clam my self down. Then I started reading about it and judging for myself. I keep distance and I did the shots.

As regards to my working environment, I see the boundaries between private and work life blurring. There is not enough work-life balance. There is no legal framework or policy in Cyprus for teleworking. So my right to disconnect as well as my privacy is not always respected by my employer and the people I work with. This is exploitation. The positive thing is that I started teleworking due to covid-19 but until now that everyone has had to go back to the office, they let me and some other people continue working from home, because we wanted to. I stay around 1 hour away from my office. 2 hours in the road and the fuel is very expensive now. So for me this is excellent. I save money and time that I

can put to good use in my other activities. When I went to work everyday and came back at night, I never had the energy to do anything else I was always so tired. Now I do yoga, I cook new recipes, I have time to sleep more. I can go back to the office for some meetings but I can telework. At one point quite recently, I felt a bit stressed about losing my job. There was a meeting where people were told that some employees are going to be sacked. I feel comfortable at my job because I am necessary, senior in years and experience, yet underpaid for what I offer. So they don't really have a reason to lay me off. But even if they do I will get another job. I am aware that people who go to the office are treated differently. They have better chances at promotions because they have a personal relationship with the boss. I don't care I am better off working from home. I prefer being at home from our open space office, because I don't have to see people who don't like me, and I don't like them. I was being bullied at work at some point because I am an introvert. Because of covid-19 I didn't have to deal with them. I have been freed from them. Unfortunately, since a lot of people don't use Teams, I was forced to give them my personal mobile phone. They use FB messenger, Viber, WhatsApp, Instagram. I feel that I cannot relax. There should be a policy and an alignment as to what tools to use for telework. I believe this is cultural. Also the age of managers and lack of technology knowledge plays an important role. But working from home gave me the opportunity to concentrate better. An open plan working space is the worst thing that ever happen to working. You can never concentrate fully.

At home, my parents found it hard at first to understand that I was working. They called me to do something while I was at meetings and could not understand that I had to decline. Now it is better. At first, I did not have an office space at home. I had to buy a desk, a new laptop because my employer did not provide one. I had to upgrade the internet and pay more to have a bit quicker connection. I don't have a land line only a 4G router. It was a good investment overall.

During covid-19 years, I was isolated from my friends. I became more of an introvert. I suffer from depression. I discovered my depression when I was a teenager after losing all my grandparents around the same time. I could not handle it. I cried and stopped talking to people. At one point in my life, later on, I tried to commit suicide. I was at home. My parents were asleep. I took pills and thankfully a friend was online on skype and called an ambulance when I said goodbye forever. My parents still cannot understand or accept that I am sick. I went to a psychologist for years and a psychiatrist gave me pills. During the lockdowns I stopped going to my psychologist. Her office was far away from my village, we kept in contact via email, but then I decided to stop because she didn't charge me and I felt bad. 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 socialize 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. I learned to disconnect. I eat better at home,

and I drink much less coffee. I control myself and my emotions. Covid-19 isolation gave me the time I needed to fight on my own in my own time and space. I got back to talking with my ex/current boyfriend who was also isolated in another country. I just managed to visit him a couple of days ago and we are thinking of moving together in another country. In the country he works and lives in.”

Specifically telling quotes: “I save money by staying home and not renting my own apartment. But I also contribute economically to the home income, and I pay for groceries and everyday expenses to support my parents. Living with my parents during the lockdowns and now is hard. They exercise control over me. I also feel obligated to inform them of my whereabouts and movements.”

“As regards to my working environment, I see the boundaries between private and work life blurring. There is not enough work-life balance. There is no legal framework or policy in Cyprus for teleworking. So my right to disconnect as well as my privacy is not always respected by my employer and the people I work with. This is exploitation.”

“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 socialize or pretend.”

Keywords: Depression, fight, voluntary isolation, control, support.

CY08

Title: Covid-19 Love Story

Narrative: “I am now 36 years old. I am an only child from Greece. I studied computers, as a technician but I never actually exercised this as a profession. I always worked in bars, restaurants, in the culinary industry. I am also a sommelier. I love wine and food. I am good at cooking too. In Greece living conditions and salaries are not good. So, when a friend told me she was coming to Cyprus to work and invest a share at a new restaurant at a beach resort, I thought it was a great opportunity to invest some of my savings and try something new, at a country where I speak the language, yet salaries are higher. I was lucky because the owner would provide us with an apartment to live in, so it was an excellent opportunity to save up and also look for something better. I didn’t invest in the end but I started working to see how things would go first.

One day when I was serving a family who were friends of the owner, I saw a woman (who later became my fiancé) for the first time. She was so beautiful, full of energy, great with children. I felt intrigued and wanted to meet her. So I asked my employer if she was single and then asked for her number. Our connection was immediate. She felt the same and we started dating. Things were not easy because I did not own a car. She worked

and lived in the capital, and I lived an hour away with no car and really bad public transport. We met once a week at the beginning.

When covid-19 measures were implemented, I was stuck in Cyprus, away from my parents at a beach resort area after vacation season, all by myself. Thankfully, when the measures were announced, my fiancé was visiting for the weekend. We ended up spending a whole month together. I think a bit more. We had a chance to connect. We exercised by the beach, we cooked and ate together, watched movies and spend quality time. She helped me heal from my past and I could talk to her about things that made me sad. If it wasn't for her I cannot imagine how I could have survived. My friends and family were at another country, the airports were closed, I didn't not have enough money to spend on tickets that would get cancelled or annulled. I could not have coped. The isolation with my girlfriend at the time was one of the best things that happened to me. We figured out what a good match we are. We understood and learned from each other and made it through the years. I got a job in the capital and we moved in together for good. We now have our own little house behind my fiancé's parents' house and I feel that I have a new family here in Cyprus who supports and loves me. My parents, especially my mother is a bit sad I decided to stay here. But both of my parents are evidently happy that I found love and I am happy. A couple of months ago, during summer I proposed. We are getting married in 2024 and we are looking forward to starting a family of our own. Covid-19 as a sickness was bad. I got it once and my fiancé got it twice. Amidst the bad things that it brought, it helped me find the love of my life and speed the process of understanding how important she is to me."

Specifically telling quotes: "She helped me heal from my past and I could talk to her about things that made me sad. If it wasn't for her I cannot imagine how I could have survived. My friends and family were at another country, the airports were closed, I didn't not have enough money to spend on tickets that would get cancelled or annulled. I could not have coped. The isolation with my girlfriend at the time was one of the best things that happened to me."

Keywords: Economic migrant, love, isolation/lockdown, support, engagement.

CY09

Title: The covid-19 situation made me dare try new experiences

Narrative: "I generally feel there is a black hole inside me. I am 35. I feel old and not as accomplished as I would wish to be at this age. I am still single. I don't miss the traffic. That was one of the best things during covid-19 lockdowns. No traffic. Now we are stuck for hours some days. It is horrible. After my mother's death and my break up, I turned to myself and I was alienated from my friends. When we had the chance to telework, I applied for it and I came to my birth city. It was one of the best choices. I had the opportunity to meet up and reconnect with my childhood friends under circumstances

that I felt comfortable in. Due to the government measures, we had to be back home at 21:00 then 22:00. We could not go to cafes or restaurants or bars. I don't really like going out. So we had to meet up in homes. Early. We played table games and had a good time. I loved it. Of course now that lockdowns are over, my friends went back to doing what they liked. M started going to theatre shows, N started going out to bars with girls and I am back to forcing myself to go out occasionally. I feel that I force myself to be delightful when I go out. I pretend to be happy so that people like me.

Another experience I had during the covid was overcoming my fear of dating after my break-up from a 5 year on and off relationship that hurt me a lot. I though dating and even sleeping with women was really hard. But I decided to try, through tinder. My first experience was bad. It made me realize how overrated sex is. I found it hard to have sex with her. I either have to like the woman emotionally or physically. The other 2 occasions when I did have sex with the women I was attracted to them emotionally. The positive experience was that I realized that I am not damaged. Had it not been for covid-19 period and the situation I don't think I would have tried through Tinder.

Generally covid-19 lockdowns and measures made me feel less guilty for not going out and doing things. Now I stopped being afraid to try new things on an emotional level."

Specifically telling quotes: "I don't miss the traffic. That was one of the best things during covid-19 lockdowns. No traffic. Now we are stuck for hours some days. It is horrible."

"I had the opportunity to meet up and reconnect with my childhood friends under circumstances that I felt comfortable in. Due to the government measures, we had to be back home at 21:00 then 22:00. We could not go to cafes or restaurants or bars. I don't really like going out."

"The positive experience was that I realized that I am not damaged. Had it not been for covid-19 period and the situation I don't think I would have tried through Tinder."

Keywords: Depression, Socialising, going out, sexual intercourse, hope.

CY10

Title: Struggling in a foreign country missing my family back home

Narrative: "I am 53, married. I come to Cyprus from Sri Lanka to work. My husband and daughters stayed back home. I work and send money to my family. My daughters are grown now. I came here long ago. I work first in one family, then another one. Then I got release paper and I started working in many homes and stay on my own. I think is better that way. Before covid-19 problem my husband wanted come to Cyprus to work and stay with me. We made papers and had help from Madam A. She help us to say she

employ my husband for fields. But when lock down came no travel. So he could not come to Cyprus. I felt very sad. I found more work in many houses. I had to move in secret because of movement restrictions. One time I almost get caught. But Madam P got me fast into the house. I was lucky.

Thankfully 9 months after my husband came here. It was hard at first. He work in fields but now we are ok he found a job at gas station and we send money to our daughters. To get by I pray a lot. At home because no Buddhist temple close by in town. My community help a lot. We are many girls from Sri Lanka and some men. We meet on Sundays and go to park to eat together, we discuss problems and good moments. We sing and pray together. We exchange clothes.

I am happy to work with Madam A and her children. I have time to myself after work and I can do my schedule and work to other homes.

I was scared at the beginning with covid-19. I was scared because I have asthma. I did the vaccine I am covered from GESY so I did the 3 shots. My daughters at home did it too. I was worried for them. When my husband finally came, he had to be in isolation for 3 weeks! At hotel. We pay for it because we arranged fake work to get him so we had to pay. We are ok now.”

Specifically telling quotes: “I had to move in secret because of movement restrictions. One time I almost get caught. But Madam P got me fast into the house. I was lucky.”

“To get by I pray a lot. At home because no Buddhist temple close by in town. My community help a lot.”

Keywords: Praying, independent work, good employer, vaccinated under General Health System, Foreigner



Czech Republic

CZ01

Title: Martina, a woman struggling with long-term mental health issues, uses tools she learned pre-pandemic to manage her anxieties

Narrative: “My name is Martina; I am 36 years old and work for the state administration. Since childhood, I have been dealing with mental health issues. I have (officially diagnosed) anxiety disorder and have been going to therapy and using other available services. Right before the pandemic, in January 2020, I was at a day-care facility for people with anxiety disorders. It is a month-long program that I didn't finish (because the approach didn't quite suit me), but I think I learned several coping techniques there that helped me immensely during the pandemic's first and second waves. I have somatoform issues and anxieties affecting my physical health, so the notion of the Covid-19 disease triggered me a lot.

On the other hand, knowing how my anxieties get triggered by my fear of illnesses and other issues, I felt a slight advantage over the general population. I kept my spirit up using strategies like a strict regime, good sleeping and eating habits, exercise, and checklists. I also had online therapy sessions over Skype with a psychiatric nurse at the Mental Health Centre.

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. I also appreciated when the protective supplies and then vaccines became widely available. Additionally, I am part of a private Facebook group with several friends with similar conditions. I also started talking openly on social media about what I was going through, which has helped me. Lastly, I want to say that it is not all walk in the park; my state worsened at the beginning of this year [2022] due to stress at work and, I guess, general fatigue, I feel better now, but it is an ongoing process.”

Specifically telling quotes: “In January 2020, I was at a day-care centre for people with anxiety disorders. It's a one-month program, which I didn't finish because the approach didn't quite suit me. But I think it somehow influenced how I approached the pandemic during the first and second waves (...). When the pandemic came, I was terrified. I felt that I had come into contact with a positive person, so I ended up in a two weeks quarantine. Back then, there were no tests, so it was very stressful. I remember the first two weeks when I was in quarantine (...), I didn't have much strength to relieve the stress with work and couldn't do anything at the beginning. But then, I created some routine based on my experience at the day-care program. This was very formative because it

helped me establish strategies that kept me going through most of the pandemic.”

“I go to therapy regularly, so I was going to therapy during the pandemic, just remotely, simply online. At the same time, I have been going to the Centre for Mental Health in [name of city and neighbourhood], where I have a psychiatric nurse assigned. And I was meeting her online via Skype as well. If I should highlight something, it would be this. It is an excellent service, very helpful as it focuses on practical things.”

“We have a small group on Facebook where we share what happened to us that day, which was quite helpful during some of the more difficult moments amid the pandemic. At the same time, I sometimes write on Facebook sharing my struggles publicly (...). So it helps me; it is another strategy for me. Last year, I took a peer course for people with experience of mental illness, and somehow I became more aware that sharing experiences with others helps me more than receiving medical advice. It is a more pleasant way for me to simply share those experiences with others and give advice on what helped me.”

Keywords: mental health, anxiety, coping strategies, online community, online therapy

CZ02

Title: Petr, a 44 man with long life mental health, lives in protected community housing, becomes more independent and self-sufficient as a result of the pandemic

Narrative: My name is Petr, and I am 44 years old and have been living with mental health issues my whole life. Up until recently, I used to live with my parents. Then, I was in the mental hospital in 2017, and right before the pandemic, I started to live in sheltered/protected community housing. As part of the community housing program, we worked in maintenance and cleaning, but as the pandemic came, we shifted to sewing cloth masks. The program offers all kinds of support - some services were reduced, but most remained like regular therapeutic sessions where we could share our worries and fears related to (but not only to) the pandemic. Our therapists also did our shopping initially, so we didn't have to go to the grocery stores to avoid the virus. The most difficult thing for me was that I often went to my parent's place, which was no longer possible, at least during the first and second waves. I would call them often, but I also became more independent, taking care of my personal things a bit more, like washing my clothes, running errands or spending my free time alone. I listened to the radio a lot and read books a bit more. I even took care of a Covid-19-related testing and vaccinations. The new meal prep service introduced during the pandemic meant we were preparing meals in smaller groups also helped me to become more independent in everyday life. I will stay in the community housing program until the end of 2023.

Specifically telling quotes: “It was very pleasant [the anti-pandemic restrictions] because I always went to my parent's house. And actually, then it wasn't possible

anymore, so I kind of started to do more things on my own. Luckily, we had a washing machine and a dryer there (...). I managed at the end; I mean, I had to."

"We started cooking together in smaller groups. We had a daily budget, made a weekly menu together, and cooked according to that. Before the pandemic, they were cooking meals for everyone, and this was much better as it was closer to real-life experience. It was a bonding experience; it brought us closer together - the cooking and the overall pandemic experience."

Keywords: mental health, sheltered housing, protected housing, community, self-sufficiency

CZ03

Title: Amelia, 32 years old, appeals to the ombudsperson to change anti-pandemic measures preventing non-EU citizens from certain countries from getting reunited with their family members

Narrative: "My name is Amelia; I am 32 years old and currently on parental leave with my eight-month-old son. I also have a flexible part-time position in academia. My husband is from South America [informant wishes the country not to be specified in the report]. We got married right before the pandemic in the Czech Republic, and we had a wedding with lots of international friends who then flew to their home countries. Some of them got stuck in either transfer or home country quarantines. My husband, too, left for his home country. He had some work-related obligations as we lived there from 2019 - 2022. I was supposed to take care of his visa-related paperwork, submit my dissertation, and then fly back to South America. But then, the Czech government announced closing the borders in a few days, and Czech citizens were not allowed to leave the country. While we were separated, different government officials kept appearing in the media, sharing contradictory messages about the planned anti-pandemic measures and how long they would last. For example, the chief hygienist said that the borders would remain locked for up to 2 years. It was terrifying and frustrating. Right then, I met a guy online whose family was dealing with a similar situation, and we created a Facebook group. There we shared information about restrictions in different countries, border crossing, visa rules, etc. At one point, it had over one million members. Eventually, we reunited with my husband after four months apart when the rules changed.

Last year, I got pregnant, and we were planning to move back to the Czech Republic. I even got a job starting fall of 2021. But as my husband's country of origin was still on the so-called blacklist back then, and he didn't have visas settled in the Czech Republic yet, he wouldn't be able to join me, and I didn't want to risk any uncertainty. I decided to contact the Czech ombudsperson pointing out that the Czech government does not follow the EU regulations on family unification procedures. As other families were in a

similar situation, he appealed to the government and the measure was cancelled. I believe this measure was an example of the structural racism of the Czech government against non-EU foreigners. However, by then, it was past the date to start my new job, so I declined the offer. We moved back to Europe only recently and reside in a different country than the Czech Republic.

Specifically telling quotes: “The rules didn't make any sense; they didn't make any sense at all. When I looked at the whole situation, I saw it's simply structural discrimination and racism against people from third countries. They didn't take the family reunification into account at all. This was very stressful for me. I was pregnant and needed my husband to be by my side as we wanted to move back to the Czech Republic, but our government didn't allow it.”

“So I wrote to the ombudsman. It turned out that there were a lot of us, so he actually prepared a letter to the Ministry of Health, calling on the government to amend the rule because it contradicts the directives of the European Union, which should guarantee the reunification of families. The ministry then withdrew it at the end of September.”

Keywords: structural discrimination, non-EU citizens, visa policies, family reunification, ombudsperson, online community, digital technologies

CZ04

Title: Tamara, a 42 years old university teacher, struggles with well-being during the pandemic due to work-life balance demands, and as her mental health declines, she decided to visit a specialist

Narrative: My name is Tamara, and I am 42 years old university teacher. I live with my husband, and we have two children, ages twelve and eight. When the pandemic started, we had to find new ways to make things work - working from home, including online teaching, taking care of children, supporting them with online education, being unable to decompress with our regular hobbies, etc. It was difficult as I used to like my roles - my professional life and being a mother - separated. But that was no longer possible. Online teaching, meetings, and overall online communication were difficult and time-consuming for technical reasons but also because of the lack of interpersonal interactions. We didn't have much support from our university, but we eventually shared some best practices and know-how with my colleagues. I ultimately became the “flying manager,” thinking about children's schoolwork, meal prepping, online teaching and preparations, and a million other tasks, running around everyone and filming online classes over the weekend while the rest of the family was out. My husband, who earns more money and has a more managerial job, managed to stay focused on his work throughout the day. His original family-related tasks, such as taking children to after-school activities, logistics or doctor appointments, were suspended during the pandemic. I eventually became frustrated; I started to feel my mental health declining. I

even developed some somatic issues. After some time, I overcame my, let's say, a pride that I was not able to manage on my own and visited my doctor. She prescribed antidepressants which helped me a lot to manage my well-being. I have had some mental health issues before, but I feel like the pandemic finally pushed me to deal with them.

Specifically telling quotes: "So for me, the main thing was that thanks to the pandemic, I overcame some sort of pride of mine, that somehow I should be able to handle it the way I can handle other things, and that I can get help in this way. So I would even say it helped or is helping me [going to a specialist and taking antidepressants]."

"I started feeling bad about treating my family terribly since I was often irritated, which also influenced their mood. I thought I should keep calm, not add more chaos to it. So I decided I was going to try antidepressants, which worked quite well for me. I became calmer in everyday functioning and how I communicate. So overall, it was more relaxed at home, and the children benefited from it as well."

Keywords: Mental health, stigma, antidepressants, well-being, gender care gap, care, unpaid work

CZ05

Title: Božena, a 65-year-old retired woman, takes care of her elderly relatives during the pandemic

Narrative: My name is Božena, and I am 65 years old. I used to work in the aviation industry as an engineer and am now retired. I have two adult daughters; one of them lives a few hours drive away, and I have two teenage children. They have a farm, and I often go there for a week or two to help them, but I couldn't see them during the pandemic for ten long months, which was hard. I live with my husband, a second daughter, and her family - husband and three kids aged between 11 and 17 - in a two-story/two generational house. I also take care of my mother and my two elderly aunts, and they are all around 90 years old. It was somewhat challenging during the pandemic. In the first waves during lockdowns, I would coordinate extensive grocery shopping for them; we would call or use Skype to keep in touch and check on them. I have also communicated with their doctors, secured medical refills, and scheduled vaccinations or in-home physiotherapy. I managed to keep my spirits up during the pandemic; we were able to take care of them - I have a few other relatives, like my sister or nieces, who helped a little bit. I limited TV to avoid the depressing news, and as I couldn't see my friends during the pandemic that much, I did lots of gardening.

Specifically telling quotes: "I haven't seen my mother for a long time [due to the anti-pandemic measures]; we talked a lot via Skype and phone. We were grocery shopping for her a lot. After the initial phases of the pandemic, I started to visit her in person again

because I was worried. After all, she wasn't going out and moving much. She didn't walk a lot back then, but then she realised that it is awful to be stuck at home all the time and that she must go for walks. She wore protective masks all the time, though."

Keywords: care, gender care gap, elderly, family, relatives, healthcare system, ageing, senior citizens

CZ06

Title: Bara supports her mother as she is battling (and ultimately) losing her fight with cancer

Narrative: "My name is Bara, and I am 42 years old. During the pandemic, my mother was diagnosed with cancer and underwent treatment. It was a challenging and stressful period. The medical care system for an oncologic patient is very fragmented; there is no - let's say - a holistic approach. You have to go and look for specialists, which takes time and energy. Oddly enough, the person who helped me the most to figure out how to navigate the care system my mother needed was my therapist. I have been going to therapy for quite some time as it has been helping me to manage my well-being. But in this case, the support didn't concern only mental health support. Since she was a cancer survivor, she knew which specialists I should contact, where to call, etc. So her personal experience with how to navigate the system as an oncology patient helped me to support my mother on her journey. The pandemic also negatively affected the availability of some medical services like rehabilitation. After she suffered a mild stroke due to one of her surgeries, she should have typically received her treatment in a rehabilitation centre almost immediately. However, she had to wait for over a year. We also couldn't visit her in a hospital; that was hard. We then took care of her at her home with the help of an NGO specialising in palliative care. I would go there several times weekly to check on her and help my father when the nurse wasn't around. She passed away later this year."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: Health care system, cancer, oncology patients, lack of information, lack of support, therapy, palliative care

CZ07

Title: Mína, a 30-year-old woman, supports two family members battling severe health issues while struggling with her well being

Narrative: My name is Mína; I am 30 years old and work as an office assistant. During the pandemic, two of my family members were battling severe health issues, ultimately

affecting my mental health. My mother-in-law got diagnosed with Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). The very same day, I got a call that my father, who was living in the UK then, had a stroke. Two tragedies on the same day, what are the odds? We had a complicated estranged relationship with my father, but as he suffered severe damages after the stroke, we had to coordinate his return to the Czech Republic. My sister (who lives in Germany, has a history of drug abuse, and just finished another round of rehab) and I drove to the UK to pick up our father. It was a long and complicated journey due to COVID-19-related restrictions, PCR test and mandatory quarantine, but we managed to get him back home. I was starting at my current job then, so I wasn't even entitled to vacation, but my boss was supportive and allowed me to take time off I needed. As the year progressed, my mother-in-law's state worsened. It was difficult to visit her in the hospital due to the anti-pandemic restrictions; she wasn't vaccinated as we didn't know what the vaccine would do to her state. We also had difficulties getting her in-home palliative care. It was sometime around summer when my panic attacks worsened. I have had panic attacks throughout my life, but it got terrible this time. I wasn't able to take public transportation. I was exhausted and depressed and scheduled an appointment with a psychiatrist, but I got an appointment in three months. And then, I had a mental breakdown and suicidal thoughts, so my partner drove me to the psychiatric ER, where we waited for five hours to be admitted. I got medication that helped, and it got me through the three months before I could see a regular psychiatrist. Antidepressants generally improved the quality of my life and supported me through when my mother-in-law eventually died.

Specifically telling quotes: "I realized that the medical staff were overworked. But you just don't care when you have someone you love, and that person is dying, and you are there witnessing it. You don't care that the nurse is tired because she already has her xth shift without a break. Back then, even my empathy went utterly to shit at that moment with the medical staff.

That was probably the worst period in my life. I've never experienced such emotional and psychological pressure, and I also had suicidal thoughts. It lasted for a few months, and after those few months, my partner took me to the psychiatric ER, because I couldn't find a psychiatrist anywhere. I couldn't do anything other than go to crisis intervention, where we waited five hours before a psychiatrist accepted me, who finally prescribed me some medication."

Keywords: healthcare system, mental health, antidepressants, well being, palliative care

CZ08

Title: Ema, a 42-year-old mother working in research, frustrated by the lack of structural support in her academic institution

Narrative: "My name is Ema, I am 42 years old, and I am a mom of a preschooler. I work

in a research institution, and so does my partner. When the pandemic hit, the most challenging for us was the issue of work-life balance. After initial closure at the beginning of the pandemic, our child's nursery re-opened and remained open even during the otherwise restrictive periods. The service was funded through EU grant money and could remain open due to its small scale and different legal status than the public kindergartens. They also would not be able to receive the funding had they remained closed. Since this was a big help, we could send our child to the care facility even during the otherwise restricted periods of the pandemic. On the other hand, we never really knew if this will not change from one day to another, which was stressful. Our family spent six months in the later stage of the pandemic abroad on a research stay in Germany. I must say that the kindergarten my child went to there was much more organized and structured in terms of internal anti-pandemic measures that prevented or minimized Covid-19 outbreak (children divided into smaller groups, parents not mingling while picking up their children, rotation at the outdoor play area and alike). Besides care-related stress, work also became a significant source of stress and frustration. The work started to pile up; there were deadlines to be met even when one didn't have a care facility for one's child or was sick. I joined the initiative petitioning the funding institution, which eventually postponed some critical deadlines. That was a big help, but apart from that, we didn't receive any structural support from our research institution, our employer.

I also picked up additional work during the pandemic - an opportunity to take part in research that focused on the issue of gender-based violence during the pandemic emerged. On the one hand, this gave me a great sense of purpose, working on something topical of great importance. But on the other hand, it led to more work and stress as this extra project was not fully recognized and appreciated by my employer. Overall, my most significant sources of support are my networks and friends. I got through all the difficulties thanks to my resources rather than the external formal ones I should (ideally) rely on."

Specifically telling quotes: "In my line of work, being sick does not mean you do not work because no one cares about that when you run on projects. One would presume that people working in social science research should be natural critics of such working conditions. They should point out that this is not good from the point of view of human capital. It increases the chance that people will burn out; it's unhealthy."

Keywords: the gender care gap, work-life balance, research, mental health, research, academia

CZ09

Title: Laura, 27 years social worker, struggled with online education and her experience working in a big elderly care centre

Narrative: “My name is Laura; I am 27 years old and a social worker. During the pandemic, I studied for my MA degree in social care. I did not particularly enjoy online education, as losing contact with teachers and students were hard. The difference was striking when I compared the online education experience to my BA degree I did in person before the pandemic. During the pandemic, the government called for social care students to go and help with the understaffed facilities. And that is how I started to work in the elderly care centre. It was a large facility and quite a harsh encounter with reality. The good thing was they were flexible, which allowed me to finish my degree while working there. But the rest is mainly negative. There were 180 clients and three social workers, and we had to deal with other tasks outside of direct social work with the clients, primarily admin but also basic medical and hygiene tasks when there was a shortage of nurses due to covid-19 infections or quarantine. There were many covid-19 infections as the institution didn’t manage to minimize outbreaks, and many clients died during the pandemic. The communication between different units and departments wasn’t excellent, and we didn’t receive any support from the employer regarding a mental health or other support like supervision; the staff/team spirit wasn’t great either. We received extra bonuses from the government for working during the pandemic as front-line workers, but money won’t solve your mental health issues. I eventually decided to change jobs and went to a much smaller and, let’s say, a friendlier institution which takes care of mentally ill patients. I also started going to therapy as I thought it would help me, but the therapist wasn’t great and suggested: “nothing was wrong with me”. So the most significant improvement was when I decided to change jobs, and I also have a close circle of friends; we support each other and play online games together, and that’s how I relax.”

Specifically telling quotes: We didn't even have any supervision during the pandemic, which was quite a shame. That would have been useful, and in retrospect, the carers didn't get any support either. The only nice thing was those who worked during the pandemic in these facilities were paid relatively large bonuses by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. On the other hand, money will not solve the carers' mental health issues and burnout.

Keywords: elderly care, social work, online education, mental health, lack of crisis management

CZ10

Title: Jennifer, a 23-year-old mom, struggled with social isolation during the pandemic.

Narrative: My name is Jennifer, I am 23 years old, and I am an American living in the Czech Republic since 2017. My son was born a couple of months before the pandemic started, in October 2019. It was very challenging becoming a new mom during the covid-19 crisis. I felt isolated; we would be home most of the time, going out once a day for a walk. I had no time for myself, no time for self-care. The lack of any also affected our

relationship. My husband was working from home, and I started to study economics at the local university, so I would have online classes every day and juggle my studies with taking care of my child. The online courses were challenging for me for several reasons. As they were in Czech, I often had difficulties following the lecture's content or instruction. I understand the language, but online interaction is challenging. I also didn't have any personal interactions with my classmates or teachers. I grew frustrated that I decided to quit my studies after one year, primarily due to the pandemic-shaped experience. Overall, I was struggling with social isolation, not being able to see my friends and family who live in the US as much as I would like to. We would often visit my husband's family, who live in the nearby town - it was good to get some help with the childcare and get social contact, but it felt a bit overwhelming sometimes. Lastly, my son had health issues and allergies while he was little, and the pandemic made it a bit harder to get the right help. We had to visit four different specialists before the issue was solved, the waiting times were long, and even details like the mandatory mask while waiting for hours in crowded waiting rooms made the whole experience difficult. Several things helped me overcome some of the obstacles. I was able to travel to the US three times over the course of the first two years of the pandemic, and despite the stress around travelling, PCR test and some visa issues for my husband, it was always great to see my family and friends in person and for them to meet my son. After quitting my economic studies, I enrolled in Transnational communication studies the following year in distance form. So I would go to the classes only every other weekend. I enjoyed the experience - attending the lectures in person, meeting the teachers in person and getting to know my classmates. I did an online certification course based in the US to become a yoga teacher. That helped me enormously - regular exercise, but we also had zoom calls with the other students, so overall great experience. My son also started to go to nursery when he was two years old. He thrives there, and apart from when he had to stay home for two weeks in quarantine as someone in his class had covid, having him in a care institution allowed me to start working full-time from home as admin support for one organization.

Specifically telling quotes: One of the hardest things for me was being a new mom at the beginning when covid started. Because everyone was at home, I was home just with my husband, and yes, we were seeing my husband's family, but I didn't see many of my friends. So I was isolated just with my family-in-law. My family lives in America, so I was contacting them only through Whatsapp, so I missed a little bit of my social time with my friends and family. And it also was hard having a new baby and pretty much staying inside; yeah, we went for walks, but we didn't really go anywhere else. We were in the same area the whole time, so that was also pretty tough.

Keywords: motherhood, gender care gap, care, social isolation, online education, nationality, mother tongue,

Germany

DE01

Title: I was happy to have a good network of friends and family to support me during the pandemic.

Narrative: "My name is Olga, I am a woman, 39 years old and a single mother. I am living together with my daughter who is 8 years old. I live in the same city as my parents and work part-time (30 hours) and self-employed as a personal fitness trainer and nutrition counsellor. My part-time job is at a medical center of a hospital, specialised on endocrinology and is located in another city, 40 km away from my home why I have to commute four times a week. I am originally from Russia and came to Germany when I was 13 years old. These days, I did not speak a word of German and began learning German and English at the same time in school.

Since I work in a hospital, I never had the option of working in home-office during the pandemic. I tried to apply for the option of doing video-counselling because I don't need to see all my patients. But it was not accepted.

For employees of the medical sector it is still mandatory to be vaccinated. I had to be vaccinated even though I had several concerns regarding the vaccination and the campaign made about it. I suffer from a blood disease with a not specific diagnosis. And as the vaccine was new on the market I did not have very much trust. But I was put under a lot of pressure at work why I finally decided to take the vaccine, just to be able to work because otherwise I would have risked my work position.

My impression was that this situation led to a bad image of mothers. We, women, were the ones who were missing at the work place and who really were affected. At my work, I was able to see in our internal system who felt sick when and how people complained about the child care conditions and I realized that they were only women. There was just one colleague who once stayed at home because his child had caught covid. But this was really an exception. I also know from male colleagues who are fathers that they hardly missed work and were mostly present at the hospital. It was said in the news but myself, I also observed that the women were thrown back in time. Men just continued working as usual.

I also had a fight with my daughter's father because of child care with the result that we had to talk to the youth welfare office because he refused to take care of her during the pandemic and to make a firm commitment with the aim of splitting the work equally between the both of us. But I was not able to achieve that because there is no legal requirement. So the result was that he took care of her sometimes when he had time. I can say that, nowadays, I feel much more helpless as a single-mother than before. I then realized that just one of the parents is legally responsible for the child in these emergency cases. I surely would not have noticed without the pandemic.

Partially, I was able to rely on the school's emergency child care for children of 'system-relevant' people as I am since I work in a hospital. But, even though, it just helped a little because the care took only place until 2 p.m. and therefore someone else had to pick

up my daughter, sometimes her friends' mothers.

In regards to my private life, I was lucky to have a vast network of friends and family in the city where I live and could rely on their help. Some friends took sometimes care of my daughter. When the pandemic started, she was still in kindergarten but, shortly after, her school enrolment took place. My parents helped me during this time when my daughter had to stay at home but this was not always reliable since my parents are still working full-time. A good friend of mine - who was on maternity leave during that time - helped a lot. Additionally, several times I had to be given a medical certificate because there was no other possibility. I am pretty sure that statistics are not reliable for this time because a lot of people resorted to this option. I remember, once, I told my supervisor that I simply did not know what to do and he just answered: this is your responsibility! Just following the motto: you decided to have a child, find a way. I remember that I stayed "sick at home" during three weeks when not being sick just because of school's closure. At work, we once talked about an option of offering child care for the employee's children but this idea was given up.

Today, we still have to wear masks and this is something I don't comprehend. My work consists in parts of psychological work and the e.g. psychiatrists - in general - do not need to wear a mask while working with patients. Before the pandemic, I offered some fitness lessons at the hospital which I am not allowed to teach nowadays. ."

Specifically telling quotes: "My impression was that this situation led to a bad image of mothers. We, women, were the ones who were missing at the work place and who really were affected."

"I can say that, nowadays, I feel much more helpless as a single-mother than before."

"In regards to my private life, I was lucky to have a vast network of friends and family in the city where I live and could rely on their help."

Keywords: legislations for single-parents, network as an important resource, pressure on being vaccinated, dependency on other people, critical view on vaccination policy, lucky to be part of the 'system-relevant' staff

DE02

Title: Children were the ones who most suffered from this pandemic.

Narrative: "My name is Olga, female, 39 years old and a single mother. I am living together with my daughter who is 8 years old. I work part-time (30 hours) and self-employed as a personal fitness trainer and nutrition counsellor. I am originally from Russia and came to Germany when I was 13 years old.

The worst thing for me during the pandemic was the lack of good education for my child. Home schooling, at the beginning, was offered only once per week online. My daughter was in first grade and she did not get to know what school really means. She did not develop any routine, no relationship with the teacher. I think that this will have further consequences for the rest of her life because this start into school without any

attachment to the teacher was really substantial.

Then, we were quarantined five times in total, each time for two weeks, the school was closed several times because of single covid cases in school. A cousin of mine calculated once that during the whole first year of my daughter's schooling, she did not even go to school for 3 months. For me, it was shocking to see that online-schooling was such a huge challenge for the teachers. Especially at my daughter's school, my impression was that the teacher did not really work much but continued receiving her usual salary for months.

Another thing that affected me a lot during the pandemic was the health situation of my daughter. My daughter suffered seizures at school, a combination of hyperventilation, convulsions and distress. I spend a lot of time thinking about why this happened, if the permanent talking about illness, breathlessness and all of that, maybe made her ill. I am sure it also has a psychological root. In total, we had to go to hospital 8 times because of her seizures, the ambulance picked her up at school. And using the mask outdoors... I really got angry when I once saw how only three children were playing in the schoolyard but wearing their masks. Why? It does not make sense! I felt so bad going to work and knowing that my child probably would be wearing a mask until 4 in the afternoon. I asked for an exemption certificate for the mask because her seizures had to do with breathlessness. The children were even forced to take part in physical education classes while wearing a mask. I had real fights with the school until they accepted the exemption certificate. This is the reason why I look very critically at this whole situation, especially the use of masks. For example, there was one covid case in her class and within five days all the pupils were infected, too. If the masks had helped, nobody should have been infected. All of them had similar symptoms (vomiting). It just does not help children.

And something else: disinfectant was installed everywhere but at my daughter's school, they don't even have soap in the bathrooms. I always told my daughter: please wash your hands after going to the bathroom - with soap. But there isn't any. Being hygienic is not only an issue when it comes to covid, it should be 'normal'. Can you understand that this whole situation really made me mad? For example, I never understood why the teacher does not tell the pupils to please wash their hands before taking breakfast. They just don't care! My impression is that a lot of people don't know what it means to be hygienic.

I believe that the psychological damage is huge and that, in future, there will come up new scientific data in regards to it. My work consists of working with children and I noticed that some children seem to be depressed. I took care of keeping my daughter occupied for example with private riding lessons. At the beginning, we also restricted ourselves to not be in contact with too many people, but after some time I continued frequenting my friends. Those children who stayed locked up during that time...I am sure that there will be further psychological consequences."

Specifically telling quotes: "The worst thing for me during the pandemic was the lack of good education for my child. Home schooling, at the beginning, was offered only once per week online."

"My impression is that a lot of people don't know what it means to be hygienic."

"Those children who stayed locked up during that time...I am sure that there will be

further psychological consequences.”

Keywords: Lack of good education, bad level of digitisation at schools, no empathy regarding health issues of her daughter, single-mother between work and education of child, Critical view on the use masks,

DE03

Title: As I like being on my own, the contact restrictions did not affect my private life too much. But studying in the pandemic was really challenging at the beginning.

Narrative: “My name is Fabiana, I am 23 years old. I am a student of Aerospace Engineering since 2020. I am from Ecuador, was raised in Spain and have been living in Germany for now 9 years. My family and me came to Germany then. I also have a five-years younger brother who is still in school.

The pandemic started when I was finishing school, we were preparing for the final exams. The last day I went to school I had an exam, I remember that very well. It was not sure if we would be able to take the exam since there were just three of us to do it as it was in Spanish. Since then, I had to prepare myself for the final exams. I did it on a very individual basis as I like being on my own and studying on my own, as well. This was a very insecure situation because we really didn't know if we would be able to take the exams due to the contact restrictions but in the end I did not feel that my grades were influenced by this situation. But some other pupils felt affected because they sometimes were not able to concentrate very well at home. One friend of mine, for example, lives with several siblings and there the studying situation was a little bit more complicated. It was a pity that all the celebrations could not take place; we even lost money because we had already paid the space rent. Furthermore, we were the first class of our school to graduate and we were not able to celebrate it in an appropriate way.

Regarding my private live, I did not feel that staying at home was a problem as I like being on my own.

After finishing school and before entering university, I was supposed to conduct an internship. I also found a place that accepted me but shortly before starting, they cancelled the contract because they were not able to supervise me due to the contact restrictions. But then, luckily, the university accepted students without the internship because they knew that it was impossible because no company was offering internships. Then I looked for an apartment which was also hard because the city where I study is a real university city and many students look for apartments on the beginning of a semester. I found an apartment but briefly before moving, just some days, the university informed us that the whole semester would take place virtually and then I did not move anymore. But everything was already paid, the deposit, the first rents, etc. I had to cancel the rental contract. When the lectures were again offered in presence, I commuted and really lost a lot of time on trains. Now, I am finally living where I study, but I go to my family's home every weekend. I am happy that I can now exchange with other students. And it is really better not to have to attend classes virtually; now, we can interact more

with the lecturers and online participation is never something very secure as internet connection can fail, etc. I am happy to have a routine now.

I did not feel that the pandemic affected me more because of being a woman. At home, we always divide tasks, everyone has his or her to-dos and responsibilities.”

Specifically telling quotes: “Regarding my private live, I did not feel that staying at home was a problem as I like being on my own.”

“I did not feel that the pandemic affected me more because of being a woman. At home, we always divide tasks, everyone has his or her to-dos and responsibilities.”

Keywords: self-educated person, student, fair division of labor in the family, patience due to money and time lost, chances given by her parents since they are paying the rent, tight family relationships, commuting student every weekend.

DE04

Title: The pandemic has not worsened my situation, I am now happy to be living on my own and being able to take care of myself.

Narrative: “I am 29 years old and I am working as a business consultant since last year. Before I started working in this job, I used to live 'at home'. I studied Cultural Studies and Economies and after my studies I did an internship from home. I was born and raised in Germany but I have a multinational background.

For me, the option of doing home office is really a big advantage. I was happy to be able to complete my internship from home and still today I am working a lot from home. Even though, I was happy to be able to move from my home city to my current city because of my new job. During the internship, I could focus on finding a new position and then decide where to move. The new job gave me the opportunity to finally move away from my family home. Now, I am living alone where I can still work from home a lot. My job is very stressful, I am supposed to travel a lot, I have to do a lot of extra-hours and therefore it really helped me to have a place where I can be on my own and take my time for everything I need. Especially in the first six months, this was an advantage.

When I go back 'home' for visit, I still have to take care of a lot of domestic work. My father is living on his own and he does not have any support from anyone else. That's why I mostly have to take the burden of his household when I am there on the weekends.

When I started working at my current work place, we always had video-meetings which helped to get to know the new colleagues and to feel part of a team. Our company also organized virtual after-work events where more exchange was generated. Even though, small talk does not take place at all which is, on the one hand, positive in a sense that we don't lose too much time talking about other things than work, but on the other hand, you never get really to know what the other colleagues are doing. Normally, I would like to work in an environment where you can have a short chat with a colleague when meeting at the coffee machine, but it is not something that I miss when I think about my workload. My impression is that both, our employer and also the employees paid

attention to create a team spirit through the virtual meetings. Our employer offered some seminars on e.g. mental health, mindfulness, etc.

In total, I can say that the pandemic brought many advantages to my professional life. Even when I was still living with my father, I could use the time of going out for a walk instead of wasting my time while commuting. I gained a lot of lifetime and tranquillity while working from home.

But being more time at home means, as well, having more domestic work. When I was still living with my father, I felt that he expected from me that I had to take care of the additional meal that had to be prepared because we all had lunch at home instead of eating at an office. For him, it seemed to be clear that it had to be me taking charge of it. I wouldn't say that it was a burden, but an additional annoying task. And at that time, my father and me, we were both working full-time during my internship. This was also a reason why I was looking forward to moving to some other place, starting my first full-time employment without having to think about my father's domestic issues. And I already knew that I would be working more than just the usual 8 hours. Taking care of only myself felt like freedom.

Regarding my professional life, I would not say that the pandemic had an additional effect on my chances on the job market. I wear a hijab and I usually apply without sending a photo - which helps. I would claim that, in average, I have to send more applications than others but I would not say that this changed during the pandemic."

Specifically telling quotes: "Regarding my professional life, I would not say that the pandemic had an additional effect on my chances on the job market. I wear a hijab and I usually apply without sending a photo - which helps. I would claim that, in average, I have to send more applications than others but I would not say that this changed during the pandemic."

"In total, I can say that the pandemic brought many advantages to my professional life."

Keywords: gender roles, family expectations, Freedom in solitude and quietness, new independence when moving away, first full-time position, self-care

DE05

Title: A family has to be prepared for emergency cases and try to make the best out of a situation.

Narrative: "My name is Sofia and I am from Ecuador. I came first to Germany in 2001, in 2003 I moved to Spain, together with my husband and my daughter and in Spain my son was born. We came then again to Germany in 2013 and since then we have been living here. I am working at a luxury hotel in housekeeping and I used to work cleaning offices, as well.

When the pandemic started, the hotel was completely closed. I am not directly employed by the hotel, but for a third company that is sub-contracted by the hotel. The

hotel stayed with its own staff and we stopped working for approximately 7 months which of course affected our lives. We got paid just a minimum salary, I think it was 35% of our monthly salary, but I did not work due to the contact restrictions. My husband luckily continued working even though not in full-time. The communication was clear from the beginning; we knew that we would not be working for at least 7 months. Then, just some of us were asked to start working again and I was one of them since I had been working with this company for a long time. But it was really just few work. Normally, I am asked to clean 15 rooms per day but these days I sometimes just cleaned four rooms, working two hours. And as there were not so many clients, we sometimes alternated the days, worked one day, one not, etc. It took from then about five months to get back to the usual workload. This was in 2021, approximately in September. Of course, it was challenging in terms of money but luckily we have always been a family that took care of saving money for emergency cases and therefore we had some resources to get along. We are four people, therefore - of course - we had to use this money. We needed to pay the rent, electricity, everything. Just as in normal times. But it was tight. My children were both still in school.

Other colleagues, especially those with more and smaller children, had a very hard time. I have those two children, and already with them it was a complicated situation. My son was still young and in school but he did not feel the need to go out so much and still he doesn't. In contrast to my daughter who liked going out. She likes going to the library, to read things. But still there, she was always on her own. I think that the isolation affected her more than my son.

Regarding our private life, we really isolated because my daughter has respiratory issues and we tried to take care of her and not take any risk since the virus affects directly the respiratory tract. This means that we did not have any contact with people even not outside, we hardly left our house.

Before the pandemic, we used to play volleyball and this was our common routine and helped us to distract from the workload during the week. My daughter and me, we played volleyball, my son did some other sports. But then, with the pandemic, all of that was not possible anymore and we really missed it. Because we did sports on Saturdays and Sundays and then, suddenly, we had to stay at home and everything was cancelled. For us, this was very sad. Then, our new "sportive" distraction was the 'movie marathon'. We opened up the couch as a bed, all laid down there and watched one movie after the other. This is what we did on the weekends during the pandemic.

We also realized that we saved some money during that time because we did not go out, spending money for clothes or eating outside. Because, when my daughter and I leave the house, we always spend money.

In regards to our flat and the workload at home, I haven't changed any routine. I like having my house clean all the time, always. I tidy up the living room, and everybody has his or her task at home, this was also the case during the hard times of the pandemic. Therefore, I would not say that I have been affected more by it because of being a woman or a mother. But, I have heard from several other women that many of them had to stay at home and the men had to leave the house to continue working and the situation at home changed. But, in my opinion, this is something about getting organised. And I have an advantage because my children are already grown-ups, it's

less work. But I have always been a person who takes care of having a tidied-up home.”

Specifically telling quotes: “Of course, it was challenging in terms of money but luckily we have always been a family that took care of saving money for emergency cases and therefore we had some resources to get along.”

“Regarding our private life, we really isolated because my daughter has respiratory issues and we tried to take care of her and not take any risk since the virus affects directly the respiratory tract. This means that we did not have any contact with people even not outside, we hardly left our house.”

Keywords: precarious job situation, family cohesiveness, reduction of hobby entertainment, when you don't have money you cannot spend it, reducing contacts because of daughter's situation, gender equality and division of labor at home, taks division between parents and children.

DE06

Title: I always try to see everything in a positive way even though some situations might be stressful for me.

Narrative: “I was born and raised in Germany and am 35 years old. My mother is from the Cape Verde Islands and my father is German. I am a creative person, leading a creative space for people with migrant background. I studied political sciences and international relations and then worked in video production at international organisations and have lived abroad in Africa and Europe. I have been living for now 5 years again in my native city. I have a five-year-old son and currently am working as a project manager at an association. I founded this association because I realised that there are no spaces where people can develop themselves in a creative way and wanted to offer a safe space for women and girls with African background. Currently, I am working as a musician in the field of audio-visual work.

Before the pandemic, the association existed already in the theoretic way and at the very moment when we had found the right premises, the pandemic lockdown was established. It was a very unsecure situation, we did not know what would happen with the pandemic and we did not know when we would be able to meet again and organise events and meetings. Executing meetings and events would have meant to be acting against the law and society.

The lockdown meant for me that my son would not go to kindergarten anymore because it was closed. I could not work. But luckily it did not hit me mentally because it gave me the opportunity to take life at a slower pace. I just would have liked to show some performance within the association, I felt a little bit pressured by that. Though, there was work to do because there were people working for some of the projects and we always wanted to organise events which had to be postponed again and again. It was frustrating to apply for funding for many activities and then we were thrown-back by the contact restrictions. And then, when we had almost given up, we realised that digitisation was a

solution and we rearranged one of the projects. We then had several video-meetings which was strange at the beginning. However, this gave me the chance to learn more about virtual tools and now I feel more prepared for new job opportunities and creative activities.

And then, when the restrictions were loosened up, we went into a very stressful phase because we wanted to finish all the projects and everything had to happen at the same time. We had to consider that the people working at the association were voluntary staff. Personally, these were hard times: I was on the verge of a mental breakdown, I had to isolate myself to proceed with my work. So much work had backed up and then the additional burden of a non-existent child-care...it was too much! It got better when all projects were concluded.

There was one more challenge in my life: we moved during the pandemic and 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."

Specifically telling quotes: "The lockdown meant for me that my son would not go to kindergarten anymore because it was closed. I could not work. But luckily it did not hit me mentally because it gave me the opportunity to take life at a slower pace."

"Personally, these were hard times: I was on the verge of a mental breakdown, I had to isolate myself to proceed with my work."

Keywords: single-mother, missing network, challenging work conditions due to kindergarten closure, main care-giver, positive mindset, decelerate life, stressful situations after the lockdown, child-care balance with existing network in the neighbourhood.

DE07

Title: The pandemic contributed to the end of my marriage.

Narrative: "My name is Melanie, I am 25 years old, I come from a big city in Western Germany and have recently moved to a smaller city. I am a trained baker, did a re-education as an administrative assistant, have then worked as a bakery sales assistant, afterwards in gastronomy as deputy manager and lately I have been working with young adults who have different kinds of problems at a company that offers vocational trainings to jobseekers. At the moment, I am looking for a job. I have a five-year-old son who will be going to a new kindergarten and am living as a single-mother.

When the pandemic started, I was still living with my husband, we had just married half a year before and I was working in gastronomy. I was directly affected by the shutdowns. As all restaurants and bars were closed, I did not work but received approximately 75%

of my usual net salary (so-called "Kurzarbeitergeld", made available by the government). We got along with that amount because we were not really able to spend so much money, except from buying food at the supermarkets. Going to the supermarket felt like the only distraction during that time. At the beginning, we enjoyed it because we had a lot of time, were able to go out for a walk, take some time to restructure the apartment, take more time for my kid and my partner, etc. At the beginning, it was nice. But then, it really got on my nerves because we got bored at home and the situation changed. My husband was also kind of unemployed, he was partly working as an insurance broker but it was not going very well, from time to time worse and this situation frustrated him and this is something that influenced also our relationship and marriage. Regarding our living standards...we could not buy too many things, I was also not receiving the tips which usually were high and helped to have a good salary at the end of the month. We were limited in some way. But I was very happy to be working at this restaurant during that time. Especially for us, the regular staff members, our employer tried to make the situation as pleasant as possible and they also tried to help the temporary employees. We had the permission to work besides receiving the 'Kurzarbeitergeld' and it was tried to keep us occupied offering courses and preparing us for the opening after the lockdown.

The first lockdown was 6 or 8 weeks long and the second was about 6 or 7 months as far as I remember. I think we had to close the restaurant in October or November of 2020 and reopened in May 2021. Sometimes we went once or twice per week to the restaurant for cleaning, just to maintain the restaurant alive and getting it prepared for whatever might come. At least, we met the members of the team from time to time. After the reopening, I directly was busy again and, in general, received my full salary again. And if not - if e.g. I was not able to work all the hours as constituted in my contract - the salary got increased by the 'Kurzarbeitergeld'.

My son did not go to the kindergarten at that times at all because we were both not working, therefore we did not need and were not eligible for the 'emergency child care'. Of course, our son got bored after some time because he could not meet other children. I am sure that many children suffered from that but I believe that my son did not so much. We spent also a lot of time at my mother's house and there we met my brother's family who was still living in the same building. We had a lot of time with the family in general, also with my husband's mother and sister.

When I went back to work, I felt that I was back to life and happy about that positive turnaround but always when coming home, there was this oppressive atmosphere and my husband and I realised that there was not much left from the relationship; he seemed to be standing still. I wanted to go forward but he didn't. And I decided that I don't want to be sad, I wanted to have a happy life and ended the relationship before it got worse. I don't believe that it is the pandemic's fault to end our relationship but I am sure that it contributed to it. Spending so much time together changed everything. And then, I also had to take a decision regarding my job; as a single-mother, working in gastronomy only in the evenings was not an option, I wanted to do something else. And then arose the opportunity at this company for vocational training in part-time which was perfect."

Specifically telling quotes: "When I went back to work, I felt that I was back to life and

happy about that positive turnaround but always when coming home, there was this oppressive atmosphere and my husband and I realised that there was not much left from the relationship;”

“And I decided that I don't want to be sad, I wanted to have a happy life and ended the relationship before it got worse. I don't believe that it is the pandemic's fault to end our relationship but I am sure that it contributed to it.”

Keywords: single-mother, relationship was ended during the pandemic, change of jobs, the pandemic made personal issues more visible, quality time at the beginning of the pandemic, bored-out during the second lockdown.

DE08

Title: You can not rely only governmental offers for child-care, I was happy to have always an au pair who took care of my children.

Narrative: “Hi, I am Constanza, I am 47 years old, divorced and have two children and live in a big city in Germany. I am a graduated medical specialist; I work in part-time in a hospital, before that I worked in part-time in a medical practice and now I am also working one day per week as a lecturer at a vocational school. I have a father and a mother and two siblings.

When the pandemic started, I was already separated from my ex-husband and living with my two children and an au-pair. At that time, we were not allowed to be in contact with other people living in another household. Luckily, we got along very well with the au pair. We just went sometimes alone to the forest to take a walk. My children were allowed to go alone to the kindergarten, meaning that there were just the two of them and no other children. As I am a doctor, I was categorised as 'system-relevant' and allowed to make use of the 'emergency care' that was offered at the kindergarten. This was a situation for about a month until other parents also received the certificate showing that they are also 'system-relevant' like police officers or nurses.

I remember the first day of the first lockdown, this was totally strange. The streets were empty, you felt as if you were living in a ghost town. But already on the second day, I received this certificate by my employer and my children could go to the kindergarten. In the end, my impression was that every second family possessed this certificate. I did not miss work hardly at all, just twice because of my Covid infections. All of the medical practitioners had to be absent from work at least once because of being infected. But I never had to miss work because of child care. There was one month when I did not have an au pair and the kindergarten said that they would only offer 7 hours of care. I wanted them to stay longer only on Thursday and Friday, on Wednesday I usually pick them up earlier because I finish work early. The kindergarten said they would not do that as they only offer this mentioned 7 hours of care. Then I answered that I would talk about this issue with the mayor of the city and the youth welfare office on an official way. I said that I have a 'system-relevant' job and I cannot stop doing surgery and working because I have to pick up my children. Then, suddenly, they became subdued and there was no

problem anymore. I was really disappointed seeing that a single parent is not supported at all. I had announced beforehand that I wouldn't have an au pair during that period. Another issue for me was that half of the staff at the kindergarten is not vaccinated, several of the educators got infected with covid, two with a long-lasting condition. It is very evident that one would not have fallen sick that long if she had received the vaccine. Another one has not come back to work since then. This is what the vaccine is about: Not falling sick for a too long time and being able to work soon again. At the hospital, we also fall ill but we come back to work soon. I feel that there is a lot of pressure on us physicians. When I fell sick with covid on the second time, I received messages every day asking if I can come back to work. There is no understanding that people have to rest to get well again. Especially for women. My opinion is that when men have a cold or a flu, they can stay at home for a week; we women are not respected that way.

The shutdowns terrible for my daughters. Especially for my elder daughter who is now 7. She could not meet any friends and undertake excursions - something we always did before the pandemic. I thought once about going to the zoological garden but then I realized that it was too crowded and I decided that we should not do that because there were always people that think that all this pandemic is not something serious, they don't use the masks and all of that. For my elder daughter who is now going to school, using the mask was also a bit disturbing because she is using glasses and they are always fogged up. When the second shutdown ended, we were one of the first families to start again our activities, going for example to the gymnastic club for children - of course, always presenting a negative test result. We also started then going to a Spanish children's school but even this was not very reliable because there were always people that had been in contact with a covid-positive person, sometime it took place online which was not a suitable alternative. Since last year, I would say that things have normalised and we are taking part in the Spanish classes.

My feeling was that my younger daughter suffered maybe more from these restrictions because she never learned how to celebrate birthday parties, meet friends. When I brought my daughters to the kindergarten, I was not allowed to enter the premises, we had to say goodbye at the garden fence, I did not establish any relationship with the other parents. I then realised that I missed the boat in her group which was later re-established. Maybe she has forgotten this episode of her life, some children forget quickly and they adapt very fast.

I would say that the 'emergency child care' was one of the most important pillars for me during the pandemic. Of course, without the au pair, nothing would have worked well, too. But no one else, because my parents are just helpful in particular cases but not regularly."

Specifically telling quotes: "I would say that the 'emergency child care' was one of the most important pillars for me during the pandemic. Of course, without the au pair, nothing would have worked well, too."

"My opinion is that when men have a cold or a flu, they can stay at home for a week; we women are not respected that way."

Keywords: single-mother, privileged situation and social status, knowing one's rights,

child care mostly covered by the au pair, 'system-relevant' job helpful for having a reliable child care, medical doctor, absent father/partner

DE09

Title: The pandemic brought more professional flexibility to my life, but more personal work on my relationship with my future husband.

Narrative: "My name is Isabella, I am from Brazil and my story with Germany started in the year 2006. I am working as a full-time journalist and meanwhile I have become a German citizen. I have a fiancé with whom I am living together.

When the pandemic started, my partner and me were already living together but I was still working at an editorial department in another city, approximately five hours away from where I live by train. In the city in which I live, I am a correspondent but I had more activities in the other city as a multimedia editor. It was necessary for me to travel to the other city from time to time and stay there for a week or two. This was the situation before the pandemic. But when the first lockdown was established, everybody was asked to reduce travelling and this led to the opportunity to be able to work more from home and from the office in my city. For me, it was a real advantage. But I did not work so much from home because I did not possess all the equipment I need to work as a journalist because I was working a lot with videos and radio broadcasts and for all of that I need all the technology that was only available at the office. But at least, it was not necessary anymore to cross half of the country to be able to work.

At the beginning, I was very happy since it really benefitted me. We, as journalists, were categorised as 'system-relevant' which allowed me to go to the office, I was not forced to stay at home.

My partner used to commute and work in home-office already before the pandemic. He was working three days of the week in another city and two days from home. When the pandemic started and the government asked the companies to offer their staff all the opportunities of working from home, his company respected it. But only when it was mandatory. This means that he was asked to commute again when the legislation allowed it. And his boss expects his presence at the office. After the hard restrictions, they went back to their work conditions as they were before the pandemic, nothing has changed. In my case, we had more freedom of choice. Today, I have a comfortable workplace at home so that I don't need to go to the office that frequently.

Regarding my holidays in Brazil, I was blessed in disguise. My father passed away shortly before the pandemic which was - of course - really sad for me but he had been sick during a year and I could visit him several times during that period, support him and bid farewell to him. I know some people that were not able to say goodbye to their relatives due to the pandemic. After his death, the pandemic started and I did not feel so much anxiety to travel to Brazil. After two years, I wanted to travel again but had to be aware of the isolation legislations. For example, when travelling to Brazil, it would not have been a problem, but coming back to Germany meant to quarantine. That could have

been a disadvantage for my work. I remember one Christmas when we were not allowed to celebrate with nobody, I even did not see my sister who is also living in Germany. Some negative aspects for me arose in the second lockdown. In the first lockdown, I followed all the strict regulations made by the government. But in the second lockdown I really felt so bad. I wanted my life to become 'normal' again. My partner and me spent a lot of time at home and life was boring, we could not go out and have a good time, it was not possible at all, everything was closed, no cinema, no friends, anything. Our relationship began to suffer from this circumstances. But luckily, at some point, this lockdown ended. But I realized for example that we worked much more than we used to, since we could not do other things. I am totally frustrated that I lost my fitness routine in that time and until now, I did not make it to come back to it. I have lost this habit. I just worked so much and everybody expected it from me. And I am trying to fight to get back to this routine, but not only for me: sometime, I try to tell my partner that we should spend time together in the evenings but he still has the habit to stay working until 9 in the evening. It is hard to change this habit. It is hard work for a relationship. Also flexibility is something positive that has arisen in the work environments but the companies don't have a plan on how there can be a compensation for the employees especially in the present times thinking about heating costs and the rising prices. I am sometimes thinking about going to the office just with the aim to save energy at home."

Specifically telling quotes: "At the beginning, I was very happy since it really benefitted me. We, as journalists, were categorised as 'system-relevant' which allowed me to go to the office, I was not forced to stay at home."

"Also flexibility is something positive that has arisen in the work environments but the companies don't have a plan on how there can be a compensation for the employees especially in the present times thinking about heating costs and the rising prices. I am sometimes thinking about going to the office just with the aim to save energy at home."

Keywords: relationship with two full-time job, no travelling due to contact restrictions, more flexibility since the pandemic, less time commuting, more work for love relationships, no gender-gap, no child care.

DE10

Title: When I got sick with covid, it was the worst time of my life.

Narrative: "Hi, I am Constanza, I am 47 years old, divorced and have two children and live in a big city in Germany. I am a graduated medical specialist; I work in part-time in a hospital, before that I worked in part-time in a medical practice and now I am also working one day per week as a lecturer at a vocational school. I have a father and a mother and two siblings.

It was a very strange situation when you went to the supermarket. I remember how children were stigmatised and made responsible for the pandemic. People looked at

me badly when they saw me in the supermarket with the two children. But sometimes I just didn't have an option of going alone. Nowadays, we know better, but these days our health minister purported that the children were accelerating the pandemic; that they were mostly the ones getting infected without any symptoms and then transferring the virus to the adults. It was not scientifically proven and today we know better but I remember very well how you were treated when people saw you with children. This behaviour towards children was very bad. If adults were more responsible, using the mask and get oneself vaccinated, our children could live a normal life. Everything would be easier.

In my opinion, social contacts are very important especially for children and single parents. I had just one friend we met regularly. We did not celebrate any birthdays and after two years of the pandemic my impression was that we were the only ones following these strict regulations. We even did not meet the other members of my family at the beginning. Naturally, after a year and a half this changed a bit. I recall that when the cinemas reopened, I went there with my two kids and there was just one other family with us in the whole room. This was fun! We had present a test showing that we were covid-negative to enter the cinema. One friend of mine reacted like that when I told her: how can you go to the cinema during the pandemic and then I reminded her that she was the one celebrating her children's birthdays already when the lockdowns were still active.

There is something that my children will never forget and this is when I myself got infected with Corona. I was infected just before the vaccine was offered to medical staff. Some days later, after my infection, I would have been eligible to get vaccinated but I was not lucky. This was half a year before the rest of the 'normal' population would get access to the vaccine. I was sick for four weeks and there were my children, the au pair and me at home. I was in bad for at least two weeks, I hardly could go to the bathroom once a day, I did not feel as getting up and doing anything. I couldn't eat, drank some water, this was all. I felt like being in coma. The au pair took care of my children. This was already the second au pair, not the first one who was really nice. But luckily due to the legislations, she had to stay quarantined as well, just as my children. My youngest daughter always woke up at five, I then put on my FFP2 mask, disinfected my hands, went with her into the living room, prepared a bread for her and switched on the TV and after that I was already exhausted. Between the living room and my bedroom there is a glass door. I closed the door but could hear if she wanted something from me while I was lying in my bed. She was so cute. I then waited until it became 9 or 10 a.m. and then woke the au pair up so that she could take care of the children and I continued sleeping. This was really the worst time of my life.

The health department called once or twice and then I remarked that there should be any support for single-parents. Just imagine not having an au pair: I would not have been able to take care of my children in any sense. This was impossible. But there is no help at all. A friend of mine brought some soup, another friend brought some bread and presents because it was right on Christmas. After ten days my children were tested and the result was negative meaning that they were allowed to leave the house. On that occasion, I asked my parents to pick up my children and this way I had some days to be on my own and get well again. I did not do anything, just sleep and rest.

This is really something I also realised during the pandemic. Most of the women, especially those who were able to work in home office, were thrown back. A friend of mine is a teacher who was able to take advantage of the 'emergency child care' but then, as a teacher, she had to online-teach sometimes also in the afternoon and my impression was that the whole childcare was her burden, not her husband's. And another person I know from my daughter's school: the mother is a lawyer and she told me that she began working from home with her children staying also with her and she said that it was a horrible time. I think the men simply just don't want to do it, their employers don't accept it, such things. I have also heard another story where the son who was already a pupil stayed at home on his own, doing his homework. His mother is a cleaner and his father works in a restaurant. They had no option of staying at home."

Specifically telling quotes: "Most of the women, especially those who were able to work in home office, were thrown back."

"There is something that my children will never forget and this is when I myself got infected with Corona."

"If adults were more responsible, using the mask and get oneself vaccinated, our children could live a normal life. Everything would be easier."

Keywords: Single parent, children, care gap, illness, external support

DE11

Title: Even though we were in a comparable privileged situation, the pandemic and all the consequences it had was a horrible time.

Narrative: "My name is Martina, I am married, 41 years old and have two sons who are 7 and 10 years old. I am full-time employed as administrative officer at the municipality of my city since 2018. I am in a leadership position, having a team of 14 employees. As I am responsible for human resources, we were directly affected by the pandemic and the restrictions made by the government. We had to draft exemption permits for the employees in case there should be any curfews so that they could prove that they are on their way to work or back, and other things. This was really a lot, especially because I was working in home-office having my two children at home. I had to work also a lot in the evenings and on the weekends and go to the office when signatures were needed. As we are a German public entity, many processes had not been digitalised in those days, I was simply not able to sign a PDF document in a digital way, just to give an example. For my employees it was also a challenging situation. There are some mothers in my team, they understood my situation slightly better than others but my deputy colleague did as well which was helpful. When necessary, someone came to bring a document to my home; I was happy about that. The mothers in my team were challenged more than the other colleagues, this was evident. An interesting situation arose between these women because one had already a teenage kid while the two others had toddlers and she supposed - at the beginning - that she would be the one substituting the others

because of their small children. But - in the end - it was her who fell ill more frequently because her teenage son had more contact to other people and was more likely to get infected with covid than all the others that had restricted themselves to few contacts.

As my husband is a production worker he does not have the option of working from home. Same situation for some of my colleagues who are service officers and have to be in the office. There were also some technical issues which did not allow everyone to work from home.

As I am part of the public administration but not 'system-relevant', we were not eligible for the so-called 'emergency child-care' from the beginning on. But afterwards, I would have had the right to make use of it but I didn't because the communication was made very clear: if you don't need it, don't use it because the kindergartens and schools are simply overcharged. When I once wanted to make use of it, I had a discussion with the kindergarten: 'how can you bring your child to the emergency child-care when you are working from home?!' Also they made their position very clear: this offer is not meant to give me a personal rest from all the stress. It was atrocious! I know that we were still in a privileged situation but I really felt left alone. We also did not want to meet my parents at the beginning because my father is suffering from heart condition but they were the ones asking us to meet again because we all felt very lonely. I remember one situation very well when we wanted to buy toilet paper and my mother went to queue for it early in the morning because it was such a rare commodity. I couldn't have left my two children at home alone just to buy toilet paper. When you wanted to buy some in the afternoon, there was nothing left.

Then, we got along with the situation because from May of 2020 on my husband was forced to enter 'short-time work' meaning that he worked less and received part of his salary by the government. Therefore, he stayed at home on Thursdays and Fridays and I could go to the office and this way somehow the situation was manageable.

My son was already in school and it was a digital catastrophe and we could not rely on the quality of the teachers. On Mondays we went to school and in the schoolyard they had left packages with the learning material with which the pupils had to deal with from home. This is something I had to do in parallel, while working and occupying my younger son.

Today, I still have negative thoughts when I think about working from home. For me, working from home means that I can (and will) do more than work and in the office I can focus better. I just do it when it is necessary, for example one of my sons is sick. But yet there has been a cultural change at our administration and now home-office has been established even after the pandemic. This is something I would value as a positive development."

Specifically telling quotes: "I remember one situation very well when we wanted to buy toilet paper and my mother went to queue for it early in the morning because it was such a rare commodity."

Keywords: bad conscience, care gap not always gender-related but job-related, leadership position, team solidarity, 'privileged' because of home-office option, digitisation not prepared for home-office, home schooling was not pedagogical,



Denmark

DK01

Title: Karen, was unemployed, but build a business during the lockdowns

Narrative: I am 55 years and have a law degree from 90. I have worked in the public sector as a manager, both in the government and municipality. A few years ago I felt that my time was spent mostly on managing sick leave for parents of young children. They told us in the last municipality that I worked that we were to have an exercise on developing the employees' competencies. They told me it wasn't a matter of saving money, but time showed that it was. Then I said - "I don't have the energy for this anymore.". Then I was unemployed for some time. I stepped down voluntarily, because of the need to save money. I had job interviews with men who were HR managers around 32 years old, worried that I might take their job because of the resume I have. I then thought, this is not what I am supposed to do. When corona started I thought I'm going to jump into this. I joined an entrepreneurship class that ended up being from the distance, then I had decided this was what I wanted to do. To me it was a circumstance to start a business while there was corona. I'm divorced and I have two children that no longer lives at home, I have a partner that lives in Copenhagen, I live in another city on Zealand. That pretty much covers it. 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 aorund 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 never really learned if it also applied for the supplementary unemployment benefit, but I ended up getting a customer that bought all of my time. 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. In May 2021 I was headhunted and worked for a company full time while working on my own business. When I had more work in my business they became customers. We did a lot of things together. It was a big company so I could get corona tests while working with them. It was a time with opportunities. Something that didn't work for me was everything going online for networking. It was hard feeling alone and not being able to look people in the eyes. I have become a representative of SMV Denmark and I can see that other businesses still struggle. For me corona was a circumstance. For the other businesses with employees it was a matter of them surviving vs. securing their employees. They were pressured a lot to save their business and get support from the government. I believe that corona will come back, at least there is a possibility of it. I think it's a matter of prioritizing and not being lured into during stuff, like taking up loans and getting into debt. For me it was just a circumstance I had to deal with. Having a shared challenge created something that I could speak to my customers about. I got a space in a shared office and some of them I haven't seen since I started there. They never returned and we weren't that many up there during corona, but we were a few people. It was nice to have

a shared challenge to talk about. I didn't want any of the support for the government. I gave up beforehand, because I couldn't figure out all of the rules surrounding it for someone like me. It helped me that companies saw the crises as an opportunity to develop their businesses. During corona it showed me how dependent we are on each other. I looked at all of the local supports for businesses and applied for some funding just to show potential customers, that I had been pre-qualified to receive funding. I have always been engaged in protection of interests, so I decided to join SMV Denmark with my business and after some time they needed a representative. I saw it as an opportunity to brand myself by taking care of the interests of small business owners. I am one of the four board members representing 1,100 members. I was in an ad for the Academics Unemployment Insurance (Akademikernes A-kasse). People told me that seeing me in that ad made them believe in themselves, something that is hard to do, while you are unemployed. Fortunately, I have not had corona, but I am meeting a lot of people because of my people and it makes me worried. If I become sick I will have to close my business. It's a fragile situation and that is also something you have to consider while starting during corona times. People starting businesses were very willing to help me during the lockdowns. I have some chronic illnesses. Twenty years ago I had a heart attack and I have diabetes. The only way to deal with it is to buy an insurance. I didn't have to stay at home as other people, because I had to go out and meet customers. I didn't get the corona depression as I have heard other people talk about.

Specifically telling quotes: "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." "For me it was just a circumstance I had to deal with. Having a shared challenge created something that I could speak to my customers about." "I have become a representative of SMV Denmark and I can see that other businesses still struggle."

Keywords: Small business owner, protecting interests, seeing possibilities

DK02

Title: Henrik, had a pregnant wife and is chronically ill, had to take extra precautions

Narrative: I am 38 years old and live in a small city in Jutland. I am married to Jeanette and have two children Mikkel and Ida, who was born on the 1st of February in 2022 this year. I work for a Danish Agency under the government as an administrator. Both me and Jeanette were in the high risk groups. I have a pacemaker and Jeanette has a chronic illness. We were very aware of avoiding the risk of contagion. "We had to take care of each other. We had to take care of our family." We were very careful in the beginning. After some time it didn't feel as dangerous because of the vaccines, but we were of course careful for the sake of our family and ourselves and of course the two small ones. Jeanette became pregnant while everything was ongoing in around May 2021. We of course had to take care of Jeanette and the baby and take precautions in relation to that. "We asked people to take a test before we had visitors, because we were both high risk."

We were unsure about whether Jeanette and the baby was safe in terms of getting the vaccine. I had to wear a mask during the birth. While they were in the hospital I had to wear a mask. I was allowed to be in the room. They also tested Jeanette for corona, when we came in. I couldn't be there if I had corona. We took a corona test regularly before. I worked from home, more than I probably should have, to ensure that I didn't catch anything. We tried to take care of each other as much as we could. They tested Jeanette when she became hospitalised. I don't know what they would have done if I had a positive test. After we went home and took care of each other. Mikkel goes to kindergarten and the children carry so much stuff back home. We all ended up getting corona in March. So we all tried that. Luckily, it was a light round for all of us. We both had tests every third day before the birth with PCR tests. Mikkel didn't go to kindergarten before the birth. During lockdown we had Mikkel. He didn't go to daycare, which meant we had a lot of time with him and to play with him. I was unemployed at that time, so we went for some walks, played and had fun. That was a positive thing to have time with Mikkel. That's something I appreciate - having had time with him. I started working in September 2020, then it closed down after two weeks. We were home from mid September until June 2021. It was boring in the end being at home. The work day where you get up, have breakfast, sit until 11, have a walk and then go back to work. They did a lot of social events online at our work. But we were a new team and it was difficult to work together, when we didn't know each other. It was hard in the end. "I needed to go out and meet some people." So I asked to go back to work as soon as it was possible. I talked a lot with the co-workers, and Jeanette, I took some bike rides when possible and got some exercise. "I used to spend lunch breaks to go a walk and clear my head. That helped me during the lockdown." It was challenging getting to know people when you couldn't see their facial expressions. Our manager told us that we had to use our cameras. There were no one to talk to. Sometimes we would just chit-chat for half an hour. It was a good way of doing it, that we got that freedom. I trust that what the politicians did was the right thing, because there was a new disease. I believe they made the right decision by doing a lockdown. I think more people would have died if they kept everything open. I think it has kept the infection rates low. My age and being a family dad makes it less difficult for me than if I had been 18 or 19. One positive thing is that it has become more acceptable to work from home and it's possible to work from home if I feel a little sick, so I don't infect my colleagues. It gives some flexibility. There's an incredible flexibility. Our manager doesn't care when we work, as long as we get our work done. The lockdowns improved my relationship with my son, because we had a lot of time together. Mikkel didn't go to kindergarten for the first week after Ida's birth, because we wanted to be careful. After a few weeks he got corona, but it's hard to avoid in a kindergarten.

Specifically telling quotes: "I needed to go out and meet some people." "I used to spend lunch breaks to go a walk and clear my head. That helped me during the lockdown."

Keywords: Illness, pregnancy, birth, working from home, protection

DK03

Title: Tina, teacher that was harassed by students

Narrative: I am 41 years old, I have a husband and two girls at 14 and 16, I am a teacher and I have usually worked in public schools. I now work as an external teacher, which means that I don't teach the same children everyday. It was lonely during the lockdown. There were a lot of expectations in terms of what we should be able to do and I didn't think there was a lot of acknowledgement. We were left on our own, especially because they kept saying now you have to work from home from two weeks, and then additionally two weeks and two weeks. It wasn't like we knew we would be back in a month. That's what affected us a lot, that we never really knew for how long we had to stay at home. It was mainly during the second lockdown over christmas 2020 and until april when we came back. I taught science class where we had subjects about baking from home and do some research and written assignments and gym class where the students could go for walks or runs and send what they had done. Nothing was optimal, that would be a shame to say. Especially, because we were told you have to stay at home for two more weeks. There were no guidelines in terms of what to do if the children started recording. Some of my colleagues said that we needed guidelines and the Danish Teacher's Association (Danmarks Lærerforening) also demanded it. The management said that it was too much. I wasn't the only one that experienced it. Someone pressing record or having a recording sent out on snapchat. I wonder how many times it has happened. When it has happened once it has probably happened more times. My biggest challenge was when I was teaching gym class and showing the students how to do excercises they figured out how to send links to students from other schools. Suddenly, there were students from other schools present. I had a student that had a crafts class that suddenly experienced that some other students were texting her nasty messages in the chat function. It was during the class, so everyone could see it. He got a link from one of the classmates, that had changed schools. He had told his old classmates to go into the link for the lesson and write that girl ugly messages. I needed that understanding from the management. I thought: Is it just me that is making too big a deal out of it? I felt violated in not being taken seriously by the children that thought they could just do whatever they wanted. The management just said: It can't be that bad. "I felt we stood together as a staff group." My manager said that there was no more to discuss. I still didn't feel it was done being handled. I didn't feel it was recognised. My manager said I could just call the mom of the student sharing videos of me on snapchat. I said: "No, I can't call her mum. You should do that." Then the management said, it's also a student that is already struggling. I don't care about that. That's not my problem. I don't want to be recorded during my teaching. It's illegal, when I haven't been asked. In the end the management called her and told her that she shouldn't do it again. That was the consequence. The other student that came into my class from another school. The management in that school told him that he should apologise to me. They seemed to be more strict than my own management was. He just thought it was the school's responsibility to create classes that could not be hacked. I didn't teach for two weeks

after did. I didn't show my face on the screen. They said I should just write to them what their assignments were. They said I couldn't go on sick leave, because you could not get sick from this. That's what I was told. I contacted the Danish Teacher's Association to focus on the issue. They had so many teachers contacting them about violations that were even worse than mine. Both the students and parents didn't follow the rules regarding online classes, which were to keep the camera on and tell if someone else was in the room. When I experienced violations from my students I tried talking to a colleague and the management. "I felt over and over that they didn't listen. That's when I contacted the union magazine from Danish Teacher's Association." I have learned that doing meetings online is a possibility. I grew closer to some colleagues, because we talked over the phone than I would have otherwise. One of the reasons I stopped as a teacher is because corona made it hard for me in my job. It took my joy away to be teaching during a lockdown. I would have stopped anyways because of a lot of the things that happened during corona. I also took long walks and ran sometimes to deal with what happened. I didn't talk to a psychologist because of it.

Specifically telling quotes: "I felt we stood together as a staff group." "No, I can't call her mum. You should do that."

Keywords: Harassment, teacher, media focus, feeling invalidated, union

DK04

Title: Berit, single mother of an autistic child

Narrative: "I am 44 years old. I have a daughter who is 14 years old and a son who is 18 years old. He has autism spectrum disorder. I am a case worker at a Danish Agency and live in a small city in the northern part of Denmark. I am divorced. I have quite a long commute for work. When corona shut down the country in 2020, my son was attending a boarding school. We had to make everyday life work and I just started a new job, so I had to be trained for new assignments as well. My dad is ill, so we were extra attentive to avoid becoming infected as we feared putting him at risk. In the beginning everything was fine. But then it started to become a bit difficult. Mostly for my daughter, since she wanted to go out and see people. "Not so much for my son, as he was actually doing fine staying in his room and interacting with the world through his computer." Then the society opened up again. My son started at FGU (a preparatory educational program for young people) after the summer holidays. They said that he could handle it. The guidance counsellor from the municipality said that he would be able to handle it. I had asked for a STU (school for young people with special needs), as I felt that was what he needed. The guidance counsellor kept saying that statistically few people get a job after finishing the STU. For around half a year it went fine. He got his routines. "Then the country closed down again and that is when it went wrong." It wasn't so much that they closed down, it was more when they started opening up again. Then they said he could go to school every other week. Then he said: "I can't do that. It's one way or the other."

Either I am there every day or I don't go." The school accepted this. They said that he could go every day. Then he started being more and more absent. Every other week they didn't have any plans for him. There were no teachers. It was hard to create a structure for someone who really just wanted to stay in their room. He actually went to the FGU for 1 year and a half, before they said that this was not working out. My son also said that he wanted to start the STU. Then he was assigned an STU, which he started on April 1st this year. He is at his best, when he is at his computer, so he can engage in his network, which is from all over the world. For me everything just had to work, so my children were doing well and the same with my dad. "I feel like I have been in survival mode." And I still partly am, because my son is not completely well. Sometimes he gets dark periods. When it comes to my son I have always used my parents and talked to them. I also have some friends that I talk to. I do things for myself in order to get energy to deal with things. I spend a lot of hours on football. I train my daughters team and I am a football judge. I exploit the time commuting to and from work, whether it's listening to a book or singing along with the radio. It helps me being able to share the difficult things and getting a hug from friends. My friends are good at listening. I mainly do everything myself, the children's dad has a brain injury, so he is not able to help. I have this idea, that you don't get exposed to things you can't handle. "I feel like I have taken my part of it." That's just the way it is. I find the solutions, when there is a need for it. I try to do one thing at once. My colleagues and friends are good at just listening, when I need to share. I have learned how much I can deal with and how many things I can juggle at once. I have gotten to know myself better. I have learned to understand my boundaries and say no. I am often the one listening to others and giving advice. I still do that, but I have become better at saying, they should find someone else to talk to. At work if I get extra assignments I have also learned to say no if I don't have the energy. I have learned to understand what is important and what isn't important. Sometimes I feel bad setting boundaries, but it gives me the energy to be there for my children, my parents and the most important assignments. I relax when I drive in a car, also because I spend the time constructively and deal with what is going on in my head. After corona I have become better at making plans with my friends to have more energy to deal with the work needed to be done at home. Since my son got his diagnosis at age 12 it has been one long learning process with schools, because they are not doing the things they say they will do. I spend a lot of energy ensuring that he thrives in school. I have been told by the teachers at his current school that he is lucky he has a resourceful parent, but I don't really feel that resourceful. But I am able to speak up, when it is needed and say that things are not good enough. Going from there and feeling some progress, that is not always easy. "I can be persistent, when I have to be." My daughter says that I never cry. If I watch a sad movie, sometimes it just gets going. Also when I have nights alone I am able to process things, it's just not that my daughter sees it. When my son was struggling with his mental health, I had to leave for a work conference, so I made sure that my daughter stayed with my parents. I had agreed with him, that he replied to my messages. I told the school that they had to be aware, that he might not go to school."

Specifically telling quotes: "Not so much for my son, as he was actually doing fine staying in his room and access the world through his computer." "Then the country

closed down again and that is when it went wrong." "I can't do that. It's one way or the other. Either I am there every day or I don't go." "I feel like I have been in survival mode." "I feel like I have taken my part of it." "I can be persistent, when I have to be."

Keywords: Autism, single mother, reaching out, education, boundaries

DK05

Title: Irene, chronically ill found community

Narrative: I am 50 years old. I don't have any children and I'm not married, but I have a big family with three siblings and they all have children. I am both a part of N.A.B.O and another drop-in centre called Kompasset. I am not the common user, as I am more well-functioning than the others. I am not mentally ill in that sense. I have some depression and I have some stress. I have been very physically ill and in connection to that I have lost a lot of my network - so it's more loneliness. I have some social anxiety and such, so I am training myself in leaving the house. I am currently in the process of the municipality deciding whether I can get a disability pension (førtidspension). The days during corona were long and lonely. In the end of 2020 I learned about Kompasset and I started coming there in October or November. I hadn't heard about it before, because I am not a part of the psychiatry, but my home caretaker (hjemmehjælper) told me about it. I haven't worked since 2009. "It has meant a lot to have a place to go and be with other people." I think a lot of people would have been worse off, if they were not able to meet others. There were restrictions in how many hours we could be in Kompasset and how close we could sit next to each other, so we were yelling at each other. You had to use hand sanitizer and the staff wore masks. I have been sitting alone at home for many years, just staring into my computer screen. In Kompasset you could also work out if you cleaned the machines. You could work out, get some coffee and speak to some people. I think it was lonely during corona. I think everyone felt like that, especially those of us that live alone. I went for walks everyday. Until there was a restriction against staying at an area close to where I live. I took walks to keep myself going and keep my spirit high. In the beginning I just didn't care. I also crochet comforting mice for children at hospitals. Even if I was bored as shit, at least I could do something good for someone else and that actually helped a bit. It's also something that we did at Kompasset. "When you do something good for others, you often feel better about yourself." That's something we should do more, do good for others, so we feel good about ourselves. It was different to crochet, when I was at home than when I was at Kompasset. The group that crocheted comforting mice, we had trends, we made rainbows on the mice to show, that there is still hope. "Then we all made mice with nursing uniforms to pay tribute to the nurses that were fighting to keep us all alive and still had to go to work." When I look back I feel like we forget how scared we were. That's just something you forget. Today when we are almost on the other side, we are saying: "Oh, well corona". It was a way to help each other keep up the spirit. In my apartment complex there lives some Opera singers that initiated a sing along with the neighbours from our apartments. They would go out into

the courtyard and start singing and then we would join. We also put teddy bears in the windows for the children to look at, so a teddy bear was waving at them from the window. Those were some of the small things that we did for each other during corona. There was actually more of a community during corona than after. Normally, I do not speak to my neighbours, but during that time I would greet others and ask how they were doing when taking walks outside. "There was this feeling of, we are going to get through this together, which made it okay. Even if it was still horrible." That helped a bit. There were more people using the drop-in centres during corona than there is now. I still have a big need for going to the centres, because I have been isolated since 2009 and I had become lonely. Right before corona I had challenged myself to sign up for some things. My mentor helped me. Then corona came and put a stop to it. The talked everyone had about how lonely and terrible it was during corona. I hadn't realised that it had become everyday life for me. I feel comfortable on my own and I am good at entertaining myself. I may not have struggled as much as other people. I lost both my dad and my mom's husband during corona. They were not fun years. It was not related to corona. Maybe indirectly as they didn't go to the doctor. They discovered that he had cancer and it was too late. I feel that others were worse of than me, because I am not used to doing something everyday. People that need other people to be engaged were struggling more. Especially young people that want things to happen all the time. I had my crocheting, Kompasset and my friends I could talk to online. They were some hard years, but I just feel that others were worse of than me. All of my special doctor's appointments were put on hold during corona. That is one of the worst things, because now I am on a waiting list to get the doctor's examinations that I need. A lot of the things regarding the processing of my case for a disability pension have also been suspended and prolonged because of corona. It makes it hard to determine whether I qualify for the disability pension.

Specifically telling quotes: "It has meant a lot to have a place to go and be with other people." "When you do something good for others, you often feel better about yourself." "Then we all made mice with nursing uniforms to pay tribute to the nurses that were fighting to keep us all alive and still had to go to work." "There was this feeling of, we are going to get through this together, which made it okay. Even if it was still horrible."

Keywords: Illness, community, loneliness, caring for others

DK06

Title: Merima, refugee and caretaker

Narrative: "I have a family. I am married and have a husband and three children. My children are 26, 21 and 17. Only the youngest lives at home. My middle child, a daughter, was also at home during corona. I have been in Denmark for 28 years. I came in 1994.

I work as a social caretaker (social og sundhedsassistent) as a temporary employee. I work through a temp agency, but it is almost full time.

Everyday has been worrying during corona. I will never forget the days, when corona started. I am from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Corona reminded me of the war in Bosnia, when I was young. The insecurity and the illness we didn't know about. Worries about the future, family and children. Many thoughts and worries.

I took one day at a time to deal with the worries. I was in school during corona. We were in school one day and two or three were coughing and sick. They were told to go home from school. Then the school leader came and told us that we had to go home. Denmark closed down that same night. They told us to follow the regulations and directives from the authorities and the schools regulations on the student online forum as well.

What reminded me of the war was that what everyday life suddenly became different. We couldn't have guests and see family and friends. And the situation was insecure and were imbued with risks.

I attended school, even when it was online. When school ended I had an internship as a home caretaker (hjemmehjælper). At that time most restrictions were removed, but we were almost back to normal again. I started mid-May 2020.

The first weeks reminded me a lot of the war. I learned to adapt to the new situation, I also learned this during the war. As long as friends and family were doing well. From March to May it was a new situation. We were all 5 at home. My oldest daughter also moved back home. We cooked together and took walks in nature. We were only the 5 of us, because it was recommended to stay away from elderly people. We didn't have guests the first months. We were just at home, except for grocery shopping. We saw my mom and my husband's parents through the window and waved to them. It was hard on all of us, but it was harder on them. We also spoke to them online on video.

Time went by and we followed what the media said. We did what we should do. We followed the authorities' recommendations. It was a different time with lock downs. Then summer came around and things were better. Everyday life almost went back to normal, but in the back of my mind I thought, "what if I got infected?" You could always read on Facebook how many were infected and dead. You were reminded that it was not over yet. If I could choose I would rather have avoided the time during corona. I would have rather been without the pandemic, even if we were at home.

I have been a part of bydelismødrene (neighbourhood mothers), but because of my school I am not a part of it anymore. I have not been a part of it during corona. I asked if another woman could take over. We were once in nature, but the other woman was sick, so nothing happened. I am still a part of bydelismødrene, but I am not the contact person anymore. The other woman that was the contact person became sick, so we have not assumed our activities.

After summer some of the restrictions were removed, so it was better. It started in March and then until maybe May, there were a lot of restrictions. We also watched Netflix, series and movies. Took walks and cooked. My children followed school online, I also followed school online and my husband online. There was enough to do even if we were at home. I also had some assignments for group projects. So time was also spent reading and writing. My children are so big, so it was fine, they had school and then we would eat together at night. I have a younger sister. She has two small children. They were at home and the children always had to be entertained, so it was hard. My children just had online school. It was cosy being together, it was not hard like that. My two youngest were sad and angry about not being able to see friends. My daughter was in 3.G (senior year of high school), and they cancelled prom in her school. We talked about that was just how it was, it was like that for all young people. There was not much to do about it. The students were allowed to drive around for graduation and they could have graduation parties. My daughter was happy about that.

I feel it was better after summer in 2020. Maybe because we were then used to the situation. I followed the guidelines and tried to avoid getting sick and infecting others. We all had corona, so we couldn't really avoid that."

Specifically telling quotes: "The first weeks reminded me a lot of the war. I learned to adapt to the new situation, I also learned this during the war. As long as friends and family were doing well." "I took one day at a time to deal with the worries." "We saw my mom and my husband's parents through the window and waved to them. It was hard on all of us, but it was harder on them."

Keywords: Refugee, care taker, family, education

DK07

Title: Camilla, visually impaired student

Narrative: I am 35 years old, my name is Camilla. I live with my son and boyfriend. During corona I went to school at EUX, but had to be home every other day, so that was a bit strange. I went to school to become an office assistant. I had a secretary in class to help me with things, it was easier, when we were sitting together than when we were apart. I think this was the biggest challenge. For instance they helped me with taking notes. Sometimes I would struggle to find material in the educational books, I needed help with that a lot, I recall. Also writing notes from the blackboard. I had to ask them to write it down for me, what was on the black board. On the days that I was in school at home I had to call people to ask for help instead of asking them when we were sitting together. I used teams to have it shown where I could find things. "I have become more aware of how digital tools can be helpful." I still use these tools. Some of my teachers were good at distributing materials some time before we needed to use it. "I always try

to find solutions to do things best. I think it is annoying to depend on others." I have become more independent. I finished my education, where I used a dashboard and created a guidance, because I didn't think the other one was thorough enough in terms of how to use it. So I wrote a new guidance, for instance writing "look up in the right corner". This made me more independent. People don't always have time to help when you need it, so it is about finding ways to solve problems yourself. I was helped with notes from the black board, I have impaired vision, so I also needed descriptions of videos for instance in Danish classes and images. I have become more aware of the digital possibilities for instance using Microsoft teams instead of meeting in person. Another challenge during corona was being social, when you also have a disability on top of it. The social life at school was lost, because we could only meet physically every other day. I tried to keep in touch with the people I normally spoke to through texts. Half of my education was during corona. I started in 2019. Distance and being required to having small gatherings also made it difficult in terms of being social. My son was at home and my boyfriend was also at home. We live in a very small apartment. My son had to be activated and it was difficult to make things work at home. In terms of the practical things with for instance cooking. I made a schedule for my son so he could see what he had to do during the day.

Specifically telling quotes: "I have become more aware of how digital tools can be helpful." "I always try to find solutions to do things best. I think it is annoying to depend on others."

Keywords: Visual impairment, student, independent, assistance, digital tools

DK08

Title: Pernille, was granted a flex job due to being chronically ill

Narrative: I am 52 years old. I have been granted a flex job because of a blood cloth. I currently have a job. I live with my husband through 32 years and I have two grown up sons and one that is 13, the two grown sons don't live at home, but the youngest does. In the beginning we were scared of corona. There were a lot of questions. I also have a lowered lung capacity. How dangerous was it? And there were concerns regarding my two big sons that didn't isolate the same ways as many other people did. It created some worries, especially in the beginning when you didn't know what it was. Then the vaccines came and we were told it could help. I had my blood cloth the year before 2020 and had my rehabilitation until February that year. We had just talked about the aspects related to treatment before the lockdown. They wanted to find an internship for me, but it was cancelled because of the lockdown. Because of my weakened physique and low lung capacity I started studying to become a social worker in 2015. It was on the day that I had my final exam that I had the blood cloth. I was supposed to have an internship as a social worker. Everything, especially within administration closed down. People were sent to work from home. It was hard to find a company that would take me in. The

municipality in Aalborg started a collaboration with an external actor to create internships on three months in order to evaluate people to determine if they met the requirements to get a flex job. During corona a lot of cases piled up that they couldn't close or make progress in. I imagine that there was a bottleneck of cases that needed to be processed. I have a feeling that the municipality picked out the people that might be eligible for flex jobs, so they could get those out of the way. I have a feeling that it was my luck that I only had to be tested for three months before they could determine my case. "They knew that I wasn't able to come back to work fulltime because of my blood cloth. I thought it was terrible to find myself in some kind of limbo." My thoughts were around having a recent degree and being ill. In relation to my rehabilitation, where I had been affected on my speaking, it functions in the sense that in order to get your speaking capabilities back the more you use it and the more you use the words, speaking is no longer atomised, so you have to think when you are speaking. "It's not just on the back bone anymore. The more you use words, the more it will come back again, right? When everything was locked down I didn't use my speech in the same way." I felt a back slide or a standstill in relation to that development and that of course worried my as well. In the beginning I was determined to come back to where I was before. I was affected by corona in terms of my education, my flex job clarification and then of course as a human being; where is this going? Can I die from this, because I already have a low lung capacity? Also in terms of family. I didn't feel like I could demand that they just stayed at home to be careful around me. I thought they should live their lives. I spoke to other people about my worries. I took long walks. I felt that the world fit me better because of my illness. One of the things that hit me in relation to my blood cloth was brain fatigue. I don't have the same energy as I had before. I didn't have to see people unless I had the surplus of energy to be around other people. "It was as if the world was in a level, that it was easier for me to follow." That was a positive thing about it, even if there were also worries. There were also some good things in that way. There were no demands in terms of doing practical things and being social. Something that I was struggling with because of my illness. "I didn't have to make excuses around not having the energy, because we just couldn't be together - it was so easy." Some people were lonely, but for some people, for instance autistic people or mentally ill people, it was easier to just be instead of there being a demand. My way of thinking about things has changed because of corona. Everything just runs in a wheel, there are demands and then you have to think about that there are other ways of being. Now we can travel without thinking about it. I was granted a flex job last summer and now I have a job working from home. Now we see this as an opportunity. I'm half Dutch and in the Netherlands they have been working from home longer than in Denmark. I think there are new possibilities now, thinking differently around working from home. I am connected to the centre of brain injuries. I have had a lot of talks with them about the situation that corona put us in. They have been good at reaching out and asking me how I am doing. I also have some friends, where we have done different things for each other, for instance making care packages. We couldn't be together, but then we could make small cozy packages for each other. We also did things together online, for instance baking together. Imagine if we didn't have this opportunity to speak to each other online. I think that would have made people more lonely. We also arranged outdoor events, where we could be together from a

distance. There was a lot of creativity. It was hard having the family forced to be together for 24 hours. That's not something you have been used to. You had to find new dynamics. I think a lot of people had to deal with that. We had a lot of fights in the beginning. We were annoying each other. Suddenly we had a child that had to go to school from home. We were just thrown into it. If we couldn't deal with each other we would go for walks. My husband went grocery shopping a lot to get out of the house.

Specifically telling quotes: "They knew that I wasn't able to come back to work fulltime because of my blood clot. I thought it was terrible to find myself in some kind of limbo." "It's not just on the back bone anymore. The more you use words, the more it will come back again, right? When everything was locked down I didn't use my speech in the same way." "It was as if the world was in a level, that it was easier for me to follow." "I didn't have to make excuses around not having the energy, because we just couldn't be together - it was so easy."

Keywords: Chronically ill, flex job, clarification, expectations, social, fatigue

DK09

Title: Carina, found out she was gay after lockdown

Narrative: I am going to turn 30 soon, in December. I live in a small city, in my home town. I live alone in a small house. I live close to the nature, which is good, because I like to hike. I am a substitute teacher at two schools, a public school and private school. I am also a substitute at a home for disabled people. I spend a lot of time with my family. Currently, I am studying to become a teacher. I have a masters degree in English and media. I am studying Danish and German to become a teacher in elementary schools. I like the relational part of the job. I did not deal with everyday life that well during corona. I was close to getting a depression. I was in a relationship, where I did not feel comfortable. I had to re-discover myself and realised that I am gay. I moved back with my family, because the situation and relationship I was in felt toxic. When I moved home with my family I spend a lot of time taking walks with my mom. My system had to slow down and I had to find myself again. My family was already challenged with their health. As an only child I felt pressure to take care of them. A lot of my family members were ill, some were terminally ill and some died. I had to let go of control during that period. Corona also did some good things for me, because I realised that I was the place where I should be. I am grateful for all of the challenges, because reality kicked me and told me that some things were more important - even though it was really hard. "It was in a way like the Phoenix bird. Burning completely down to the ground, only to rise up again." It was a challenge in society and in terms of finding a job. I saw corona as a turning point in my life that I would not be without. During corona if I had a date I had to make sure that they would get tested. I don't worry about that as much anymore. I spend my time figuring out if I was gay and into women. I met with women and non-binary people. We mostly met outside and avoided meeting inside where there were a lot of other people.

I went on a hiking trip once. I also went to a metal festival in November last year. It was strange being at a concert again. It was the first time I was at a concert after corona broke out. It was a period where I had to figure out what I wanted. I was not only struggling I also had to figure out what I wanted after I was more relaxed in myself. I became impatient. I spoke a lot to my parents about it. I told them I was really annoyed about it. "It was like an introspection you had to do." A lot of my decisions were surrounded not bringing back corona to my two family members who had cancer at the time. I really talked to my parents and told them I didn't believe in myself when it came to being attracted to women. My parents said that I should do whatever makes me happy, they would love me either way. That terminated that part at least. "This is just who I am." "It has been a long journey." "Before I felt that I had to prove something, that I had to fit some stereotype." It's hard to explain, but I have just let go. I have taken my shoulders down. I don't have to look a certain way to be LGBT. I don't have to act a certain way to be LGBT. I can be who I am and be LGBT. If someone feels differently, that is okay as well. I feel like I have found a home. A home in my own skin and body and who I am. I chose to cut my hair short, to let go of my former role. I was in a running club during corona, where we were divided into small groups. When I moved back home I continued to run. I also did workouts at home. I went on apps to find other women to talk to and make friends. I also started drawing more. I spend time reading again and relaxing, when I had some spare time. I also had a translation company, so I would also make translations during that period. My dad helped me make a schedule, because corona had completely messed with my schedule.

Specifically telling quotes: "It was in a way like the Phoenix bird. Burning completely down to the ground, only to rise up again." "It was like an introspection you had to do." "This is just who I am." "It has been a long journey." "Before I felt that I had to prove something, that I had to fit some stereotype."

Keywords: Sexuality, rising up, personal development, self acceptance, defying stereotypes

DK10

Title: Diana, single mom working from home

Narrative: My name is Diana, I am 45 years old. I work for a public institution in an office. I live alone with my two children, a daughter that is 6 years old and a son that is 13 years old. It was hard in the beginning being completely isolated all the time. The only thing I saw was my computer screen, my four walls and my children. I felt isolated and excluded from everything. I saw my dad and his wife, and my sister and my brother. I tried to turn my camera on, when we had online meetings. I also tried reaching out to colleagues to see if they wanted to take a walk. Further along in the process, when we were sent home again, again. I told my manager I was getting crazy from being at home all the time. I lost motivation. "I felt I was going crazy." You needed a special reason for your child to go

back to kindergarten. I told the kindergarten, that my daughter had to back, because I could not keep engaging her and I also had work to do. I was allowed to sent her to kindergarten during the first part of the day until noon. It helped because I got out of the house. I know that I also had the children to wake up for, but before I would just walk around in my pyjamas all day, so it was different. It was exhausting having to deal with everything at once. It gave me more freedom, not having to be on constantly. My son could take care of himself, but I had to take care of my daughter and engage with her all the time. When I tried reaching out people were scared, because I have small children. They were scared that my children would infect them, because children were carriers of the disease. One day one of my colleagues said that she wanted to meet me to take a walk. So we did that during a lunch break. "That was golden. Just getting inputs from another adult, if you can put it like that." To hear from her that everything was not great. She also has children in the school age and pre-school age at that time. "I felt less alone. I could see other's having the same challenges." My brother and sister do not have children. My dad and his wife only have adult children. So it was hard for people to place themselves in my shoes. It was liberating realising that I was not the only one thinking things were crap. I think I appreciate the things that I can do after the pandemic. Being able to go out and for the children to go to their after school activities. If everything is a mess then I will just cook some pasta and then they should eat that. I'm better at taking things easier. Before corona I would worry about having to go home and cook and having to do other things. Now I worry less, because we will get something to eat. We will survive. Now we can do things that we want to do. I'm also appreciating being able to work from home more than I did before the pandemic. I also appreciate my leisure time more. After corona I think that more people feel pressured to work, when they are ill, because it's easier to work from home. I think it's harder to accept when people are sick. I've seen this in my colleagues. They don't call in sick even though they are really sick. When I'm sick I have to call in sick, because or else I won't be able to care for my children. But I have felt guilty for calling in sick, because my colleagues don't do the same. What really made a difference was when I got to work in the office again after I talked to my manager about how I was doing. I was in a downward spiral. My manager obviously supported me, because she knew I was alone with two children. I felt pressured from all side. My children wanted something, my employer wanted something, my son needed something for school, my daughter had to be engaged so she didn't start running on the walls. It really helped when I started having these walks with my colleague that was in the same situation as me. She could tell me that I wasn't alone. She had a husband who was also a teacher. But she understood where I came from. The understanding for my situation was very important.

Specifically telling quotes: "I felt I was going crazy." "That was golden. Just getting inputs from another adult, if you can put it like that." "I felt less alone. I could see other's having the same challenges."

Keywords: Single mom, working from home, colleagues, caretaker, responsibilities, understanding

Estonia

EE01

Title: You always have to have hope

Narrative: “As a woman with disabilities, who uses a wheelchair, I experienced different challenges over the pandemic. I have been using a wheelchair for many years and even used to sometimes compete in sports a bit, but I had had to give it up already before the pandemic, because of my health. Fortunately, I have relatively good digital literacy. Disabled people in Estonia have also quite organized and that helps—although the state of my health does not allow me to be part of the network and to contribute to it, like I used to. In Estonia, disabled people remain invisible. Many things are changing, above all in infrastructure. When I went to the university, it was very hard to move within buildings if you had reduced mobility but now this is not a problem. At least buildings now have elevators and wheelchair-accessible ramps, so there is change. But it was a problem during the pandemic, as when all medicine moved online, people like me who need therapy and access to facilities that provide it were really let down. Although we have all kinds of neat electronic systems like the electronic prescriptions service that allows you to fill prescriptions everywhere, this does not solve physical problems and people were left on their own.

Thus, the issue was not getting access to information, but rather losing my support networks and also access to some therapy I need to manage my pain. Because everybody was dealing with their own pandemic drama, the problems of the disabled did not seem very burning to society at large. It was not easy for anyone, of course. Pain haunts me to this day and it is often a struggle to find a position that would help me sit or to sleep. It is not the pandemic that made my physical situation worse; my disability is just progressing as I have known for many years. I also was laid off after the pandemic and this has made me more economically vulnerable than I was during the pandemic. My parents are still alive and I live close to them, which was a huge help but they are getting older and will need care soon themselves. At this point, though, they support me, especially emotionally but also with all the logistics during the pandemic. Speed has become a central part of our lives, but I still believe that especially in this context it is especially important to maintain ties between family members and to try to find some kind of a support from the wisdom of our ancestors. I even looked up some of my cousins online and am writing to them at least once a year, to maintain a web of connections, although we have not met face-to-face for decades, it seems. The connection that I get through e-mails seems very real to me and was especially uplifting during the pandemic.

Those connection mattered, because during the pandemic I lost my beloved partner who suffered from an autoimmune disease for decades. Although he was released from the daily suffering that he experienced, this loss has left a huge gap, because he, despite his pain, gave me so much love and hope. He also taught me resilience that has helped

me go on. His main lesson to me was to hope and this is what I also tried to remind myself of during the pandemic and now, when I do not have a job and my health is steadily deteriorating. This is not a complaint but a statement of fact. I have been in hospitals since my childhood and have come to accept my body and to think of what I can do in the world. The pandemic, my personal losses and finally the loss of my job were something of a new wake-up call. I had time to think about my life and I made the decision to go back to school and to learn a completely new field, related to pastoral care and support. Estonian society has very little support for the vulnerable and is, in fact, often careless, preferring to forget the people who are left behind. There seems to be too much anger and carelessness. Going into pastoral work seems to be one way in which I can give back to other people like me. Combining care for my health with studying is a challenge, but this has also helped me to find a new support group and a new faith. I cannot change the society around me, but I can try to change myself and try to provide attention and understanding, where it is lacking now."

Specifically telling quotes: "Although we have all kinds of neat electronic systems like the electronic prescriptions service that allows you to fill prescriptions everywhere, this does not solve physical problems and people were left on their own." "The connection that I get through e-mails seems very real to me and was especially uplifting during the pandemic." "Going into pastoral work seems to be one way in which I can give back to other people like me."

Keywords: resilience, care, disability, community, education

EE02

Title: The pandemic helped me teach my partner about care work

Narrative: "I am the mother of two young children who had just reached kindergarten age when the pandemic started. I had really looked forward to the kindergarten age, as I was eager to catch up with my career. The latter word is a bit too festive, as my work is not of such a fancy nature as to enable one to build a dramatic success story, as I work in the underpaid cultural field where nobody makes very much. What I have in mind is that our profession depends on project funding and I had not been able to write any projects to show my usefulness to my employer. In our field, bringing in project funding is expected and when financial difficulties arrive, the people who have not managed to secure funding are seen as a burden. In any case, I was eager to get out of the problem category and to start building my CV for projects when the pandemic happened and I had to become a full-time mom again when all childcare facilities closed.

I know many other mothers, naturally, and in a way the pandemic seems to have been much easier for me than many others. Not because we are rich. My salary is low and I have to take on extra jobs if I want to pay for a nanny, for example. My husband earns more, but his work is also project based. We manage, but we do not have much left over

at the end of the month and neither of us can afford to lose our present employment. What I mean is that I was relatively lucky. The support offered by the central and local governments to parents was nothing really. We were told to go home with our children and that was it. I honestly cannot think what was done to help parents like me—eventually, there was help to parents whose children had disabilities, but the other parents I think were forgotten. What helped in my case was the fact that my parents were retired already and they lived close by. They were also healthy and thus, after the really strict restrictions were lifted, they happily took in the grandchildren. This was also entertainment to them, as they stopped going out to maintain their health. The same with us: we created a small pod, to continue to communicate with my parents—and to use their childcare support.

But what was perhaps even more important was the fact that 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 realized how many things had to be done on a daily basis just to maintain a household. Seeing it 24/7 sort of opened his eyes, especially about the amount of attention that goes into daily childcare and how it makes impossible to work on anything intellectual. He had always pitched in, but now he understood the daily grind. 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, as I have always managed, but after some less-than-successful work meetings that I tried to have from our bedroom, with children jumping on the bed, we had to discuss the use of our only isolated desk in the apartment and also the need for him to be the sole minder for the times when I had to go to the empty office at work for any intellectual work that required any concentration. There were some tensions, but I put my foot down firmly and I am very glad. My husband learned to tame the children, who listen to him more anyway, and, the best of all things, 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 their 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. This is why I feel lucky."

Specifically telling quotes: "I was eager to get out of the problem category and to start building my CV for projects when the pandemic happened and I had to become a full-time mom again when all childcare facilities closed." "we created a small pod, to continue to communicate with my parents—and to use their childcare support." "Seeing it 24/7 sort of opened his eyes, especially about the amount of attention that goes into daily childcare and how it makes impossible to work on anything intellectual."

Keywords: agency, parenting, equality, care gap, right to success

EE03

Title: I realized I had to care for others

Narrative: “I am a woman of Russian origin, but with an Estonian passport. I was born in Estonia and have lived my whole life here—initially in a part of the country with majority Russian population but during my university studies I was surrounded by Estonians and I became fluent speaker of Estonian. In fact, I use Estonian at work exclusively, although Russian is a language that we speak at home with my partner, who is also an ethnic Russian, but, like me, an Estonian citizen. Our children are bilingual as well. We want them to fully fit in in Estonian society. I did not emphasize this in the last interview, but since February, passports and citizenships have gained a new meaning for everybody who lives close to the Russian border.

I and my partner both are employed: he in IT and I in education. As I explained when we spoke before, our jobs fortunately allowed both of us to work from home relatively easily, especially since I was still on parental leave and had a rather small work load. This is done now and I am back to full-time teaching and my youngest child is now already used to going to the kindergarten and every day is not a big emotional drama any more. The older children are back to school and the whole pandemic experience seems already like a blurry memory, even the tensions about vaccination that we had. My partner was not vaccinated, just in case there was any grounds in the rumors about their ill effect that spread on the internet, to make sure that both parents would not be incapacitated. I have been re-thinking this decision now and keep on wondering on the way we may have been influenced by the Russian language internet. But all is well, s neither of us got really sick, although my husband ended up having Covid.

Family and motherhood have always been central to my identity and they became even more so during the pandemic, as I have also told you before. I have always been houseproud, loved cooking and baking, even sowing clothes—but the joy was diminished when it became a duty. Although I am trained as a teacher, it was also a drain to be a teacher both online for my students and then, the remaining hours of the day, for my sons who were only gradually learning to be independent and to use the many tools their teachers used. As a teacher, I fully understand the teachers—I, too, did not want to be the teacher who just sent students home to do independent work, but, as a mother, I experienced how all the exciting things teachers cooked up drained my energy, as it was I who was learning to use all the different apps and acted as tech support. Sometimes my partner helped, but he had his work. It was great that he was able to take over when I actually had to appear on camera.

There was very little support from the local authorities. My employer at least allowed us to go to the office, if we needed, and to use the computers there. It was too hard for me to do, but some of my colleagues could only teach from office, as they had no space to separate themselves from children. Some people also got new equipment and we had tech support as well. We had the necessary tools at home already, so I did not take any of the distributed resources to leave them to people with real needs. So it would be wrong to say we were completely alone. We also helped each other—we regularly shared tips about apps that crashed, school systems that could not take the traffic. In a way, it almost seems that we developed new community spirit at work, although we did not

necessarily meet in classes. There was Messenger and Facebook.

Work was in a way a chance for me to step out of the family role. I love my family, but work was really the only break I had. We have a very traditional family, in the sense of the role division and mostly it works, but the pandemic was hard in that model as everything got done (at least somehow) at the cost of not sleeping and cutting corners at work, at last a bit. I am not sure that anything really changed in our family in a major way after the pandemic: my partner is still the main breadwinner and I am still the person who takes care of the children and of the home. I enjoy it, so it is not a burden. I wish my professional identity would be more respected at home sometimes, as I would like my children to see me, not just see me as somebody who makes them eat vegetables, but I hope this will change as they age and I will have more time for my work. And being a mother has an important social side, too! The events since February have made me think about this a lot: all these children in danger and displaced. There are some tensions about the interpretations of the events in Ukraine in the Russian speaking community, but one part of my family is Ukrainian and so there are no questions for me. It is our duty to help the children who have arrived in Estonia. I have been volunteering in a small way, too, as I would hate to think that my children would go uncared for in a similar situation. Already Covid showed how selfish people were and so I now feel it is just very important to care for each other and to leave the small world of one's own family."

Specifically telling quotes: "Family and motherhood have always been central to my identity and they became even more so during the pandemic." "We also helped each other." "Already Covid showed how selfish people were and so I now feel it is just very important to care for each other and to leave the small world of one's own family."

Keywords: motherhood, care, housework, volunteer work, community building,

EE04

Title: Estonia is not mindful of human fragility

Narrative: "I currently live abroad, although I am enrolled in a postgraduate program of an Estonian university. I lived in the town where I study but I moved to live with my parents during the pandemic to save on rent, as all the activities were online anyway and I have to economize. My parents are not rich and so my scholarship is the only income I have. In fact, one of the reasons I am currently living abroad is that it is cheaper here than in Estonia, the country with the highest inflation in Europe. I have to economize to save for the time when I no longer can get a scholarship as I am unoptimistic about my job prospects. I see competition in academia every day and although I have done OK this far, I have no illusions. So I economize.

Now that I have some distance from Estonia I have also developed an increased understanding of the levels of intolerance. I probably talked about it the last time as well,

as it has been on my mind a lot. I try to become invisible as a gay man in Estonia, especially in the small community I come from and even in the university setting. It is hard to say this, but it is 2022, and we do not have any openly gay staff, probably because of the fear of stigma. I am myself just too tired of my economic woes to be able to take on the burden to also have to explain by sexuality. It is easier to just remain ambiguous. I do not react to the casual intolerance because I am old enough to remember that you can actually get hurt. One of my young foreign friends recently got punched in his face by a stranger who yelled an abuse at him. For no reason, just for looking too happily effete. I am older and I know that it is safer to remain illegible.

It seems to me that the intolerance of Estonian society got bigger over the pandemic because people were locked into their own private tragedies. I have close friends who have small children and I really truly commiserate. My private tragedy was just the loss of access to the psychiatric care and some medical attention I could have used. But my misery was at least medicated. So I am not blaming people for being selfish, as I was also selfish.

What was very sad was how the populist politicians especially exploited the fears of the less educated people who already had been left behind by the neoliberal success narratives of the nation. Masks were politicized, vaccines were politicized by the people who sell fear of the other. The same people who before the pandemic were venting fears about gender and especially about gays and lesbians. 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. Estonia is not mindful of human fragility, as the pandemic showed very clearly. It is a society that favors the strong and sees the weak as a problem. 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."

Specifically telling quotes: "I have to economize to save for the time when I no longer can get a scholarship as I am unoptimistic about my job prospects." "It seems to me that the intolerance of Estonian society got bigger over the pandemic because people were locked into their own private tragedies." "Sometimes voting with one's feet is also a political act."

Keywords: intolerance, sexuality, economic precarity, neurodiversity, indifference

EE05

Title: I am something other than just a caregiver

Narrative: “I am already in my late sixties, but until very recently, I was also the primary caregiver of my mother who, despite being in her late nineties, was not just alive but living independently in her own home. This independence was very important, as she did not want to be a dependent, but at the same time it was also clear that she could not be left completely alone. I have siblings but I am the only daughter and, besides, since I have no family, I naturally became the primary caregiver, although I am still working and did not live in the same town as her. Fortunately, I do not have to be in the office every work day and am able to do many things flexibly and this has enabled me to spend many years now already by traveling between my work and my mother. My brothers looked in in the middle of the week, but I was the person who provided most of the care as a sort of a live-in aid. This is something that Estonian local governments do not provide. Even people with severe disabilities cannot get home care, not to speak of seniors. Laws actually mandate that it is the responsibility of children to take care of their aging parents and there are no affordable memory care facilities, not to speak of decent facilities to which people can transition from their homes. The existing facilities are either very expensive or very miserable. As my mother did not require memory care, it seemed inappropriate to talk about sending her into an institution, especially since her home was so important to her. So I just had to do this.

What made things harder was that my mother refused to get vaccinated. This was a major surprise to us, as she had higher education and was all her life intellectually active. We did not fully understand where this stance came from. We tried to persuade her, as she was in such a vulnerable age. But she refused, saying that she was afraid of injections. And what could we do? So we all had to be very careful. I got vaccinated and boosted as soon as I could—as I was already in the risk group myself, because of my own age. I got flu shots that are not required in Estonia. My job brings me into contact with many people on a daily basis and so this increased the risk: how was I to know how careful everybody was, whether they were vaccinated and took health precautions and did not come out when sick. They might not get sick, but I might carry the virus to my mother and be dangerous to her. I do not know how many times I tested myself. This added a whole layer of extra stress. My mother, by necessity, had to remain isolated to be safe. Her mobility was limited anyway and it was something of a relief that at least she could not go out and fall down and break a bone. But we then had all the burden of keeping her mood up and keeping her socialized. Most of that fell on me and this emotional work was quite a burden.

I can only, looking back, fully appreciate the level to which it wore me out. I was not able to get my work done on time and this was noticed by my superiors. They were understanding, but there is a point at which this was becoming a problem and we started to discuss my going half time at least. This was very hard for me, as my professional identity is very important to me and I have always been critical of people who cut corners. It hurt to know that my employer was right, as I was both distracted and tired. Before I had to make this difficult decision, however, my mother had to go to the hospital. This was when we got some help finally from the local social services as they also agreed that, although her problem was not major, it was unwise to let her return to her home. Being

in the hospital, though, was psychologically hard for her and she started to wane and eventually passed away. I do not blame the care system—she had had a long and good life and, frankly, it was better for this to happen in a hospital, where she was getting professional care. It would have been harder if I had had to be responsible. I really would have had to retire then. Now I am starting to feel that I am getting my life back. I can again focus on my work and, even more, I am able to do things that I had had to set aside for a while, such as going to concerts and movies again. In the past few years these visits have been guilty pleasures, both because of taking me away from care work, but also the increased risk they created, as in all of those spaces I was exposed to other people. I cannot say that I have already got back on top of my professional duties, but I feel I am getting my identity back, that I am once again somebody who is not just a caregiver who escapes to work to relax.”

Specifically telling quotes: “I can only, looking back, fully appreciate the level to which it wore me out. ” “I feel I am getting my identity back, that I am once again somebody who is not just a caregiver who escapes to work to relax.”

Keywords: care gap, gender roles, ageism, double burden, vaccine hesitancy

EE06

Title: We cannot bring back unthinking mind control

Narrative: “I am in my early fifties and I work in the somewhat precarious creative field in which we depend on projects, but my own personal position is secure at the moment because of a project. I have been in the field all my professional life and I believe that I am respected by my colleagues. I am not really an institution person in general, as I have always taken an interest in things that are considered somewhat radical in Estonia, such as environmentalism and gender. I know, they are very mainstream in Europe, but with us they still mark you as somebody who differs from the consumerist mainstream. I have not been an activist in the sense of organizing demonstrations but in the sense of just challenging norms and asking critical questions. Naturally, I try to live according to my beliefs, in a mode that could be called ecofeminist.

The pandemic was a shock to me, but in a different way from what you might expect. I was surprised how people became so afraid that they forgot all the previous habits and customs, especially how they became detached from their own bodies and experiences. The fear tactics by the government and mainstream media really worked and people who had previously been critical thinkers all of a sudden did not ask whether a vaccine that was developed so fast was effective at all. There was such a hunger to return to “normality”, at whatever cost, without thinking of what kind of a normality we actually need. There was so little challenge to the techno-fix aspects of pandemic response, without thinking about how we got to the disease, that is, destruction of natural habitats that made it possible for viruses to jump from animals to humans or to the profit-oriented

nature of today's mainstream medicine. Do not misunderstand me, I am not saying that there is no disease or that traditional medicine is evil—but it is not all we have. We have so many other ways of defining health that is more mindful of mental health and in better harmony with our natural environment. The choice that we will force everybody to get vaccinated and then we will all return to the normal as if everything was OK is to me absurd. I did not get vaccinated, because I believe that alternative medicine gives us more holistic ways of engaging with both our bodies and our minds. I got the corononavirus twice, in different mutations and it was OK, like any cold. My body adjusted. Many people in my circle of people who are environmentalists and into holistic health are the same: we try to live in harmony with nature. For me this is also a gendered choice, as the institutionalized medical system is often also quite condescending to women's agency and treat us as dumb bodies that the professionals will set right, with no attention to the specificity of the body.

I have had these views before, but I really felt that it was necessary to start to speak out during the pandemic, both in social media and in conventional media because of this massive group think that pervaded Estonia. In a society that is still so close to our totalitarian past this is unacceptable. We should remember what it felt like to be silent and, well, we see the effect of this habit in Russia now and what it leads to. We all should exercise our right to speak and express our opinion even when this goes against the decrees of the government and the mainstream opinion. Perhaps especially then. We now are seeing the rise of right-wing populism in Estonia that is capitalizing on people's fears and economic insecurity. We have to maintain the habit of criticism to have the ability to speak out against the threat to democracy and this means we have to protect and exercise the right to speak out. There are so many timid people in Estonia and this is a problem. I know that my views during the pandemic were unpopular at the time and I got some pushback from even old friends, but also some support. It proved to me that our democracy still works."

Specifically telling quotes: "I am not really an institution person in general, as I have always taken an interest in things that are considered somewhat radical in Estonia, such as environmentalism and gender." "There was so little challenge to the techno-fix aspects of pandemic response." "We all should exercise our right to speak and express our opinion even when this goes against the decrees of the government and the mainstream opinion."

Keywords: freedom of speech, gender, environment, neoliberalism, techno-optimism

EE07

Title: This has been an important first step

Narrative: "I am a 20-year old Estonian who lives in one of the larger cities in Estonia. I really cannot imagine living in a smaller place because even here the community of

people I can hang out with, without fear of prejudice, is rather small and I really need this community to whom I do not have to explain what I am. There are quite many gender-aware and even gender-fluid people at my university, but society around us seems very intolerant and this intolerance seems to have become worse during and after the pandemic, partly because some extremists have made the LGBT+ community a direct target. Without my community, I would try to leave Estonia, but I do not have the financial resources. I still live at home, because, although I work in the service industry, in addition to working, this money does not stretch that far in the local rental market and my parents do not have that much to spare. I crash with friends sometimes, but I mostly live at home.

I was assigned female at birth, but for the past 3 years I have been feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the rigid norms of femininity, especially since right-wing politicians seem to think that the only thing a woman has to do is to bear children. I did not initially want to reveal my gender discomfort even to my parents. They are actually tolerant and at least have never forced me to be hyperfeminine, but I still was not sure how they would take it, as they were raised at a time when gender fluidity was not talked about. Everything came out when my mother figured out that I was failing at school and that this was caused by depression and sent me to a psychologist. I did not want to go, as I was afraid of becoming stigmatized. Mental health issues seem to be treated as a weakness and I did not want to be called another snowflake. The wait was very long and during it I came to understand that it is easier to talk to a stranger than to people I live with. But the two-month wait was absurd. I know this as several of my friends were waiting as well. During the pandemic, that was one thing that was really hard to get, the wait times were long even in private clinics, not to mention the national health service. I have friends who really hurt, but there was no way to jump the line. In any case, I was lucky, I was seen after 2 months and was also lucky to get a young psychologist who had the right vibe and who was the first adult to whom I explained my problems. She told me to tell my parents. This all happened still during the pandemic when we were all rather isolated and so I waited a bit, as there was other tension at home and I did not want to add a new layer. When life in Estonia normalized, I talked to my mother and although I saw that she was taken aback, she has taken it rather well and seems to be quite happy to host my nonbinary friends in our home. My father seems fine as well but we actually mostly just avoid this topic.

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. At present, I am not sure I am actually in need of gender confirmation, as I am quite happy with my nonbinary identification, but I now know where to seek advice, in addition to international social media. I do not think I would have had the courage before. I am not yet ready to join more activist events, as the social intolerance is a bit too frightening, but I am now at

least more confident in my identity and more willing to join a community. This has been an important first step.”

Specifically telling quotes: “I really cannot imagine living in a smaller place because even here the community of people I can hang out with, without fear of prejudice, is rather small.” “Without my community, I would try to leave Estonia, but I do not have the financial resources.” “This all happened still during the pandemic when we were all rather isolated and so I waited a bit, as there was other tension at home and I did not want to add a new layer.” “I am not yet ready to join more activist events, as the social intolerance is a bit too frightening, but I am now at least more confident in my identity and more willing to join a community.”

Keywords: gender fluidity, gender conformity, economic dependence, mental health, community-building

EE08

Title: Being displaced is stressful on so many levels

Narrative: “I am a man of Ukrainian origin who came to Estonia to work a few years ago, right before the pandemic. Work dried up during the pandemic, but the total lockdown lasted a relatively short time and during this time Estonians seemed to develop even greater need for construction work and so it made sense to stay here and earn money and send it back home. The salaries are at least three times higher and there has been a lot of work, especially since we, Ukrainian workers, are willing to work longer hours. I think we are good in what we do and there has been plenty of work for us. Most of us are men—we work in construction, but there is another large group in agriculture, in fields where you do not need to speak the local language. Our wives used to be back in Ukraine with children. Not perfect for families, but this is how we were able to make ends meet.

The situation has become more complicated since February—when Russia attacked Ukraine, I felt my first duty was to return home and join the fighting. However, I also realized that if I returned to Ukraine, I would not be allowed to leave, as all men under 60 are to join the fighting and it is very hard for men to leave the country as refugees. So I have not returned, to my shame. My family, instead, joined me here, so that the children could be out of the harm’s way. This is very hard for all of us. Estonia has welcomed Ukrainian refugees but life has become very expensive, especially now that all the energy prices have gone up. I continue to work, but construction jobs have dried up as prices are going up. There is still work, though, and I hope that things will pick up in spring again. My wife is not working right now, as somebody has to take care of the children. They are doing their school through the Internet, as we do not want them to lose their Ukrainian skills and to fall behind on their Ukrainian school. We expect to go back, but not during the winter when there is always the danger that things like

electricity, heat and water will be gone. I feel like I am a coward, I should be there, but this way we are at least not putting our children in danger. This is also hard at the family level—my wife and children are in this new place, with no networks of support and we have had difficult moments, fights, tears.

So right now the pandemic seems very far away, frankly. There were lots of fears about Ukrainian workers and Covid-19. Some Ukrainians were even sent out of Estonia, because they went to work when they were supposed to self-isolate, despite negative tests. I read about it, as it made all of us, Ukrainians, feel insecure. Their employers wanted them to stay and work and in summer 2020 they even paid for special charter flights to fly Ukrainians in, as there is a lack of workers in agriculture. But especially in smaller places there was also a lot of suspicion of us as strangers, although we were tested. Estonians are law-abiding but were also suspicious of strangers, who were feared as sources of infection. Yes, true, Estonian rates were very low, compared to Ukraine, but still, it was not like we met many people. We mostly spent time on work sites and with our small group of workers. The xenophobia seemed to be politically motivated, but I have to say that I do not follow Estonian news and am not really part of Estonian society, but move in our small community. But the stranger is always the easiest to blame. The locals did not care what we felt, how we got tests or how we supported ourselves. They had no idea how hard life was back home and how hard we worked. The situation has got better since February, as most Estonians are very supportive of Ukraine and it was proud to be a Ukrainian. I have no complaints there. My family has been treated well, considering the circumstances, but being displaced is stressful on so many levels."

Specifically telling quotes: "Not perfect for families, but this is how we were able to make ends meet." "I feel like I am a coward, I should be there, but this way we are at least not putting our children in danger." "My wife and children are in this new place, with no networks of support and we have had difficult moments, fights, tears." "But the stranger is always the easiest to blame."

Keywords: refugees, displacement, foreign workers, xenophobia, worker identity

EE09

Title: This could have happened to us here.

Narrative: "I am a woman in my mid-fifties who has not worked for a few years already. My last job was extremely stressful, with lots of complicated personnel decisions within severe financial pressures. Every day was a battle that I could not win. I just could not motivate myself to continue. It was no longer the job I had initially taken and I frankly developed some mental health issues, as I realize when looking back. At least I did not do anything self-destructive, like many people in Estonia, like drinking. I took up exercise and kept a very healthy diet, because at least in this I was in control. Perhaps this was unhealthy, come to think of it. But it took me several years to gather the courage to leave,

as I had not really allowed myself to see the problem, the value system where you work and work and work. At my age, however, it is also very hard to start again, even when you are a skilled professional, as many workplaces indirectly discriminate against middle-aged people, especially women. I do not think I would hire myself either. The fear kept me doing a job that I increasingly disliked and was also increasingly not that great at. My husband has been making enough money for some years now, but it was still hard to make the decision to become a dependent.

But the pandemic was really the last straw. The administrative mess, the new tools that had to be learned and all the stressed out people around me. The technological solutions were all rather new to me, as I had not really kept up with these developments in my field, as my seniority gave me that freedom. There was thus a very steep learning curve. Staring at the screen for days brought it home to me that I was burned out. I made the hard decision to leave and it was a great relief. I felt that I was in control of my life for the first time in years, although I was at the same time for the first time in my life not financially independent. My husband's salary is what we live on. It is a big risk at my age, especially since I also am still about ten years away from retirement and this decision will reduce my pension as well. I am also of course very aware of the fact that my husband now will control even the shampoo that I can buy. He has always kept an eye on my expenses, even when I worked, but now of course he has every right to. But we have been married for a long time and have reached our peace. His career has really taken off now and thus we are OK.

I freelance a bit to keep myself busy and help my husband's business in small ways to keep myself occupied, but in other ways I enjoy being a housewife, above all taking care of the house and garden. When I was working full time I never had the time and I never thought I would become the person who will look at plant catalogues. But it is so much less stressful than working with people and I can see the effect of what I do and do not do immediately. I feel guilty for being unemployed, especially now, during the Ukrainian crisis. Well, I have tried to be active in volunteer work—I donate things and also my time. My husband is not really into this, as he lost some of his market when the borders with Russia closed, but I just cannot look at this suffering and do nothing. This could have happened to us here. The volunteering has also helped me to connect to new people. Before I quit my job, I had not realized how many acquaintances were from the office and these ties have not survived. I guess both I and my old colleagues are a bit afraid to reach out, as my departure was rather abrupt. I was quite alone in the first year, meaning that my ties were just within the family and family friends. Now I have started to come out of this small safe space. It has made me feel how privileged I am and I feel a stronger obligation to do something to help others."

Specifically telling quotes: "Staring at the screen for days brought it home to me that I was burned out. I made the hard decision to leave and it was a great relief." "I felt that I was in control of my life for the first time in years, although I was at the same time for the first time in my life not financially independent." "It is a big risk at my age, especially since I also am still about ten years away from retirement and this decision will reduce my

pension as well.” “The volunteering has also helped me to connect to new people.”

Keywords: mental health, stress, quiet quitting, emotional violence, volunteer work

EE10

Title: I can live like this and that perhaps more of us should live like this.

Narrative: “I have lived most of my life in a small town in Estonia, close to my parents who lived in the countryside. After their deaths, I have moved into their former home and become more of a country-person. I still hold a job in town, but my wife mostly stays on the farm. Her job was not paying that much anyway and the effort of driving both of us to town was greater than the financial pay-off. We do not have animals, but we grow enough vegetables for us, our children and, in a good year, for friends and relatives. This was not really a formal choice to slow down and to look for romantic country life, like with some of the younger couples from bigger cities who have moved to our parish in the past decade, but just what we always expected to do. We were both raised this way and this was natural. Our cousins have gone to bigger cities for careers, but we have stayed true to our roots. In an uncertain world, we can basically almost live off the grid, if we have to—we own enough forest that we can use to heat our house, we have water from the well and grow some of our own food. I am handy—I trained as a tradesman a long time ago and so I can maintain our house quite well and fix things around here, like electricity and the farm machinery that we have. We have not bought solar panels, as they are expensive, but over the past year, as electricity prices have skyrocketed, being independent like our ancestors has become very attractive. We are not some environmental radicals, but living close to nature just makes sense. I drive a car to get to work and we shop in the bigger cities, because there is not much local infrastructure in the countryside and the little there is has also dwindled even further, so that you have to go to town for doctors but also to get food beyond the basics. I am glad that we are still healthy and mobile. Yet, our village also has old-timers who also cope, as we help each other in the community.

I thought a lot about our way of life during the pandemic, as I realized that while the lives of busy people in the cities changed a lot and there was all that panic in the papers, our lives were not that destabilized. OK, the work that I did dried up, as interpersonal contact was not allowed and my job was not one of the emergency kinds. That is, I was not exactly unemployed, but at best had chance gigs for a few months and thus spent more time at home, in our farm, working for myself or, rather, for the family. It felt right. We had what we needed and we did not really lose anything that mattered. We have not travelled internationally, because we have the farm, we did not go to big events anyway, our children have children of their own and we were able to help with the care. In fact, they all wanted to move to the country now, too, as life seemed safer and, above all, saner in the countryside. We do not have burned out people here, although there are of course many people who are unhappy, as life in the countryside is hard and there are people

who drink and live off benefits. But they do not have fake needs, like needing to drive a fancy car or showing off. They just want respect from politicians who have forgotten people who work hard and remain invisible. There is a lot of talk about the green deal but many of us are living a lifestyle that is already greener than what politicians talk about. They want to convert old mining regions into I do not know what, but they should come to the countryside and look at how many people already live: close to the land, perhaps not fully sustainable, but by respecting natural diversity without the bureaucracy of EU directives and, above all, not wasting stuff. The one thing the pandemic taught me, I think, is that I can live like this and that perhaps more of us should live like this."

Specifically telling quotes: "We are not some environmental radicals, but living close to nature just makes sense." "I realized that while the lives of busy people in the cities changed a lot and there was all that panic in the papers, our lives were not that destabilized." "The one thing the pandemic taught me, I think, is that I can live like this and that perhaps more of us should live like this."

Keywords: sustainability, economic self-sufficiency, farming, off-grid life, community



Spain

ES01

Title: Giving voice to elderly women during the pandemic

Narrative: I am Anne, technician at the Women's House in Spain. I have been working in this same Women's House for approximately 22 years now. Me and the rest of professionals working there carry out many and different activities all related to women's participation and empowerment. Regarding gender violence, we could say that the Women's House is one of the main resources for women experiencing violence. In other words, it is a major gateway of access for these women. They can come to us for different reasons: they might have heard about a service that we offer and they just want to know more about it, other times women are derived from other professionals or services and, even if they are the fewest, there are women who arrive spontaneously. In any case, our first step as technicians is to do an early detection. In the majority of the situations, the women are derived either to the psychologist or to the legal service. From there on and depending on the women's situation, they are referred to the appropriate Service and/or professional. In my opinion, one of the main strengths of our working methodology has to do with the kind of attention we offer to these women from the very first moment. Also, another important element has to do with the specialized services the Women's House can offer. These Services go from psychological and legal support to understanding what they are going through in terms of violence. One of the most important things that women mention when they give us their feedback is that we do not judge them, that we accompany them, that we believe them and that we respect their time/process. But it is true that there are times when institutional violence (justice system) destroys women in separation processes, custody issues, economic issues, and so on. One of the issues that these women identify as something helpful and positive is not having to fill out a form or having such personalized attention, which makes the whole process more feasible. However, in order to maintain the quality of the attention that we, as technicians of the Women's House, offer to the women entering this network, more resources are needed. Another challenge that we, as technicians, are facing right now is how to define a feminist attention model where intersectionality is present. Looking back at the pandemic and its lockdown, I have to say that, as professionals of the Women's House, we have observed that there has been a huge containment on the women who live gender violence situations. These women knew that during the pandemic it was more difficult and more complicated to report and to get rid of the aggressor. In fact, the pandemic has been a drama for women who suffer violence because they have been locked up with their aggressors. So, in that sense, women who have been living with their aggressors for such a long time, have been absolutely contained in order not to make the spark go off. And we are still there. I believe that this fear has not yet passed. The pandemic has helped us to confirm things that we already knew: that elderly women are in a situation of impressive loneliness and that with help, support and accompaniment they are capable of doing many more things than what they think they

can do.

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: elderly women, gender violence, visibilization, participation

ES02

Title: "I was living a precarious situation, but others were suffering twice as me and I wanted to help them"

Narrative: "My name is Paula, I am from Nicaragua and I arrived in Spain 8 years ago. At the beginning I worked as a live-in domestic worker. I started volunteering for an anti-racist organisation in 2017, when we built up a group of domestic workers, and in 2019 -few months before the pandemic outbreak- I became an employee in this NGO.

When the lockdown was announced I was living with my sister and her husband. Both came from abroad few months before, they were working but lost their jobs due to the pandemic situation. Since then, I was the only one working and providing for the family. While it was hard for us as a family to endure the situation and we were scared about the future, I knew that many other domestic workers were suffering even more and I should help them. This is when, together with the team at the anti-racist organisation, we started calling domestic workers one by one, to ask them about their situation. The needs were dramatic: some workers lost their Jobs and could not afford food and accommodation; others were locked in their employer's home. We decided to collect money to respond to these basic needs. A volunteer in the association put us in contact with the local feminist assembly. We told them the needs we encountered and they helped us setting up a crowdfunding. Together we launched a video to support the campaign. Beyond the crowdfunding, we also left moneyboxes in many shops in the area to collect money. Overall, we collected around 15.000 euros that we distributed to domestic workers according to different criteria. Those people who could access some kind of income support were helped with the documents and applications, other who were left out of these measures were selected based on some criteria (families with children, victims of violence, people with no resources and living in the Street) and we distributed the money to them. As to the workers who worked extra hours without being paid, we helped them file a demand.

While the crowdfunding was underway, we tried to meet urgent needs of food and housing, by contacting the Citizens' Hospitality Network of the bigger city nearby. They even traveled to the village to distribute meals to those in need.

We also reached out to the local administration to seek help. They met with us and listened to our proposals, but in the end they did not follow them. We asked them to make an exception and register the residency of some workers who lost their job because of the pandemic. Some of these workers were lucky enough to find shelter in a friend's house, but they cannot register there, and this prevented them from accessing income support measures. The local government approved a special income support

for domestic workers, but due to the strict requirements set (e.g. residence), it was not accessible to most people. We tried to convince them that some criteria had to change for income support to be truly accessible to the ones that needed it most, but eventually they did not listen. Our initiative tried to fill this gap and support domestic workers who could not access any kind of support.

Most of the support we received with our initiative came from the third sector, from associations. People in the village were also very supportive: old ladies, families supported us... I think it is because they know us, we have a strong relationship with the territory, and for other factors as well (political orientation of the local gov.).

Later on in September 2020 the feminist assembly of a nearby village realised what we did and wanted to replicate it, so we are now in contact with them too.

What I realised back then was that we set up a network, we collaborated with each other, especially with the feminist assembly and the Citizens' Hospitality Network. Our initiative was very successful because we all mobilised a lot, each one with their contacts, and it was very fast, and the dissemination was very effective. The positive thing is that collaboration is still alive, we meet with the women from the feminist assembly of the village nearby, they want to do more to help domestic workers, with our support.

I think the pandemic shed light on the problems domestic workers are facing, and it was an opportunity for us to become a reference point for domestic workers, to build networks and involve people who empathise with our work and our agenda.

After the pandemic, we had the intention to find a cooperative or an agency to help domestic workers to regularise their situation, and to invest profits in professional training of the workers. Unfortunately, there were not enough people available to do this...we have ideas, and I hope we will realise them in the future.

We meet once per week with our network of workers and I tell them "if you have ideas, put them in practice, we will support you". I want them to know they can have the leadership, they can do things, they are part of a group."

Specifically telling quotes: "I was afraid of the situation, and I was also having troubles, but I told myself that at least I had a job and I needed to set aside my personal problems and find out how others were doing"

"When you feel somebody is supporting you, believes in what you say and thinks what you are living is no exception, that it happens to many, this makes you stronger, and gives you the confidence to speak up".

"This experience taught us that if we join forces, we can do many things. During the pandemic we did something we never did before, we supported women in need. We can join forces again".

Keywords: domestic workers, intersectionality, poverty

Title: “I need to be strong as a reed bending in the wind. I will bend but not break”

Narrative: “My name is Carla, I left Honduras 5 years ago with my son to live in Spain. I worked as a carer of elderly people. My life here has been very hard since the beginning, I left my country because of the extreme violence, and I had high expectations of a better life, but the reality here was different. When I started working, I had the opportunity of a job in the care sector, but the conditions were inhuman: I worked seven days a week, and the salary was below minimum income. The lady I was taking care of treated me very badly, insulted me, diminished me, called me names and made jokes about my weight. I was exploited, basically.

When the pandemic started, I was caring for another person with Alzheimer as a live-out worker. The lady insulted me constantly for my skin colour. Her son fired me for fear of contagion. I had no contract and I had no regular residence, so I could not do anything. I went to a Church asking for food, because we had nothing to eat. These days were extremely hard, I suffered a lot. I also received help from a local anti-racist organisation, they called me to know about my situation and gave me some money. That day I had nothing, I almost cried, thinking “there is still Good people out there, caring for others”. Later, I went for a medical check and I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had no money, no work, I felt the world was falling on my shoulder, but I thought that I had to rise like the Fenix from the dust. I asked for help, I went to social services and they gave me an allowance, a very small one that was enough for surviving at that time.

I was afraid when I went to the hospital for the treatment, because there was the lockdown and the police was controlling people in the street, but this was a life or death situation, and I thought that the sense of humanity would prevail on the law. My son looked for a job, while I was in bed recovering, he was like an angel for me at that time. But he had no residence either, so he struggled to find a decent job and sometimes he worked without being paid.

I am still receiving treatment but I am getting better. I found a person who employed me for a cleaning job through a whatsapp group. I took the risk, I called him and I told him my situation and I think he was moved by my story. The job is very hard, and after the treatment I received it was even harder, but I need it. I work by night, so I can go to the hospital during the day. Thanks to this job I could finally get a residence permit.

I don't have any family, and people here are not bad but are not making efforts to help you either. They can help once or twice, no more.

I have trouble asking for help generally, because I always considered myself as being autonomous, but I had to, because I had no energies left and there was no alternative. I don't feel shame, because it was a matter of survival.

I experienced a lot of discrimination, humiliation, lack of respect. I did not want to tell my personal story to anybody, but then I looked for a support group on the internet, and I found this whatsapp group. I read the stories of other people who were living a difficult situation during the pandemic. The group was anonymous, and I took ideas from other people on how to endure the situation. For instance, I learned to look at myself in the mirror and give myself encouragement, positive words, I gave myself hugs. This helped

me a lot and now when I feel overwhelmed I write down everything in a diary: how I feel, what happened, you see your problems go away. With the diary I channel the pressure I feel. I also pray God, one need to have faith in something, otherwise you break down. I'd like to save some money and look for a psychologist, but I want to make sure to find a good one. I don't trust the public system, I want to look for somebody who would understand and be kind. More than anything, I want to protect myself.

I heard a song during the pandemic that says "I will resist and struggle to be alive". I repeated this to my self all the time. I have hope that everything will be alright. I am still fighting, and I know I will be better."

Specifically telling quotes: "Domestic workers' situation is like being a clown: they laugh on the outside, but they are crying in the inside. They wear a mask. It is so hard..."
"I feel like the green reed which bends in the wind but does not break"
"Asking for help is hard, you feel a lot of shame, especially if you never asked for it before in your life"

Keywords: domestic work, migration, poverty, self-care, individual resilience, mutual support group

ES04

Title: Marta, a community worker in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, organised a mutual support network

Narrative: "My name is Marta, I am 43 years old and I am a community worker, I work with neighbours' associations and I promote participatory processes among neighbours. This is also part of my activism.

My lockdown has been very different from the "usual". I did not get bored or had a lot of free time. Since my work is connected to the needs of the neighbourhood, my day to day did not change a lot, except that I worked even more than before. Few days before the state of alarm was declared, we knew something was going to happen, because of the high vulnerability of this area. People here do not have savings, if they lose their Jobs... well, they don't have anything less. So we decided to set up a support network, together with a local activist, and during the lockdown I have been busy coordinating it, on top of my work. When the lockdown began, we were ready and active on social media. In few months a thousand of people joined the whatsapp group offering help with various things: preparing a health protocol, taking care of social media, distributing mobile phones... Many more groups were created and the network grew incredibly fast. At first, we helped with delivering grocery to the neighbours in need. After we appeared on national media, the network grew even more, we could reach out to people who are not on social media. Afterwards, we started receiving calls for food. Neighbours' associations helped us organise the food banks, by providing the space, and helping with the crowdfunding. We also employed a local cooperative to prepare food.

I don't know exactly why this initiative was so successful. I guess it was a mix of things.

Ours is historically a caring neighbourhood, with a great sense of community. As any participatory process, the network needed a structure, a team to coordinate everything and to take decisions, to manage the massive amount of donations. But also, to mediate among different entities and their rules. We tried not to involve politics, because the network was open to anyone. We acted strategically, and I tried to cut short criticisms, and sort things out. Most of the people who took part in the network had never participated in anything before, they saw the network as a way to help out others, and we could not exclude anyone based on political ideology.

Many people in need were not attended by social services, who were extremely overburdened. This was a huge difficulty, but we could overcome it. From one hand, social services were keen to communicate, from the other, being myself a technician, I have direct relation with the local administrations. Since we got in touch with people in need through the food bank, we could map these cases and pass the dossiers to the social services. Then, neighbours' associations put pressure on politicians to provide a follow-up of the cases.

At a certain point, we needed help distributing food, so we asked the people who were there waiting to collect their box to help us out, be part of the process. And the food bank became self-managed, until we realised we needed to change or stop, because the situation had changed. The food banks became associations, and that's how the initiative evolved after two years.

The experience was fantastic. I have great stories to tell, stories of neighbours reacting quickly to provide support to others, elderly, migrants helping each other's. And this kind of response is still working nowadays, even though the requests have lowered. This is what I learned from the experience: having faith in the human being.

With our approach of "not getting involved in politics" we worked very well. For instance, the police were aware of the food banks and allowed us to move during the lockdown. They were also more flexible with other issues, because they knew our work. The administration left us a municipal space for our activities. Politicians wanted to visit the food bank, and I said they were welcomed, on condition of coming alone and helping out with the food boxes. When they came here I told them I was on furlough myself, and I spent 4 months without receiving income, I went to the food bank myself at that time, because I needed it. But still I was 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. This network gave me a lot of beautiful things: our work received acknowledgment, it was demanding but if it weren't for this network I would probably be depressed. I met a lot of amazing people, and it was great to see so many people helping out. They don't realise they are doing much more than helping others, they do community healthcare. We also enjoyed a lot, we had fun and 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."

Specifically telling quotes: “Thanks to this network, I met a lot of amazing people, I made new friends in the neighbourhood, and this is for me what “doing community” means”.

“We also enjoyed a lot, we had fun and we de-stigmatised poverty: we treated each other’s as equals, not as poor. Poor people are often mistreated when they ask for help. We tried to de-mystify poverty and gave people what they needed, what they asked for...”

Keywords: Neighbourhood support network; strategic alliances; solidarity; poverty

ES05

Title: A single-mother fighting back against dismissal through collective action

Narrative: “My name is Carmen, I am 48 years old. I am divorced from the father of my daughters, a person with disability who is deceased, so I am the head of a large single-parent family. I have 3 daughters between 11 and 16. I am a specialised worker in a large metal company.

At the time of the pandemic, my economic and employment situation was precarious because I was the only source of income in the family, I had to pay two mortgages and I was made redundant. Back then, I asked myself “where am I going to find a job at 48? I don't have anyone who can provide me money”. The pandemic caught me on sick leave due to the death of my ex-husband. I took the leave to take care of my children, depending on how they were dealing with the grief and how everything was going to turn out. When they closed the schools it had been a month and a half since their father died, so the situation was very difficult. I had to juggle between the paperwork, the girls, and my own emotional status. The girls had their difficulties, we were constantly fighting about homework until eight-ten in the evening, it was crazy.

In May, when I started to feel a bit better, I was discharged, but due to the pandemic, the company adopted a furlough. We had a two-day general strike and then an indefinite strike, at which point the number of redundancies in each section had already been published. I did not think too much about it. We went on strike, we went to the porter's lodge and the list (of dismissals) came out, I didn't care because we were in the porter's lodge. They payed me the money and I called the bank to ask what I could do with this money because I was not going to touch it. As long as we were at the door, demonstrating and on strike, we were all united, nobody went to work and people were very clear that not a single dismissal could be accepted, it meant the tiredness of being there, the cold, a bit of stress... But it did not mean more to me because I didn't see myself out”. The situation was very hard but we were coping very well because we were very united. Everyone in the area was supporting us: the businesses around us, all the people.

We all knew that the situation was unfair and arbitrary. We were very united. The public institutions did not support us in any way. The mayors of the area came one day and had

their photo taken, but they haven't really done anything because they said it's to ensure that the company continues, but that's fictitious. We received support and solidarity from social and cultural movements, important people, schools, factories, individuals... I received support from my children's teachers.

Personally, I felt that we succeeded when the court declared the dismissals null and void. I thought "you wanted to sack me and you couldn't because you weren't right, here I am and you're going to put up with it". As a collective, the company wanted to lower the conditions of the collective agreement, to take away everything that has been achieved over all these years."

Specifically telling quotes: "As long as we were at the door, demonstrating and on strike, we were all united, nobody went to work and people were very clear that not a single dismissal could be accepted, it meant the tiredness of being there, the cold, a bit of stress.... But it did not mean more to me because I didn't see myself out"

Keywords: Single-motherhood; collective action; community support; covid-19 related redundancy

ES06

Title: Student annoyed with too much authority and too little information in the face of the pandemic.

Narrative: "When the pandemic broke out, I initially saw it as an opportunity to "slow down" and spend more time with my family. I was worried, especially for my family, especially my grandparents, but I was not afraid of the situation. The first few days were an opportunity for us to spend time together, reconnect with the family, and for my parents to rest from the long days of work. However, as the situation dragged on, as our house is very small, we began to resent it. 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. He lives right opposite the field where his animals were, so 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. Of course, on my journeys I was continually questioned by the police and the authorities, even though they already had the proof that I had obtained. Also on the trips that a group of young people used to make to help elderly people and neighbours by doing the chores and going to the groceries for them, we were constantly stopped and questioned by the police. Instead of appreciating our attitude and that we were organising ourselves to help other people, they questioned us and accused us of taking advantage of these activities to get out of the house. In addition, we were forced to shop in certain shops and supermarkets, even if they were more expensive, because they were

closer. The pandemic hit us in our last year of high school, when we had to choose our profession. Everything was limited to online classes and we received no support of any kind, neither infrastructure (at home there was only one computer and several people had to use it, nor a good wifi connection) nor guidance. In normal conditions there is a counsellor who talks to the students and gives them advice. We had none of that. I chose my profession a bit blindly, talking to my friends and looking for it on my own. As a consequence of all this I think we are in a corrupt system, where decisions are made without consulting the people and only to favour a few. I understand that it must not have been easy for them either, but if they had done things differently, it would have been easier.

For example, curfews were imposed on us and we were given curfews and time slots to go out, but if we were going to the shops, for example, is it normal for police cars to follow us to check where we were going or if we left home earlier or arrived a little later? On the other hand, there was the surveillance to which we were subjected by society: people watching from their windows what we were doing, how many of us were there or if we left the doorway 5 minutes earlier. All this makes me very sad and I think that this society has no future. Of course, I am aware that deep down I was also lucky. Imagine what it was like for women suffering from gender-based violence, for the homeless, or for migrant families crammed into a house. Imagine the elderly people living alone who could not receive a single family visit in the whole confinement. Or those who died alone. 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. There are also people who still have physical after-effects: for example loss of physical condition or after-effects on smell and taste as a result of the disease.

If all this were to happen again, if we were faced with another crisis, it is clear to me that I would not act in the same way. I would no longer be satisfied with information from the media, I would inform myself through other channels. And I would mobilise, even if that meant breaking the rules. There is no point in going out to applaud the health carers and then doing nothing to change things. We need to get back to being willing to promote social change and stop letting ourselves be carried away by pure individualism: young people are demotivated and demobilised, and if we don't manage to re-engage with activism, there will be one crisis after another."

Specifically telling quotes: If all this were to happen again, if we were faced with another crisis, it is clear to me that I would not act in the same way. I would no longer be satisfied with information from the media, I would inform myself through other channels. And I would mobilise, even if that meant breaking the rules. There is no point in going out to applaud the health carers and then doing nothing to change things. We need to get back to being willing to promote social change and stop letting ourselves be carried away by pure individualism: young people are demotivated and demobilised, and if we don't manage to re-engage with activism, there will be one crisis after another

Keywords: decision-making, youth, inconformism, mobilisation

ES07

Title: Education during the pandemic. The experience of a girl in a child protection home

Narrative: I am Aisha, a 17-year-old teenager living in a foster home for teenagers in Spain. I have been living in this foster home since September 2019, but I first entered a child protection home when I was 8 years old. I cannot live with my parents, after my two older siblings and myself were declared destitute due to inadequate parenting by my father and mother. My father is a foreigner and currently lives in a North African country, my mother is a native, born in Spain, but she has personal and financial difficulties and cannot take care of her 6 children. In March 2020, when the pandemic started, I was 14 years old and in the second year of secondary school, although I am not a very good student (I don't usually get very good marks) but I more or less managed to pass all the subjects. During the pandemic I followed the classes from home, on the computer. I didn't have my own computer, but they gave me a device from the school, through which I connected to all the classes. During that year I found the subjects a bit easier, at least the teachers helped you more, because there were fewer exams and more exercises and worksheets that we were asked to do and that we had to hand in so that the teachers could correct us and give us marks. I'm not going to say that I passed the course because it was easier because of the pandemic, although I think that in part they did make things easier at school. On the other hand, my relationships with my classmates also changed a lot. It's not that before the pandemic I got on badly with them, but I had my group of friends outside school and I had very little contact with my classmates. During the confinement, we used to video call each other every day after school. As we were bored at home, we stayed connected and talked a lot with each other, we started to tell each other things about our lives, our families, etc... and the truth is that my relationship with them improved a lot, now I have more friends than before the pandemic, because in addition to my usual friends, now I also have friends from my class... I have more friends than before the pandemic.

Specifically telling quotes: "For me, confinement was easier. I didn't fail any subjects in the confinement. I'm not going to say that I passed the course because of that, but it was easier. We didn't have to take global exams. They sent you worksheets to do by post and you did them. And then, when we went back to school, we handed them in. And there weren't a lot of exams either, like in the subjects, as well as technology, religion and all that stuff we did forms" "It's something I can share with everyone, because it's happened to everyone. We've done things that... if there wasn't the confinement, it wouldn't have happened". "At school I made other friends." "Being so much time with the mobile phone and with technology, I did relate more with people" "Then there is also the issue of teachers. I also saw that they were more attentive... they helped me a lot". If you had any doubts and they came, they explained it to you". For all the exams I need to study for, the teachers come and help me, they are there with me". During the

pandemic, if you were on the phone and you didn't understand the teacher, I called them to ask for help. For example, I used to mute the call, tell the teacher to come and explain to me and that's all."

Keywords: neglect, adolescent, woman, protection home, basic education, pandemic, technology, inequality, academic support, resilience, social relations

ES08

Title: I feel privileged, despite all difficulties, I have beautiful friends and the group of elderly women for mutual support

Narrative: "My name is Candela, I am 66 years old and I live alone since many years. I am divorced and have adult sons. For many years I had trouble at work and this put me into a critical financial situation.

Now I am retired and fortunately my situation has improved financially, but back then, in January 2020, I put a room to rent and a girl came to live with me. Then the lockdown came and we were locked in the house together. At first, I was afraid this forced cohabitation would undermine my privacy, but then the experience was very positive. I was happy we could share those months together. The cohabitation was very smooth, it was respectful and enjoyable. I guess few people can say the same. Although we had very different personalities, we managed to make some compromises. Each of us had their tasks at home, we did the grocery shopping together, we talked and shared, but we respected our own spaces...these kind of things for the quiet living. I liked to throw out the trash by night and stay in the middle of the avenue for a while, enjoying the silence and the loneliness... there was nobody outside. I did not think it could work but it did and it was very positive. I feel privileged. It would not have been the same without her.

In the same period, I went for a medical revision and I was diagnosed with a lung cancer. I had surgery very fast, after the lockdown, but I went to the hospital alone, since there were still some measures in place. It was like a hurricane hit me... I was not really aware of what was happening. It was so fast.

I still wear the mask in public spaces, since the pandemic I have this habit...to protect myself, and in this sense, my flatmate was the same, both of us were very careful. Can you imagine if I lived with a person who did not respect the rules?

I am involved in a support group of the neighbourhood, and during the lockdown they started to get organised in order to provide help. I wondered what could I do? Before the Covid, I was learning how to sew, and I liked it a lot, so I started sewing masks using old bed sheets, to help the group. I felt useful. It is impossible for me to look the other way: I am not a nurse, a doctor, but I needed to do something. I keep contributing in the group also today, with the food bank and the clothes bank. There is a lot of people in need and I like to help, it makes me a better person. I have always fought for the good causes I believed in. I was in trade unions when I was young, and I still need to get involved and fight.

We have a whatsapp group with the neighbours, and during the lockdown we went at the windows clapping, but we also cooked for each other and left the food on the doorstep as a gift. We already had a great relationship, but it became even stronger. We are always ready to help each other's. These bonds that were established in such a difficult moment have a great importance.

I am very happy of living alone, besides, I have great friendships and we support each other's. Despite all the difficult moments I lived, I feel privileged. Me and my friend never stop caring for each other's.

Moreover, 3 years ago I joined a group of elderly women, promoted by an organization. It was a difficult moment in my life, I felt I needed to share my experience with other's and indeed, it was beautiful. It was a life-saver and it helped us healing. I have friends, but when I have a bad period, I close myself off. Meeting this group allowed me to share my problems with people who were experiencing similar situation.

Supporting others helped me heal from my own problems. We built important connections. What we have is difficult to obtain, now it's been a couple of years since we meet on our own, outside the project. Since we are on our own, problems started to emerge, but couple of us managed to involve the group into a conflict resolution workshop. Having this group is a luxury, having a space to meet. They are giving us, elderly women, a space, an importance, they are listening to us...we feel very grateful.

People ask how we did it, how does the group work. We care a lot about each other's, about the group. These women are part of my life, they are my friends. "

Specifically telling quotes: "It is impossible for me to look the other way: I am not a nurse, a doctor, but I needed to do something. So I started sewing masks".

"With my neighbours, we are always ready to help and ask favours to each other's, as if they were my children. We established strong connections, and affection. These bonds that were established in such a difficult moment have a great importance".

Keywords: Elderly women; poverty; mutual support; solidarity

ES09

Title: An elderly woman who cared for others all her life finds ways to take care of herself through social interaction

Narrative: "My name is Isabel, I am 70 years old, I was a nurse until 2 years ago when I retired. I am a widow living alone, but my daughter and nephews live in the same apartment, so we are very close.

The pandemic was a very intense period for me, the lockdown caught me when I was recovering from a surgery, so it basically extended my confinement at home. When the schools closed and my nephews were at home, I prepared the meals for all the family, and then once my daughter went back to work, I took her by car, since commuting by public transport was not safe back then.

I felt very lonely during the pandemic, and I had nothing to do, since I could not attend

to my courses, and during those moments when I was alone, something strange happened. I started remembering sad moment of my past, about my parents, my family. These were memories I removed, because they were very sad and intense. I suffered a lot during that period.

I have a very great friend who is my only support, because I have a conflictive relationship with my daughter. However, this friend had her own troubles during the pandemic so I could not count on her, I was by myself. Eventually, at the end of 2021, I started going to therapy and it helped me a lot to manage my feelings and to talk about everything that happened to me.

At the end of 2019, I joined a group of elderly women who meet every week. The group was coordinated by a cooperative, they proposed to us a number of activities. It is great, because we have a nice space to meet, we have been doing projects with the university in the neighbourhood. It is very enriching; I like it a lot and I think we are very lucky for all the amazing things happening to us. At the beginning I was a bit sceptical about the group, but then we became very close with the other women. During the pandemic, we called each other's and made a chain of phone calls. I phoned more than one person, to check how they were. Ours is a very diverse group, there are women around 60 and others who are 80 years old, some have high-level education. We practice meditation, exercises to relax and other activities. Being in the group was very helpful for me, it gave me a reason to wake up and go out in the morning.

When finally the situation improved I could go back to attend my usual activities, the sewing course and the furniture restoration course. I like to attend the afternoon class, because I can be with younger people and it's very stimulating. They come to the course to take a break from their work, to relax, and I like this spirit. With them, I feel that I can be myself and show sides of my personality that are usually hidden, like my sense of humour.

I am a curious person and I like to be informed about many things and share information, people who don't know me well usually misunderstands this and think I am a know-it-all or I want to show-off, but it's not that way.

I have always been a carer and it is difficult for me to take care of myself or let others do that. I am very strong, I can stand everything on my own. But I started talking about some personal issues only recently, so it is difficult for me to share. The sewing and the restoration courses are a moment for myself. "

Specifically telling quotes: "I am a carer, it's very difficult for me to let others take care of me"

"I like going to the sewing course and the furniture restoration course in the afternoon. There are younger people, very diverse, and they come to take a break from their work, to relax. I like to be with them, I feel I can be myself and show some hidden aspects of my personality, like my sense of humour".

Keywords: elderly woman; care role; social interactions; loneliness; health

ES10

Title: Putting out fires using my personal mobile phone and the coordination among professionals during the lockdown

Narrative: “My name is Atenea, I am a psychologist and currently working in an office of Equality and Attention to victims of gender violence, which is part of a network of offices belonging to the Women's Institute. I started working there in the year 2011. Regarding gender-based violence situations, I have to say that this office represents the women's main entrance to the existing Services in this region. In this sense, we are in charge of providing these women with information, orientation and counselling. Also, and depending on the seriousness of the women's situation, we derive them to specialized Services such as psychological and/or even legal assistance in case they want to file a report. But these procedures and this way of taking care of the women we were in charge of, dramatically changed due to the pandemic situation. When going back to this period of time, talking as a professional of the Service, I have to underline the feelings of loneliness and abandonment we felt from the regional administration. It has been thanks to the local administrations' responsibility that we, as professionals, have tried to do our best with the scarcity of tools we had at that time. During the lockdown, it was just me and my personal mobile phone. Both of us trying to put out fires in a worldwide pandemic situation. I did it the best that I could, taking into account that my only resource was my personal mobile phone. Despite the intricate circumstance we were going through, there was something very important for us, for me and for my colleagues, that helped us with our daily responsibility and duty of giving an appropriate answer to the women that needed us. This was our Services' cooperation with the national police. Do not get me wrong, this cooperation existed prior to Covid-19, but it was sporadic coordination that only happened intermittently. During the pandemic and after, alliances were strengthened, and currently, these alliances have continued and have been reinforced. In fact, as a result of this reinforcement, the VioGén group has been created. This group, which is composed by three police officers, dedicates exclusively to the monitoring of protection orders for victims of gender violence. Although this group already exists in other regions of the country, I like to think that the close experience our Services had during the pandemic has been able to reinforce and promote its creation in our region. ”

Specifically telling quotes: “I have to underline the feelings of loneliness and abandonment we felt from the regional administration”

“During the pandemic and after, alliances were strengthened, and currently, these alliances have continued and have been reinforced”.

Keywords: gender violence, assistance to victim's of gender violence, lockdown measures, professional's coordination

Finland

FI01

Title: Ritva founded an online group to cheer up all living in quarantine-like conditions

Narrative: "I'm a 75-year-old woman, I don't have children and, after divorcing about twenty years ago, I have lived on my own. This house that I currently live in was built by my parents and I was born in here. I've been retired for about ten years; before that I worked as a researcher. I was very interested in computing when it began in the 80's and I continue to be interested in ICTs. Before the pandemic, I was active in Enter ry, which organizes guidance and courses for elderly persons in using ICTs. Also, I was active in organizing friend groups for lonely elderly persons through the Finnish Red Cross.

When the pandemic began in Finland, the Government announced that people over 70 years of age should live in quarantine-like conditions. This happened on 16th March 2020. Only a few days later, on 18th of March, I founded a Facebook group, with the aim of "cheering up us who live in quarantine-like conditions". I invited some of my friends to join and allowed them to invite their friends, too. The first members were, for example, my former colleagues, people from friend groups that I had organized, and people that I knew through my voluntary work in Enter ry. The Facebook group was public so that you could find it from Facebook and request to join. When we ended the group the next autumn, there were 78 members in the group.

In the Facebook group, we shared both important information related to Covid-19 policies and everything funny and entertaining. For example, we shared information on how to order food online, when the groceries were open for risk groups, and how to take video calls with a phone. We even shared information on how to draw up and share a plan on how we want to be treated medically if we are not anymore able to communicate our will. These plans can be shared in the Government health records system My Kanta Pages. Also, we discussed our feelings regarding the life in quarantine-like conditions and discussed the regular briefings that the Government provided on its Covid-19 policies. In this group, most people took the Government recommendations quite seriously. I remember that once someone asked if others thought it would be safe if she took a tram to the centre to buy more yarn for knitting, but others advised her not to. In addition to more formal things, we discussed different newspaper articles and everything funny; we shared our old photos, funny jokes, and once we shared pictures of the paintings we had in our homes, with small stories attached to the pictures.

The group was very important in sharing information on what one could do in quarantine-like conditions. For instance, I posted information on opera, theatre and concert streams, and on online art exhibitions. Some of these, I posted as events so that we could watch them at the same time and then discuss them. Once a week, we had a movie night. Also, I posted information on various live gymnastics streams every day and

took part in these myself as well. Some members of the group were interested in baking or handcrafts, and shared information on these. We shared photos of the nearby environment. During that spring, I made little walks twice a day and saw the detailed signs of the spring in nature better than ever. That spring was very beautiful.

In April 2020, we had our first Zoom meeting with the people in the Facebook group. After that, we had a Zoom meeting once a week in May and June. On 15th June we met outside, in a beautiful park nearby my home, in which I had taken many pictures during that spring. We were supposed to close the Facebook group after that final meeting as the Government had announced that we do not need to live in quarantine-like conditions anymore. However, we decided to let the group continue for a while. I closed the group in the autumn 2020. Before that we organized many nice trips and outings during the summer. For instance, we visited many amazing islands that are located very close to the centre of Helsinki.

In the autumn 2020, I founded a new Facebook group. This one is not a public group and there are somewhat less people in it, around 25 persons. With this group, we continue to share information on cultural events and other interesting things. It is a good forum to ask a friend to join a theatre play or a short trip. For instance, we have visited lighthouses in Finland together with some of the people in the group. It has been challenging to organize theatre and concert trips in those occasions that events have been cancelled, which has happened quite often during the two years of pandemic. However, this has not been a big problem for me; I still love to organize these trips together.

I'm very happy that I was able to stay active during the lockdown, too, and to help some other people to stay active as well. "

Specifically telling quotes: "All the members could invite and accept new members to the group. On the day that the group was founded, I wrote this: "Everybody can accept new members to the group. Invite your own friends, let's see what comes out of this! I will go through the friend groups I've hosted, I might find some new members to invite from there, too. Let's aim that no one will be alone at home, as the Government kindly wishes, too." So, I think I founded the group for myself, but also for others.'

'We [in the group] followed how the signs of spring developed. It was a lot of fun. I've never followed all the little signs of the spring in such detail as then. Now I'm familiar with all the amazing Mayday trees nearby, and the lilies of the valley, I had not really noticed them before. I walked every day on top of the hill of the historical park. And I took a picture every day - not the first day as it was rainy - but then I took pictures every day and shared some of them in the group.'

'At the time, many event streams were created. I shared these, and others shared them, too. Of different opera streams, for instance, by our Finnish Opera, Metropolitan Opera, and Napoli Opera, I think. Many Opera houses around the world began sharing these

streams. The times were quite important, some other page, “seniorsurf” or something, had wrong times on their page. They forgot the time difference. I then told them that and they fixed it. It was important to put right times as the streams were available for certain times, and then they were closed.”

Keywords: online group, social networks, peer support, over 70 years of age, quarantine, preventing loneliness, ICTs, cultural events, physical exercise, nature

FI02

Title: Johanna created initiatives to help communities through digital platforms

Narrative: “I’m a 51-year-old woman. Before I worked with other topics, but when the social media break through happened in Finland about a decade ago, I understood that there is so much potential in these networks and wanted to do something around it. I founded a company and an NGO together with a few other people, to create various social networks and encounters via digital platforms.

When the pandemic began, I continued my work within these organizations and was involved in many projects that discussed how the civil society could respond in the situation. Our organization developed some special initiatives, which aim was to help other people to survive during the pandemic. For instance, we have a service called [name of the service] that connects neighbours with each other, and we quickly launched an addition for Covid-19 aid, such as shopping for your neighbour. Many people offered their help there, and some found help. However, many who would have needed help probably did not find the service. I think it would be very important to find ways to connect people with those who leave nearby them. If all people had a few phone numbers of their neighbours that they knew they could call for help and support, this would create a lot of resilience during crisis. I understand that people are hesitant to connect with their neighbours because they don’t want to lose their anonymity in the neighbourhood. However, I will search for solutions to change this. Our current service is still up and running but not very active at the time. It is difficult to gain the critical mass for continuation, and we also don’t have funding to develop it further.

As a small organization, we are very agile, and can sometimes offer help much faster than public authorities. For instance, after one month of Covid-19 restrictions, the city of Helsinki and the Lutheran church co-organized a food service, which helped particularly elderly people, who were recommended to live in quarantine-like conditions. This was a very good thing, but it took a month to put up. People need help faster, and this is where small organizations and communities can do a lot. This is not always organized very well in Finland, where people expect that it is primarily the Government that helps them. We need several various kinds of support networks to increase resilience.

Another service that we founded during the pandemic was an additional to our

crowdfunding platform called [name of the platform]. We founded a special additional to this platform that provided artists, event organizers and restaurants an easy possibility to apply for crowdfunding when they faced problems during the pandemic. I think it took two days to set it up: one day for visual design and one day for technical construction.

We applied for Covid-19 aid ourselves, too, and got Business Finland funding for developing our services in the long run. This was very good for our organization, and the new service we developed with this funding will be launched soon. However, I think it would have been even better if our organization got funding for those services that we developed for helping other companies and organizations to survive through the pandemic. Then we could have, for instance, advertised our services better at the time when they were very important.

In my personal life, the pandemic affected my working conditions. Me and my husband were both working remotely, and the children were a lot at home, too. Partly I think that was cute and cosy, but at times it was tricky as well. For instance, if me and my husband had meetings at the same time, we had to decide whose meeting is more important and reserves more privacy. It is also possible that children's culture changed during the pandemic. Our 11-year-old is still spending a lot of time at home. Her school might end at 1 pm, and then she comes home and meets her friends online. We cannot change this culture alone, but I think it would be good for them if they met each other outside, too, or even in a shopping centre.

There are also some activities that gave me strength during the pandemic. One of them was to ice swim in the sea. I had particularly one friend with whom we went to walks and swam in the icy sea throughout the winter. It is always a trill, and something to look forward to when it is very dark outside and other outdoor activities are not so tempting. Sometimes the public saunas were closed, and sometimes it was possible to use them, too. Ice swimmers became an important community for me as well."

Specifically telling quotes: "People in cities live very close to each other. How could we use the potential that this closeness creates? Our service tries to do just that. But we are quite small, and it is difficult to reach a critical mass. I wonder if there could be some kind carrot that would inspire people to get involved, or if cities could be designed better so that it would be easier for inhabitants to meet each other.

When the pandemic began, we quickly launched the Covid Aid Service. Many people offered to help their neighbours there. And some of the people found help through the service. However, some of those who mostly needed help probably could not find the service. Still, we were very fast. The civil society responded quickly. I participated in many networks where we thought about good solutions, and people gave their neighbours papers that told they could help them.

We also went to ice swim without sauna. You just wear a lot of wool, and the swimsuit

underneath. It's a thrill! It's been important for me for a few winters, it is important to find pleasures during the dark time of the year. It has been a big change in my life that I began to go walks and ice swimming with one of my friends. I also got to know the other swimmers."

Keywords: societal development, civil society initiatives, neighbourhood help, remote work, entrepreneurs, cultural sector, performing artists, restaurants, crowdfunding, nature

FI03

Title: Loosing all income as massage therapy entrepreneur

Narrative: "I'm a 29-years-old woman and visually impaired. I work as a massage therapy entrepreneur.

When the pandemic began, I lost all my customers for a long time. Even today, some are still afraid to come. This is a contact profession that cannot be done as distance work. During the first two months of the pandemic, there was maybe one person, who wanted to book an appointment. Yet, I did not get any support from the Government. At first, when I heard that companies would be supported because of the pandemic, I was very thankful and thought I could get that support, too. However, I was not able to get any. I feel very bad about it, as if my work would not matter. I don't understand how I survived economically.

In the beginning, I was afraid of Covid-19. I didn't want to get it and I also worried for my close people, who belong to risk groups. I didn't go out. I lived with my mother at the time, and I didn't have much of my own space. I remember when the personal assistant took me to walk in the forest the first time during the pandemic, I think it was in April 2020, and it felt amazing. Just to be around people felt very good, as I am a very social person. It would have been easier if I had a trained dog with me, but I didn't. Later, I have not been as isolated as in the beginning. Today, I also live on my own.

I only had to pay half of the rent for my workspace during the time when there were no customers. This was helpful for me and probably for many of us here. However, it meant that our association lost money, as we rent our workspace from our association. It was still a right thing to do at the time. I'm a board member of our association.

Once, during the worse times, I got a call from the entrepreneurs' association "Suomen Yrittäjät". They simply called to ask how I was doing. That call felt very good. I had to tell I am doing very badly as I don't have any customers. However, it felt good that somebody cared.

When there was a recommendation to wear a face mask, I did it. I remember that it was

very hot during the summer and wearing a mask at work was very difficult. I felt I could not breath properly. Nowadays I use mask only on customers' request. Also, it is not as problematic when it is not so hot anymore.

In my personal life, I survived because of music. I play myself and I sing, and I listen to music. I could play music everyday and it kept me going. With music, I can process my feelings. Speaking to others helped as well. I just had to survive. I was not ready to give up working. I love my work."

Specifically telling quotes: "Customers disappeared. Even today, there are some customers who are afraid to come. In the beginning of the pandemic, there were absolutely no customers. Yet, I received no funding that was provided for companies.

First, when I heard that companies would be supported, I felt very thankful that we are helped. That we are not alone. But then it didn't go as I thought. After that, I felt like, not really bitter but, I thought I cannot believe that it really went like this.

I did not go anywhere. I don't know why, perhaps I was afraid in the beginning of the pandemic. If I had a trained dog, it would have been great. But I didn't have a dog. In April 2020, I decided to go out to walk in the forest with an assistant. It was a life-saving event. It was exiting to be with other people after being at home for such a long time. I'm a social person, it was fantastic."

Keywords: disability, visually impaired, lack of own space, environmental justice, financial trouble, entrepreneurs, contact profession, music

FI04

Title: Working as medical doctor with elderly patients

Narrative: "I'm a 75-year-old man. I work part-time as a medical doctor in a rather small family company. I have retired from my post as a professor of geriatric medicine but continue to do research as well. I'm married and one of my three children is still living at home with us.

When the pandemic began in Finland in 2020, we closed our company for one month and provided only online appointments. However, after one month we estimated that not providing face-to-face appointments for our customers was more harmful than providing appointments with a low risk of transmitting Covid-19. We opened the clinic and were of course very careful; we used face masks and increased hygiene. Our customers are elderly people, who are vulnerable in many ways. Not providing appointments is risky, too, as many need regular follow-up appointments and medicine needs to be adjusted. The pandemic did not erase other diseases, which need to be taken care, too. There were somewhat less customers than normally in April and May

2020 but after that, customers have booked appointments normally. We provide physiotherapy, too, and those services were not used for a long time. Nowadays people go to physiotherapy normally, too.

Half of the revenue in our company comes from training professionals. This side of the business stopped almost completely when the pandemic began and has recovered very slowly. We soon began to provide online trainings. However, organizations do not buy as many trainings as before and they do not pay as much for online trainings as they did for face-to-face trainings. As I've got my pension, this was financially not such a big problem for my family. However, it was a big loss for the company. I can only imagine how many small companies have suffered during the pandemic, particularly in those industries in which face-to-face contact is crucial. Yet, Covid-19 funding was provided for all companies that wanted to develop something and companies in these face-to-face industries did not necessarily get any funding.

I feel that the Government did some mistakes in providing information to citizens. Some people got very scared of the information and recommendations, stopped meeting other people altogether and stayed alone at home. The physical condition of some of my patients has gone down significantly because of the pandemic. Also, I remember that when our Prime Minister Sanna Marin stated that people should not travel to their cottages, I thought that it would have been a very good time for many people to travel to their cottages and avoid catching the virus in the cities. I think it would have been better if the experts provided the information, rather than the politicians.

Overall, the reactions to the pandemic showed in many ways that people over 70 years of age are not valued in our society. We are seen as people, who just stay at home and can do their groceries at 7 am. Also, I doubt that all elderly people, who died because of Covid-19 in elderly homes, were taken care appropriately. The age is looked at as a number although we should always look at the actual health condition of an individual. One of the big mistakes was that Covid-19 spread in elderly homes. This could have been prevented better through systematically testing all the staff members in elderly homes.

In the moment, Covid-19 is not discussed anymore although there are still many cases. Perhaps there is only space for one topic of discussion at the time. It is good that people are not overly scared, of course. However, the Covid-19 might still mutate and become nastier. Also, in the future, we might experience a bad influenza pandemic, which has been postponed with all the Covid-19 related restrictions. It is thus important to take both Covid-19 vaccination and influenza vaccination.

In my personal life, I don't think I have been very much affected by the pandemic. Two of my children, who are currently studying, faced problems in distance studying and this was the most severe problem in our family that the pandemic caused. Of course, we also did not travel anywhere for two years, which is unusual for us, and we did not attend many cultural events as not many were even organized."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: over 70 years of age, elderly, medical doctor, work, entrepreneurs, politics

FI05

Title: Living with Long Covid

Narrative: "I'm a 76-year-old woman. I live with my husband, and we both got Covid-19 in early November 2020.

Up to that point, we had been very careful; we wore masks and even rubber gloves when we visited somewhere. We were not as careful within the building we lived in. At that time, my husband had a study that was located in the same building, but separate from our apartment. Next to that study, there was a construction workers' break room. He got the infection first, and it's possible he got infected there. When we tested positive, we placed a paper note on our door and in the main gateway to the building. We wanted to inform our neighbours that we had Covid-19. However, the note was removed for fear that it would cause panic in the neighbourhood. I think it would be better if there was some formal guidance on how to inform one's neighbours. Then, the management could not simply remove such notes.

My Covid-19 was originally rather mild. I was able to stay at home for the whole time. My daughter brought me food and left it behind the door. I was very tired, and I lost my sense of smell and taste. Also, I was very weak afterwards. I remember when I went out for the first time after my doctor told me it was possible, the short walk to the pharmacy felt like a very long way to go. I'm grateful that doctors and nurses communicated with me during the whole time I was ill. When I had recovered, they also encouraged me to return to normal routines and to go out again.

My husband had a very serious version of Covid-19. He was hospitalised very soon after we had been tested positive. Altogether, he spent about seven weeks in four different hospitals, including a period in intensive care. I don't think I understood the severity of his illness at the time, as I was feeling very sick myself, but I now think he was very close to death at one point. He recovered, however. We are very thankful for the Finnish health care system. We didn't have private insurance, and we were cared for by the public health care system. The personnel communicated with us very well during the whole time and my husband was very well taken care of. In the main Covid-19 hospital, he was placed in a room with twelve other patients. This was rather tiring for him as he is already 80 years old. However, later, in another hospital, he got a private room and was able to recover there in peace. My husband was discharged in December 2020.

When we had thought that we had recovered from Covid-19, I felt that there was something wrong in my upper body in January 2021. I was told that I had pericardium

and an infection in my lungs and my gallbladder. My gallbladder was removed in March 2022. May 2022, I was diagnosed with an infection in my left leg caused by Covid-19. I will remain a heart patient for the rest of my life, and I am receiving medication for that. Before having Covid-19, I was healthy and did not have any of these illnesses.

Life goes on, however. We are grateful that we can still do many things. We just returned from a visit abroad to visit my husband's relatives. I think this was one of the best visits we have ever had there, it was so touching to meet everybody again. Some people were surprised that I still dare to fly with my heart problems, but I think it is very important to do things in life, and not to live in fear or grumble all the time. This has also been a typical attitude in my family. I guess I have inherited this forward-looking attitude towards life from my female relatives.

The restrictions during the pandemic have not affected us much. We have been recovering from Covid-19 for such a long time that we would not have been able to go to concerts or other cultural events even if they had been available. We had enough entertainment at home."

Specifically telling quotes: "We got tested for Covid-19 because we had some symptoms. We got tested in the morning and the same day, before five p.m., we got a call that we had Covid-19. We were very surprised. It was Tuesday. The next day we got several calls from doctors and nurses, who gave us instructions what to do. I mentioned that my husband's strength had diminished. They said that if that continued, we needed to go to the Covid-19 clinic in Laakso. We went there on Thursday. He had to stay but I remember that, at that point, I was even able to walk several kilometres back home from there.

I'm grateful that doctors and nurses stayed in contact with me all the time when I was sick. It was perhaps partly because they gave me information about my husband, too, particularly when he was in intensive care. But they also took care of me in their calls. When I had been at home for about ten days, the doctor told me I didn't have to stay at home any more and that it was time to go out and walk for ten minutes.

I am a Long Covid patient. I think the doctors communicated with me well, regarding my illness, and prescribed me treatments and medicine. Of course, it feels bad that I have lost my health. I used to be quite healthy. Now, I will be a heart patient for the rest of my life. Long Covid has caused also various infections in my body. Last March, I had my gallbladder removed due to infection."

Keywords: Covid-19, Long Covid, intensive care, over 70 years of age, public health care, thankfulness, neighbourhood

FI06

Title: Returning to Finland after living abroad for decades

Narrative: "I'm a 53-year-old man. I was born and raised in Finland but have lived for most of my adult life abroad, in different countries. When the pandemic began, I lived in a South American country, where I had been living for about ten years. There, the lockdown was very harsh. Everything was closed and one was only allowed to visit bank, pharmacy and do groceries. I lost my job because of the pandemic and, as there was no social security, I did not get money from anywhere. My friends from Finland sent me money and that's how I was able to survive. However, at that point I decided I need to come back to Finland. Also, I lost my apartment as the owner wanted to do something else with it because of the pandemic and was only able to rent one room for myself.

Returning to Finland was not easy. European countries arranged evacuation flights as many people were in a similar situation as I was. However, I did not leave at that time, in the very beginning of the pandemic. When I wanted to leave, I had to get a normal flight. However, I was not able to do that due to some visa issues. In the autumn 2020, I was already at the airport when it turned out that I could not enter the plane because of some problems in my visa. I spent another five months in that country before I got court's decision that allowed me to leave due to humanitarian reasons. I was without a place to stay again at that point because I had given up my room since I thought I was leaving. I was able to arrange another room for myself for the last five months, though. It was a very boring year. I spent almost the whole time in one room without doing anything.

I was able to return to Finland in February 2021. After that, everything has been easier. First, I lived at my friend's place and then I rented my own apartment, in which I continue to live in. At the time, there were some Covid-19 related restrictions in Finland, but that did not concern me much. However, it was difficult to get back to the Finnish system after living so many years abroad. It took me four months before I could open a bank account. Before having a bank account, it was very difficult to arrange anything as the account is needed for identification purposes, too. I visited various institutions in person. This included visits to the Social Insurance Institute Kela, and to the unemployment office. I had to get a pre-paid phone since I didn't have any financial history in Finland.

In the autumn 2021, I began studies in vocational education. It has been very nice to study again. Also, I have completed several internships related to my studies. Of these, I did one in the airport. It was a very interesting time to work at the airport. My job was to help people when they were not accepted to their flights. For instance, I helped them to get the right kind of Covid-19 tests or translated them forms they had to fill in. This was very meaningful work as I remembered my own struggles to return to Finland. When I was finally able to return, I was almost not accepted to plane once again because of a wrong kind of Covid-19 test. They required a PCR test, and I only got an antigen test. However, I was accepted after I showed the documents in which the airline company stated that the antigen test was accepted, too. When I worked at the airport, many people were never accepted to their flights, and I can only wonder what they did afterwards. So many people had problems in getting back home.

Recently, my boyfriend from the South American country moved to Finland, too. He first arrived with a tourist visa, then we got married and he applied for a residence permit. Although my life is going well, it has been hard to see how many of friends have died or lost their close people. I have been following the life of my friends in a South American country during the whole time through social media, so I have heard all these stories. I never thought I would live in that country for the rest of my life, but I certainly was not planning to leave like this. However, at this point life looks very good again. It has been nice to see my old friends and the winter wasn't as bad as I remembered. I will get my vocational degree next spring. Currently, I have arranged to go to several job interviews for my next internship."

Specifically telling quotes: "At the time, I lived in [a South American country]. Everything was closed for months. I lost my job, and I lost my apartment, too. In practice, I lived with the money that my friends from here, from Finland, sent me.

I was leaving [South American country] for Finland. I was already at the airport, but they didn't let me in the plane. This happened in the autumn 2020. They didn't let me leave the country due to some visa problems. I remember thinking, what do I do now. I had already sold or given away all my stuff, I was there in the airport with the rest of it. I took a taxi back where I had been living and I was able to get a room once more, from an apartment that nobody lived in yet. I spent the next five months in that bedroom. Then, I received a court's decision that I could leave the country for humanitarian reasons.

When I returned to Finland, I found out that I was completely deleted from the systems here. I had to request to be re-registered in all the systems and it took a while. For instance, it took months to get the bank account with Internet banking facilities. And without them one cannot do anything in Finland nowadays."

Keywords: returning migrants, visa problems, flying, Covid-19 tests, working at the airport, helping others, studying

FI07

Title: Working as independent artist during the pandemic

Narrative: "I'm a 33-year-old woman, an independent artist and musician. At the moment, I focus on my career as a solo artist, work with my next album and practice a new way of performing. Before the pandemic, I was traveling a lot and performing in different countries. When the pandemic began, me and my partner faced a practical problem. Up to that point, we had not decided where we want to live. We happened to be in Germany at the time and thus we settled down in Germany for two years. I travelled to Finland each summer, though, and now we live in Finland.

In the very beginning of the pandemic, it felt good to calm down for a moment as my life had been very hectic. However, I had bad anticipations already at that point. All my gigs for the summer were cancelled and I was thinking that this might have negative consequences for my career in the long run. When the pandemic prolonged, living in Germany did not feel that good anymore. We lived in a commune with eighteen other people. I lacked privacy and could not connect very well with all my housemates. I don't speak German and some of the challenges were maybe due to a culture shock, too. Also, I lacked professional networks in Germany. When the pandemic continued, I began to feel depressed. I lost meaningfulness in life and felt hopeless at times. Also, I could see that many of my friends and colleagues were really upset, too. The professional community that used to be so tight broke down and society did not support artists much. Throughout the pandemic, I spent a lot of time in Internet. I constantly followed Finnish news, as well.

During the first pandemic summer 2020, I spent four months in Finland. During the next summer, I spent almost half a year in Finland. When I was returning to Germany in the autumn 2021, I felt physically sick even before reaching my home there. I had to tell my partner that I cannot continue living in there. I moved permanently back to Finland in 2022 and my partner followed me a bit later when he got a study place in here.

The restrictions in Finland felt very unfair at times. For instance, bars could be open but if there was a pianist performing in the bar, only very few people were allowed in. It felt like the society did not value culture, as if culture is something extra, a luxury thing that can be abandoned as the first thing. This made me very upset. I know many of my friends tried to influence politicians in Finland. They met politicians and talked to them. I think this was the best way to influence things. 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.

Some ongoing projects helped me to go forward. I took part of the folk song challenge and that grew into a bigger project. During the whole pandemic, I streamed hundred songs and got many followers. It was great to have a project that continued although everything else was cancelled. I missed live performances, though. When I was finally able to perform live last spring, it was a disappointment. I had been waiting for it such a long time and had so many expectations of how great it would be. Contrary, I realised that I had lost some of my confidence in performing, and the first gig was also physically very challenging. I had recently got Covid-19, and this probably influenced my abilities to sing and dance, too. It takes time to get back my performing skills and the feeling of living a meaningful life.

The pandemic changed the musical scene permanently. I don't know if we will ever return to what it used to be like before the pandemic. Nowadays, the scene is much harder for small musicians. Event organizers do not take any risks and thus invest only in big names. It is much more difficult to get changes to perform in festivals, for instance. Also, many bars do not exist anymore and there is a lack of sound technicians. The pandemic has thought me that networks with other musicians and actors in the industry are extremely significant. We cannot trust the Government or society but need to form alliances together. When we join, we are more likely to be heard."

Specifically telling quotes: "Bit by bit, the pandemic made me lose the sense of meaningfulness in life. I began to feel depressed. Our community broke down and I began to feel hopeless when the situation continued. I could see that many of my friends and colleagues were facing very hard times, too. In addition, it felt bad to see that society did not support us. These issues began to impact my mental health at some point.

In the beginning of the pandemic, I took part of the Folk Song Challenge. Many musicians took part of different challenges, such as making a song a day or something. For me, that project grew. I got people to follow me, and many were enthusiastic. [...] The project helped me to cope with the situation. It felt good to have a continuous project.

I learned that musicians and artists cannot survive alone. I've always done quite a lot of things alone and I have built my career alone. I haven't paid that much attention to networks and alliances. The pandemic made me lose my trust for society, politicians, and other decision makers. I understand I need to find alliances with other musicians and artists, event organizers, agents, and everybody in the industry."

Keywords: cultural sector, musicians, entrepreneurs, performing artists, unemployment benefits, living in many countries, streaming songs

FI08

Title: I completed my general upper secondary school online

Narrative: "I'm a 19-year-old man. Currently, I'm studying in university. During the pandemic, I was studying in general upper secondary school. I completed two last years of my studies there online. At some point, there was hybrid studying, which meant that we could spend one week in school and then two weeks online. The whole time and different phases of studying have kind of blurred in my mind.

Online studying worked rather well for me though. In some ways it was even easier than going to school in person. I lived quite far away from the school, so I saved time when I didn't need to take a bus to the school, and I could sleep much longer if I wanted to.

Also, I was able to go to the gym every day. Some of the lectures I even listened while I was at the gym. I don't think I was fully able to concentrate while I was doing the actual exercises. However, most of the time at the gym goes to waiting for recovery between exercises, and during that time I was able to focus on the lectures. At home, it was nice that I was able to eat during the lectures. I could just wake up and eat breakfast while listening the first lecture. Sometimes, I slept during the lectures. It's a weird feeling to wake up afterwards and realize that I'm alone in Zoom.

We had our lectures online in Meets or Zoom. Usually, there was a short introduction to theory and then some exercises that we had to do. We could also ask from the teacher if there was something we wanted to ask about the exercises. In some subjects, we had group discussions and group exercises. I think studying online requires more skills for independent studying. It worked for me better in some subjects than others. However, I didn't stress about it. I just studied for those subjects that needed extra work before matriculation exams. In the end, my matriculation exams went rather well. After those, I studied for the entrance exams and got a study place in higher education. Also, I received a prize on doing well in sports during upper secondary school.

I met some of my friends throughout the pandemic. Sometimes we met online and played online games together. Also, with those friends that lived nearby, we met outside to play sports. Those friends from the school that lived further away I didn't meet that much. In addition to meeting my friends and doing sports, I listened some interesting books to learn more about certain topics.

After all the restrictions passed, there were many parties. All parties that had been cancelled during the pandemic had to be held at the same time. It was nice. It felt good to socialize a lot after the pandemic and it was great to meet all the friends at school again, too."

Specifically telling quotes: "Studying online was easier for me. I live in [town nearby where the school was], and it takes over two hours a day to travel from there to the school and back. I was able to sleep later. [...] And it's not just that traveling takes two hours. One also has to wake up much earlier to catch the bus. I used to wake up at six and now I was able to sleep till eight.

My memory of studying during the pandemic is a bit blurred. It was so different... I know I wasn't the only one, who slept during some of the lectures. You should not sleep, but you just fall asleep. Particularly in the mornings, if you watch the lecture in your bed and if you have a tough morning.

When we got to go to school again in person, we socialized even more than before. We had snooker tournaments and stuff. It was great to see everybody again."

Keywords: studying, upper secondary school, getting a study place in higher education, sports, online games

FI09

Title: I helped other people through informal networks

Narrative: “I’m a 52-year-old non-binary person / transman. For me, living through the pandemic was not more difficult than any other period in my life. The number of people I socialize with was perhaps a little bit more limited than normally, but I still had certain people that I met regularly throughout the pandemic. I have some financial problems, but they are not related to the pandemic.

I think I was able to help many of my friends during the pandemic. For instance, I cooked for my friend, who has a small child. She visited me once a week with her child and I prepared them food for that week. She paid me some money for my work and for those ingredients that I had not received from food delivery projects, so this helped us both. In addition to that family, I cooked for my other friends more occasionally. Also, as I’m actively selling and sometimes buying things in the second-hand market, I often find clothing, home appliances or other items for my friends when they need something. Also, as I told in the last interview, I volunteer in two food projects. In one of them, I pack products to bags so that people can come and pick them up. The other one, the waste-food project, is more loosely organized by us and the shopkeeper. That group became an important network for me during the pandemic, too. I often ask if somebody in that group needs something when I have some items or left-over food.

I find it very meaningful to meet people and to eat together with my close friends. This was the case both before and after the pandemic. However, I cannot afford to eat out as often as I did before the pandemic. The typical price for a lunch is nowadays higher than it used to be. The prices went up when the restaurant restrictions were finally lifted last spring. Before the pandemic, a lunch typically costed less than ten euros, nowadays it costs 11 - 16 euros. Also, my own financial situation is more difficult nowadays. Last spring, I had a medical operation, and I rented this apartment to have a place where I could recover in peace as I didn’t have permanent home at the time. Unfortunately, the rent is at least 200 euros more than I can afford to pay as I’m unemployed. My operation was postponed a little because of the re-organizing that was done in hospitals due to the pandemic. However, the pandemic-related waiting was not a major problem, and the operation went well. Thus, my main problems are currently financial.

I get extra money through selling items that my neighbours through away. I don’t know why but, in this neighbourhood in particular, people don’t recycle things but simply through them in the garbage. I find a lot of expensive stuff in the garbage room of the house that I live in. It’s difficult for me to see that good things are thrown away, so I often take them and sell them in a second-hand shop. One of my friends is even more obsessed in collecting those items. They visit my place to see whether there is something expensive in the garbage room. We make some money through this practice. However,

this also means that my apartment is full of stuff, and it is more difficult for me to do other things at home. For instance, cooking is now more difficult. During the summer, I also got some extra money through collecting and returning empty bottles. Before the pandemic, Romanian people collected all the bottles from my neighbourhood, but now they only collect bottles in the centre of the city. Me and my friend were the only people who were regularly collecting bottles in my neighbourhood this summer. There were also lots of face masks around and in the sea. I was sad to see how much waste those created.

I'm happy that I have managed to go to the gym despite it was closed at some point. This way, I've managed to keep my weight as it is during the pandemic. I went to the gym with a friend, or several friends actually, and for some reason it was usually me who initiated that we should go. In retrospect, the pandemic feels like a short moment in my life. I know it lasted for two years but it feels like it was a very short period. "

Specifically telling quotes: "For me, everything went well. I don't think that the time of the pandemic was tough. It was good time, for me anyway. When the opening times of the bars were restricted, that was good because there was less disorder.

I have cooked for many people during the pandemic. One of my friends came to pick up food every week with her small child. Also, I have given some items that I have found for my friends and for the people in the waste food project group."

Keywords: helping others, informal networks, volunteer work, financial problems, neighborhood, public health care

FI10

Title: I found new ways to get peer support and establish academic networks

Narrative: "I'm a 44-year-old woman and a later stage PhD student. I have lived in Finland for some years with my family but before that we lived in several other countries. I'm very happy that we were in Finland when the pandemic began. In comparison to many other countries, the pandemic and related restrictions have not been as harsh here than in other places. Nature was very accessible for us, and we did a lot of running and skiing and other sports that can be done outside. Also, as researcher I could continue my work despite the pandemic, which I think was great for me.

I have two children. When the pandemic began, the younger child was nine and the older one was eleven. In the beginning of the pandemic, they both had to study online. We got laptops for them, and their lessons were organized online by their teachers. I feel that, just in one week, my younger son transformed to an adult. Before the pandemic, he had been playing with his toys and not used computers much. However, remote studying went well for them, and their teachers were doing a good job. At home,

we made calendars to fit our schedules together and to find time to have breakfast and lunch together. Of course, we still had to help children a lot and my own work was often interrupted. I realized that I cannot work hundred per cent when I need to help my children with their remote studying. I set myself a goal of accomplishing 60 per cent of my original goals. In the end, that time in the beginning of the pandemic was very productive and I was able to accomplish as much as before. I worked in such a focused way when I was able to work and prioritised my work very well.

One thing that helped me to focus on my work was that I found a private workspace where I was not interrupted. Although we have enough rooms in our house, you can hear voices through the walls and, as we sometimes had four online meetings going on at the same time, it was difficult for me to focus on my own work. Libraries and cafés were still closed, and I had a deadline to submit my article in the end of May. I asked around for places where I could work for some time, even in their cellar or any other place that was quiet. I found out that there was this community space in our house, and I was able to rent that for myself for one week. This was important in getting my work done. One positive effect of the pandemic was that my husband didn't have to travel, so that we could share responsibilities at home evenly.

I think there are three stages of coping: survival, adaptation and learning to go forward. Firstly, I focused on surviving in the changed situation. I paid attention to sleeping and eating well and getting exercise. Secondly, as I realized that the pandemic would continue, I began to adapt. I tried to find ways to accomplish my tasks despite the pandemic. Peer support and intellectual stimulation is important for researchers. To meet these needs, I participated in an online co-writing group with some of my colleagues. I had known these colleagues before the pandemic, and we had met once a month back then but now we began to meet online twice a week. Also, I formed two professional communities that met once a month. It was a right time to organize online communities.

Thirdly, I started to look ways to go forward and even benefit from the changed situation. I think that PhD students faced very different challenges during the pandemic in comparison to other academic staff members because PhD students are still building their networks. I tried to actively look ways for networking during the pandemic. I systematically wrote up my different networks and listed people in them, both people I knew and people I wanted to get to know. I participated in online conferences and contacted people during or after the conferences. In addition, I found a UK-based early career women researchers' network that had previously been limited to scholars in UK but, due to pandemic, opened to people from other countries as well. The network provided peer support and networking possibilities, which were very helpful for me. Also, I presented in one conference, which raised money for medical frontline workers. This way I could contribute to fight against the pandemic, too.

I was originally planning to gather data via face-to-face interviews in different countries, but this was not possible during the pandemic. However, through my networks, I was

able to get access to an organization in which I could gather data in their online meetings. This was a very different approach and I had to do some extra work because of the changed plan, but it turned out very well in the end and was in some ways even better than the original plan. I find the topic of my research very meaningful. I think this is also one reason that kept me going throughout the pandemic.”

Specifically telling quotes: “I got an invitation to present in the conference, which raised money to help doctors in the frontline. [...] This conference raised one million, an amazing amount of money. This helped me to realise that I can have a more active position, not just take what comes for me. In my network, I can influence people and we can do more, not just feel hopeless and powerless.

One thing was very helpful in this stage of adaptation: an online co-writing group with some of my colleagues. Before the pandemic, we met once a month, because we had so much intellectual stimulation anyway. Then, we started doing it once a week and then twice a week. It was three hours at the time, every Monday and Thursday.

The six weeks of complete lockdown will probably stay in my mind for ever. The six weeks when the children were studying from home and my husband was teaching from home, and I was doing my research from home. Children were still nine and eleven at the time. It was really challenging time. There was no other choice though, we just had to find a way to survive. We started with very basic things: children need computers, they need to learn how to go to Google classrooms. I still remember how my younger son became an adult in one week. Before, he was playing with his toys and now he sat behind the computer and looked like professional. This was a little bit scary as well.”

Keywords: early career researchers, PhD students, children, remote work, remote studying, professional networks, intellectual stimulation, peer support

France

FR01

Title: Getting by with a little help from my friends

Narrative: “During the first confinement, it suited me not to go out, I was afraid to go to the shops. I had a relationship with a man who came to stay at my home. He wasn't working, he was at the end of his unemployment benefits, I paid for everything. He had found a permanent job three months before the confinement. I said to myself, we're going to have a break, but 15 days after the confinement they had to let him go. He had no resources. I only had the minimum benefits. I couldn't do the cleaning hours I had at a lady's house or in an association. The woman who employed me went to the country to stay with her children until September. The association closed down. So for me, the lockdown lasted much longer [i.e. she was without resources well beyond the end of the official lockdown]. My partner said that I was living off society! But I paid for everything, he never did!

Financially it was very hard. At the beginning I managed, but what shocked me the most was to be obliged to go for hand-out meals every lunchtime. And not paying two months' rent. I've always managed to pay my bills, even on minimum benefits, with my little jobs. Not being able to provide for myself, to buy my own things...

I went to see a long-time friend who works in an association. I said to myself: maybe the association will be able to help me. She was desolate, she said “Why didn't you call me before?” She bought me groceries with her own money and a packet of tobacco and gave me 20€! Then I got food vouchers from the association. Usually they don't do that type of thing. But during the pandemic, they did: food distributions, hygiene packages, thing like that. I got given 80€ twice to buy food. And at lunchtime, the meal handout... After the first lockdown I went out again, and maybe six months later I got rid of this toxic man. I managed to do it! He had gone to visit his daughters. I called him, told him there was no need for him to come back, that I didn't want him anymore. He came to get his things and left - leaving me with his two cats. So I had five cats to feed. I used to be a cat feeder on the streets [in a cat sterilization programme]. I knew some charities and there was a girl there who was buying kibble to help the feeders. She gave me four ten-kilo bags. I did a month with ten kilos!

After the lockdown, I went back to the café where I had been going for years. They were happy to see me again, too. Some friends helped me there, asked me to clean their house. So I could have money. Yeah, good friends. Some I asked. And some of them offered to help me, seeing that things were difficult. Like a girlfriend, she asked me to do her windows, her cleaning, whatever. And a friend of mine who couldn't cope with his cleaning. A lot by word of mouth. If they had given me money I would have been embarrassed. At the second lockdown, I found a new employer, who I still work for, and who has become a friend. She bought me fruit and vegetables every week.

I had a friend who wanted me to get together with two other friends and have an aperitif once a week to force me to go out. My mother also helped me at the beginning, she sent

me a cheque. Since she had helped one of my sisters, so she did the same for the other two.

The lockdown really ended when the café reopened... The boyfriend I have now was attracted to me 15 years ago, but I wasn't interested at all at the time. We hadn't seen each other for ten years. I knew he could more or less afford it so I asked him "Do you need a cleaner"... I started to work for him and after a few months it just happened naturally.

I had my psychiatrist on the phone twice during lockdown. I had trouble with this shrink. She gave me medication that really messed me up. So I stopped seeing her. It's important to get my anti-depressants every month. My GP prescribes them now.

My situation has improved because I've gone back to work. I still have two months' unpaid rent. I got help from a social worker with the paperwork. My landlord could have been paid by the benefits administration and I would have paid it back a bit every every month. We sent him the papers; he never filled them in [i.e. didn't claim the unpaid rent]. I'm lucky ! And to be with my new boyfriend! The positive thing about all this was the solidarity of the people, a lot of solidarity. So, I would say I managed because I'm well surrounded. People have been quite supportive, yeah."

Specifically telling quotes: "It was quite supernatural what we experienced! I'm often very anxious and I've been on anti-depressants for a very long time. I have an attention deficit disorder."

"He moved here without me really asking. After the lockdown, I realized that it suited him that I was afraid to go out, that I couldn't go to the bar either. During this time, he was the same as he had been before: a manipulator! I realized that this man lied to me, and that, for me, ..."

"If we hadn't had the food stamps, the lunchtime meal, the parcels, financially it would have been very difficult at that level. Financially, that's it, with the minimum benefits... With the 270€ housing benefit, that makes me 770 €... With a rent of 590€ you can see that it's not possible, that you can't get by."

"The handout meal wasn't very good. Maybe they didn't have a real chef, I don't know. They make do with what they've got, I imagine, no doubt. But it would have been easy to do better."

"Two friends from Friuli [an island off Marseilles] came to stay sometimes, so I wasn't completely cut off from the world."

"The friend from the association, since I'm her friend, at first she helped me with her own money. I went to see her at her association. I didn't go there before because I didn't need their help. I knew her from elsewhere. I managed to give her back the €20, because she doesn't earn much at the association either."

"[The association doesn't usually do that?] No. They did it during the first lockdown, they organized themselves to get food to help people, yeah."

"I worked for the waiter in the café and for one or two clients, in their homes. That was their way of helping me, and that was great. I had a lot of help, I think people were quite supportive."

"My new employer told me "it will be like that, as long as it's lockdown, as long as you don't have...". Every time, she bought me fruit and vegetables. We became friends and

so during the second lockdown she kept on giving me fruit and vegetables.”

“We're not supposed to work on the side, we're supposed to get by on our minimum benefits. Which is impossible, or very complicated. Or you'd have to go and eat every lunchtime, all the time, all the time at this handout... That's it.”

“My landlord, he may even have deliberately dropped the thing [requesting the unpaid rent]. I had redone the kitchen at one time because... Same for the bathroom, I redid it a bit. I repainted the flat in 2018.”

“It's OK because I'm better now. He tells me that I should perhaps see a shrink again, but I don't feel like it at the moment. (...) I still have completely weird anxiety attacks sometimes but it's getting better. Being with him [the new boyfriend]...”

“During the second lockdown I went out to work, I had to. (...) Since I couldn't go back to work after the first lockdown, it was long for me. I couldn't go back to work until September. And in October there was the second one, so the association closed again and the lady went back to her children in the country. So all I had was Caro, who gave me fruit and vegetables every week. That was not bad.”

Keywords: collapse, manipulation, despair, humility, perseverance, opportunism, support, friendship, love, solidarity

FR02

Title: A sewing group to keep contacted

Narrative: “My name is Claudine, I am 64 and I live in Marseilles, in the south of France. I think my first reaction to the lockdown was stupefaction. What's going on? Just before the lockdown, I met with a friend who said “Have you heard about this disease? I said “Who cares?” and we kissed each other as usual. That was the last time. Even now we don't kiss anymore.

At first there were very few people in the streets but even so you avoided them. You could hear the birds, that's not commonplace in Marseilles. At first it was really like a tunnel. You didn't know what was at the end, you didn't know how long it was going to last. And indeed it lasted a long time. The whole of the first lockdown was just spent trying to manage, just that. And it went on and on.

I am a seamstress. The day before the lockdown I quickly took some material back home to be able to work there too. And I cheated right from the start, I went to my workshop by fiddling with the authorization forms we had to fill in. I felt I'd go crazy if I didn't do something with my hands. Very soon we found out that masks were needed. A hospital had put a pattern for a cloth mask online. I downloaded it and started to work, I was doing nothing else, like crazy. I was very worried about my finances: with a pension of 908 € per month and a housing allowance... Less than 1100 € and more than 800 € in fixed expenses... Panic aboard ! We had no prospects, we didn't know what was going to happen. I had to find a solution. I sold the masks in 3 I had made in three ways: at a reasonable price for people who could pay, people with a bit of money paid what they could, and I gave the rest of the masks for free, to charities, to really poor people, to

migrants...

One day I received a phone call from a complete stranger, a history teacher who wanted to help. He knew a haberdasher. So he contacted some seamstresses - including me - whom he found by word of mouth. With his help, we were able to get some elastic-everyone was short of elastic. An informal network was set up. I brought in a foreign seamstress friend who was in a catastrophic situation with her two daughters, without even enough to eat. She couldn't get medical treatment because the hospitals were a horror. We managed to pay her. And a young undocumented migrant too. A merchant we knew who sold us cloth "under the table" - the shop wasn't supposed to be open. I advertised for elastic on a cultural website, people came sometimes from quite far away just to bring me one meter of elastic! And they talked to me about themselves too, there was a great need for exchange, people were often very disoriented. There they felt useful!

My 93 year old mother was in a retirement home, it was very difficult. She was 800 kilometers away, at first I couldn't go to see her. And an old friend of mine died of covid. He was two months in a coma and I couldn't see him, I couldn't go to the funeral. My family didn't help me. That's how it was.

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 infantilizing. And all the public services were closed. Those were really big failures.

I really wanted to be involved in collective actions, to find links to people. I took part in a food drive that I had heard about. It worked ! Mostly with women, they gave food and hygiene products. Men too, but less, really. We took everything to a little CSO that made up bags for needy families each the evening. A lot of CSOs set up food aid circuits that were beyond their usual area of activity. They phoned the people they knew: "You can find food here, there you can find vouchers for food, there hygiene products...". Information was totally scattered. Local administrations, town halls should have be able to set this up. All that rewrote the basics for me in big letters and... you need to work collectively."

Specifically telling quotes: "There were question marks everywhere. There wasn't a single thing about which you could say to yourself: "OK, let's stick to that".

"The government spokeswoman said: "Masks are useless, and we don't even know how to put them on properly".

"I have the impression that I was a bit of a Stakhanovist at the beginning: making masks and masks and masks... I said to myself: "That's something I can do, so I'll do it". And I think that saved me from going off the deep end, really."

"There was this very young migrant man who came from Africa, we had him make masks and we paid him. But his masks were no good! I had to throw about fifty away. But that didn't matter."

"Frankly, I saw a lot of people who had very little money who really did the maximum, who made themselves available. People held on because they were able to contribute

something. Whereas in “ordinary” life, they feel useless.”

“In fact, the public aid reached people who already had a minimum of social status, who were already part of the social system. Those who were used to working illegally because they had no other solution, because they were foreigners, because their life history meant that they were disconnected and there were too many things to deal with, they fell through the cracks, and there was nothing left.”

“That’s how the system works! A friend of mine said something like [about informal work] “it’s anti-social”. But it’s not my choice. I’d rather work, declare, pay a bit of taxes, be in the right boxes and not be in financial anguish, anguish about the future etc...”

“There have been real shortcomings, in health services, in social services. I know a gentleman who went completely crazy and became paranoid and conspiratorial. He had to be hospitalized in a psychiatric ward afterwards.”

“I remember an old man who was suddenly surrounded in the street by three cops who harassed him. He had a small plastic shopping bag. They fined him €130 because he was in a shopping area 200 metres beyond the allowed distance. They threatened him and said that next time he would go to prison! He was trembling!”

“It wasn’t covid that made society dysfunctional in some ways, but it put a glaring spotlight on it. You have to be tough to be able to watch it, because it’s violent!”

“And in what I saw around me, it was 95% [informal actions] for 5% of real political or social initiatives. They were really micro chains of mutual aid. There was a great deficit in terms of positive public action.”

Keywords: stupor, distress, isolation, social breakdown, remobilisation, personal investment, collective, exchange, coordination

FR03

Title:

Narrative: “My name is Isadora, I am Brazilian, I’m 52 and I live in Marseilles, in the south of France. I’m single and I live with my mother and my elder brother. In Brazil I used to work for the industrial union. Everything related to the social services and training for industrial activities. I came to France 15 years ago. I was registered to study here but I didn’t get a visa. I came anyway and I started working straight away. I started with childcare, picking up children from school, feeding them and showering them until their parents arrived. Then I answered an advert and gave Portuguese lessons for six months, a paid contract. The company moved, and that was it for me. Now I do housework, and have a job with a CSO doing after-school activities in the mornings and on Wednesdays, and sometimes I look after the elderly. I have a two-year residence permit, so I work declared.

I had finally started a degree in Applied Foreign Languages at the university here. I had to stop because of the covid and because working at the same time was too much. At the beginning of lockdown, my after-school activities job continued because we had to take care of key workers’ children. But I earned less because I no longer worked

elsewhere. I used to shop a lot, but then things became too expensive for me. When I first arrived in France, I had trouble understanding French society! Fortunately, I had a basic knowledge of French from university in Brazil. I took French courses here that I paid for, they weren't free. In my culture, when I have spoken with you, we are already friends. I'll say: "Oh yes, I know so-and-so, we've already spoken". But here, when the covid arrived, people didn't even call each other!

In my own life, I'm very careful. We don't know what this illness is. I protect myself and if I catch it I isolate myself. I caught it twice and then I was got better. My mother was locked up at home, in Brazil during the first lockdown, and then here. She has diabetes. People who have health problems had more trouble. Then I didn't go out either: I didn't want to catch it or bring it home to her.

In my building there are elderly ladies and other people offered to do their shopping.. I helped look after an elderly person - I was supposed to look in three times a week. People from CSOs went to collect food in front of the shops all the time. The students couldn't feed themselves, they didn't have jobs. At the university there was a campaign to collect computers for those who didn't have them to follow distance learning. But many dropped-out. I did. I dropped out!

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. Before, you knew but you didn't want to see it, you didn't talk about it. Or else it was: "Well, it's the foreigners, isn't it? They want everything here". It was the foreigners who were poor. There were no poor people in France, but now you see people in the streets. It's disturbing. 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! But a lot of CSOs, the ones who did the work, have closed.

It's still a struggle. I've continued to get back on track. I still want to go back to university but I don't know when. For the moment it's not possible."

Specifically telling quotes: "As my situation is now legal, I am declared when I work. The policy has changed, they give us renewable cards every two years. What they make us understand is "You're not married, you don't have children, so you won't get it".

"At the [students' social services], they told me that studying is until 30 years old. So okay, thanks, well, that's fine. So

I couldn't continue."

"There was a lot of aid, but as I had to work and study, I prioritised work because you need work to feed yourself, to dress yourself and to get around. Young people have more access to aid but I'm not the same age, so I didn't even think about it, I said well no, I'm not going to continue, I'll leave them the place. At the [students' social services], they told me that you count as a student until 30. So okay, thanks, well, that's fine. As a result I couldn't continue."

"Now we only buy if we really need to. Because during the covid everything increased and now it's even more complicated. Before, we used to go shopping for €10 and we

could eat. Now, 10 € of shopping is what? End where? There are cheaper things, but then the quality..."

"It was as though we were in a period of war. I just went by [a distribution center] and I saw a huge queue of people waiting for food. I was shocked, especially by the children."

"The situation has been exaggerated too much with the aim of scaring people. When you want people to agree, what do you touch? Fear and money."

"On the positive side, there are many associations that have used social networks, the telephone... and apps like Too Good To Go for example, to recover unsold food. It was created a little before covid I think, but before that it wasn't really known. It's the unsold food from bakeries, from supermarkets even..."

"The most negative thing is to see that the inequalities are even higher than before covid."

"The good thing is that there could be more solidarity between people."

Specifically telling quotes: downgrading, impoverishment, perseverance, courage, racism, absurdity, control, manipulation

FR04

Title: Philippe moved to a cellar after the stress of lockdown

Narrative: "I'm Phillipe, I'm 54, I'm disabled and I live in Marseilles. Ah Covid - I don't want to talk about it anymore! We were well taken advantage of. That was all they talked about. Now it's the war in Ukraine, we don't talk about covid anymore. It's as if it didn't exist anymore.

I lived with my girlfriend before the covid, and after, for the first year. We still see each other but I don't live with her anymore. Her children are impossible, too hard on her, she doesn't know what to do. They never accept anything. She is overwhelmed, she cries. But since the beginning, she has never known how to say no to them. So now, no, they don't know what that means! They are 6 and 9 years old, a girl and a boy, both are the same. So I left. With the covid, with the lockdown, they didn't go to school. Then they didn't want to go anymore. It was no longer possible. She was afraid I would hit her children. I've never hit a child! I've got three grown-up children, I've never hit them, I couldn't do that to a child. It was better for me to leave. We didn't have the worst situation, we weren't locked up in a tiny space. Not like people who lived with their whole family in one room, but it was no longer possible so I left.

If anyone wants to find me, I'm still in the area, in this street that has some greenery. The cellar where I've been sleeping for a year is here. A friend lent it to me. During the day, I'm here, on this street. I go into the cellar for a bit to drink a coffee and rest a bit. I can't work any more. I'm on disability. I've had motorbike accidents. I've had operations everywhere: arms, knees, hips. I can't sit down anymore, or only for five minutes, it hurts too much! After my accidents and operations, I was in a wheelchair for two years. I can walk again. Only I can't work anymore, I can't sit down.

I went bankrupt. I'm in debt. They take part of my minimum benefits away from me

because of my debt. People like me, we can't save money, we can't manage. I have two social workers: one for housing, another for disability. She's going to try to get me recognized as disabled, because then you can get more than 800€. She tries, she applies for it. Because I'm really disabled. And I live in a cellar...

I'm lucky that I ended up here, that the cellar is in this street. Here, there are people whom I see every day. I have friends from the street. And the guys from the associations [CSOs], girls too. There are lots of associations here, they are nice. People give me things. Sometimes I help out. I used to be in the restaurant business, I make pancakes better than anybody else ! So when a charity needs something I sometimes make pancakes. If someone buys the milk, the eggs... I make them. With my own equipment. I kept my pancake stove, you need good equipment to make good things.

I still see my children. My daughter is 22, she studies at university and works at MacDonald's. She's a hard worker! My boys are in secondary school, they are 15, they are twins.

The cellar is better than the street. My migrant friends on the corner here are really homeless. Fifty of them sleep in an underground car park at night, they have no choice. The guy you see there, the one with no teeth, he's my friend, he's great. He tries to work, sometimes he manages to do so. There are several of them like that. They work a bit sometimes, but at night it's the car park, and during the day, the street. So, of course, they drink a bit. I do too, but not like them. But you've got to keep going. For them, covid or not covid, war in Ukraine or not, it's the same. It's not the government that's going to help them, on the contrary. I'm French, it's different. But it's not much support anyway. In the street next door there's an association that takes my mail, I go and get it once a week. In my misfortune, I'm glad I landed in this street, that's all. There's help here anyway, it's like a small neighborhood. A poor neighborhood but with people who support each other all the same. And the associations give us life. We're not completely alone.

But I don't want to talk about covid anymore. My friends, they were hungry, even if people were giving...Without it, I think some of them would have died. So the covid, the government, I don't want to hear about it anymore! If there was aid, the migrants didn't get anything. I didn't either, but it was still less hard for me. Nobody wants to see them, so of course... It's disgusting, but that's how it is. I don't even want to talk about it anymore! I'm going to make myself a coffee. "

Keywords: The respondent refused to have un record the interview that was carried out in the street.

Keywords: disillusionment, exasperation, poverty, disability, alcohol, comradeship, associative support

FR05

Title: Carole had to look after her father at a distance

Narrative: “My name is Carole, I am 45 and I am a music teacher and I live near Paris. The first thing I remember is anxiety. What is this, what will happen to us? People were infected, they died. The uncertainty. Everything stopped, only stores selling “essential” things were open.

I teach children and adults in a music academy. The whole idea is to do things with others. With the lockdown, it was no longer possible. I reacted very quickly. I invented a shared project. Each kid recorded a little piece, I edited it and we shared it. We felt very strongly that there was something very human about it. We managed to keep a link with the children. But it was difficult. My computer was old, too old for videos. I had to buy a second-hand phone during the lockdown. With no help from my employer - just a few very encouraging, well-turned messages from our department manager. The second lockdown was more difficult. We had seen the students again, we had restarted projects and we thought we were out of the mess. I suffered much more the second time.

The worst thing was that I couldn't go and look after my sick father who lives 450 km away. He's 73 years old, he's disabled, diabetic and has a lot of co-morbidities. He is very lonely, he has only one friend and no other family. He was at risk and very anxious. We had to manage this from a distance, reassure him, try to explain things to him. I had to find people to do his shopping. It was out of the question for him to go out. We didn't really have any information, no masks... We had to find concrete solutions to keep his life going, so that he could eat! For Dad, eating was the most important thing, because with diabetes, it's a matter of survival. For him, not seeing anyone was just like usual. I was the one who forbade him to go out. I tried internet shopping but it was horrible. Everything was taken by storm!

He didn't see me for a year and a half. We wanted to go and see him when things were going a bit better but he didn't want to. We saw each other by Skype. I had mixed feelings, I felt relief too: it wasn't me who didn't want to go, it was him who didn't want us to come. I felt less guilty. I had been there for him at those very scary moments. He postponed all his medical appointments to avoid going to hospitals. Fortunately, he saw his nurses in the morning and evening, and this link allowed him to get vaccinated too. Afterwards, little by little, he went out again, a bit later than the others. He came to see us at Christmas but my husband caught covid. I told my father, he remained calm. We had Christmas with FFP2 masks on our noses and it worked. We aired, my husband ate at a distance, we wore masks all day.

The first time we went to see him, he didn't want us to enter his house. Then his nurse contacted me and said: “We really have to do something”. He had completely let himself go for a year and a half, accumulating everything. It wasn't the covid that caused it but it accelerated the process. I felt responsible for the situation. I was ashamed to ask for outside help. I did four weekends of heavy cleaning and sorting. After that, I said to myself, “I have to get help”. I asked my husband to call the social services, I just couldn't do it. They were supposed to give me an appointment at his house, but they had so many requests from people whose situations had worsened that they couldn't do house visits. We did it by phone, which suited me. I asked for assistance with shopping, cleaning, and reimbursement for sanitary pads. Then it was up to me to find an association to do it. It was very complex, the person first told me that she wasn't sure she could take it on and I burst into tears! It was the complexity of the whole process. It's

hard psychologically. There should be a single contact person and everything should be in the same place.

On the positive side... It made us realize that the most important thing is to get back to basics. In personal life, in work, everything... There have been some nice things, nice testimonies from the children especially, at work. So there's still a bit of a positive side to it, but we've had a hellish time of it."

Specifically telling quotes: "My dad tends to look at everything via a TV screen, which isn't necessarily the best way to relax and gain perspective."

"It didn't change him much in fact. Except that he goes out once or twice a week to do some shopping (...) It hasn't changed him either in terms of seeing people because he doesn't see anyone."

"So his friend installed Skype on his tablet and since then we've been seeing each other on video. It was good for him to see faces, to see smiles, to see his grandchild grow up."

"On the other hand, I remember that at All Saints' Day, after the first confinement, we invited him and he said no (...) He invented something (...) He said he was tired, something like that (...) But I know that he was anxious at the idea of seeing people and of potentially catching the disease"

"It was catastrophic during that period when nobody went back to his house because he no longer realized what was normal, what decent living was."

"It's not the covid that caused this but it has accelerated it. Covid has accelerated a lot of things."

"I spent four weekends cleaning (...) On my own. I stayed in a hotel. I left home on Saturday mornings and drove for four hours without stopping. I arrived, I did the cleaning, the shopping because obviously he hadn't planned for anything. I'd take lots of wipes with me, detergent, sponges, hoover and all the rest in my car trunk. I brought it all from home (...) I would do this all day Saturday and go to the hotel at ten o'clock in the evening. I would come back on Sunday and do it again. I emptied thirty bins in one weekend. It was a crazy thing to do! He keeps everything, he doesn't throw anything away."

"Because I was ashamed in fact to call for outside help in that state. In fact I felt responsible for this situation, well... I'm not, I know, but still."

"[Getting social assistance] For me it's complicated, but how is it for people who maybe don't speak French well, or don't read it well, or for people who have had less education. Even I find it very hard (...) You call a number, they tell you to call such and such a number, and at this number they tell you that no, that you have to go there (...) When I pick up my phone to call the Department and never know that you are in the right service, the right thing, the right thing. (...) That's why I had my husband contribute. I was in total panic, I couldn't do it."

"It's all complicated, you have your life to manage too. You have to think about the things you have to buy for your kid's school, your job, your house and on top of that you have to manage the accounts [for the assistance for her father], see why they're paying that..."

"It makes you take a step back and that never hurts in your life. Afterwards, I don't know if it was worth it (...) Because at the cost of a lot of suffering and people who have disappeared"

Keywords: shame, anxiety, fear, mental overload, discouragement, exhaustion, tenacity

FR06

Title: Drawing cards helped Eva through the lockdown

Narrative: "My name is Eva, I am 60, I live in Marseilles and I work in a school, accompanying children with disabilities. I also draw the cards.

I wasn't panicked at all, I welcomed what came my way. I'm used to being alone. You had to have authorisations to go out but I could open my windows. You were restricted but it's not a prison either. You could also travel outside via the internet. And it allowed me to do other things.

The curfew thing, the going out thing... At the beginning when I went shopping, the street was empty. I was alone in the street, and I had the impression that it was a biological memory coming back when I saw people waiting in lines - the impression of living images of what my grandmother lived through, during the war. What we learnt about at school, rationing, handing out coupons: "You can buy so much butter, so much meat...". I was in my bubble. What came up a lot in me were memories of the war. Then I took a step back. I said: "Now Eva, you were in a state of confusion" (laughs). I observed myself, I understood that what I was experiencing was really a memory.

When they locked down, I said to myself "The state is hiding something from us, we are locked up because there is something going on outside, they are putting up 5G antennas or something". I never believed in covid. Well, yes, it did exist because I have girlfriends who got really sick. That brought me back into reality. I said to myself "Well, shit, this thing exists, it's real shit". For me it was man-made. It came from China. The Chinese are more subservient to their leaders with QR codes and things. At one point, I was declared a contact case. I yelled at my friend: "Why did you DENOUNCE me to Social Security [the administration that traced contacts]? Are you crazy?" It put me into a state of shock, with palpitations.

Concerning the mask, they said: you must put it on, then you don't need to put it on. Afterwards, the president said: "No problem, kids can go to school". I accompany disabled children in primary schools. In the news, they told you that the children don't need masks. And the vaccine that they force us to take! I was afraid of the vaccine. I asked myself "If I'm asked to be vaccinated, what do I do? Should I quit my job?" In my school it was OK, they didn't oblige us to be vaccinated but it depends on the school. They are formatting the children, the masks, isolating them, putting them at a distance. They tried to put us in a state of panic and fear. I thought during the lockdown about the children who were maybe sexually abused, the violence in the families...

At the beginning they told you "There is a vaccine, but you don't have to take it". Afterwards, it's as if the screw was being tightened. A teacher told me that there would be a big revolution if the teachers had to be vaccinated, if they held demonstrations. The same for the cops. People were vaccinated but that in fact it didn't protect them at all. I never believed in this vaccine. Where did this vaccine come from?

Of course, when the virus first arrived, it was dangerous. I got the covid. I panicked, I said to myself, "If it's going to be like my girlfriends, it's going to settle on my bronchial tubes." Then I thought, "If I'm going to die, then I'm going to die. That's it. What was great was that I wasn't alone because I was accompanied by my GP. That's very important. I was in connection with him. He is against the vaccine. Everything that was forbidden, he prescribed to me.

I didn't believe the news about the deaths. The news reports were misleading. Some people realised that even if they were vaccinated, they would get the covid. The vaccine created differences, clashes. The vaccinated were suspicious of the unvaccinated.

Then all of a sudden, no more news about covid! Now Ukraine is responsible for everything, the gas, the wheat... The media make you go the way they want. School was originally made compulsory to open minds, and now they want the opposite. They want people to be stupid. One of our teachers says that in all her years in the profession she has never seen a class with such a low level.

The positive side of lockdown was the animals and the way nature reappeared in the city. And the support of my doctor. I made masks. There was a shortage. I kept on working in the school and got my small salary. I didn't do anything, it was go home, buy groceries, go back home. For 20 hours a week, I get €730 net, plus an activity allowance and housing benefit. There are very few men in this job, I think it's the maternal side.

I'm happy because I also develop energy with my cards. I could consult by telephone during the lockdown. I'm moving towards that. "

Specifically telling quotes: "Afterwards, when we were told about lockdown, I didn't panic at all. I'm already someone who lives alone (...) This lockdown really allowed me to make an inner journey. There was still contact via the internet and the telephone. We weren't cut off from the world, locked in."

"There is a woman who made an application called "Tell me what you see from your window". I thought it was quite original. Everyone took photos, as we were in total lockdown, and everyone showed what they saw from their window. "

"[I have] girlfriends, who like me live a bit alone. Except that they have children. They feel alone as adults, but as I tell them "You are not really alone, you have children" (...) There is a presence, there is a human being. I have Choupette, my cat..."

"No more cars, so no more pollution in the air. For me, I thought of the trees, nature and especially the animals! The same on facebook, there were animals with dolphins coming into the harbour! It's like... Or deer came into the city (...) There were images, parodies where they drew a cage with the humans locked up and the animals looking at the humans. It was a revenge of the animals."

"I felt as if (...) they were doing something outside, and no one must be outside. I don't know. Maybe 5G antennas, I don't know, but I had this feeling. (...) For me everything was wrong. I don't know why we are experiencing this now. Either there are too many of us on earth, and we have to kill some, I don't know. The leaders are up there, we don't know what they're doing, and we don't know who we are."

"(...) What is impressive is that in the teaching profession, no one is vaccinated! (...) The cops are supposedly not vaccinated, the medical staff are, but the teaching staff are not."

"There have been other vaccinations where it was rather natural because people saw

that by being vaccinated, I don't know maybe for the plague, that it stopped there. This one doesn't stop covid (...) For me, there's also a question of money. Laboratories that make money."

"And the worst thing is when I saw that they were turning to children and that they were starting to want to vaccinate children. So I said, "Where are we going? What are they doing here?"

"(...) even in the swab that they put in our noses to do the tests. Because there is something that makes it sting the nose and make you sneeze. So what do they put in there? If you take the masks (...) Once I put it on my nose, I kept sneezing. There is a product on these masks. So now what I do, I wash ten of them in the machine, I remove this product and then I put the mask on."

"Ukraine is responsible for the gas, Ukraine is responsible for the wheat! Ukraine is responsible for everything. So that means that the increases, everything we are experiencing now is due to Ukraine. Wrong! I say that somewhere, when these statesmen meet, what happens? I find it hard to believe these statesmen. That's why I live in my bubble. I hear what's going on, but I don't watch the news anymore, or very little."

"I hear what is said, what is done. I know that this virus is airborne. Nobody is safe. I understand that. But at no point did I say to myself, "I'm going to live in this fear. Because if you start living in that fear, then they've won in a way."

"We are being formatted (...) I didn't understand it straight away, it was when I came out of the lockdown. (...) Because when you look at the beginning, we were all in contact "Oh yeah, hi, how are you? And the fact of putting this, this virus, this lockdown, it put some distance."

"In hospitals you can't go in as you please. There's still this barrier thing where they force you. If you undergo an operation, you have to be, not vaccinated but have a negative test. So for me, we have lost a form of freedom in relation to that."

"Sometimes I get angry when I hear the news and all that. What saddens me is that I felt much freer before, I asked myself fewer questions. And today they try to format us. I still try to believe in myself. I believe in myself but sometimes I feel like it's getting tighter and tighter and at some point... Well, I don't know what I'll do then. It's like being forced to vaccinate myself..."

"It's like wars, eh? It's always the same, it's the statesmen, and it's still the people who suffer and suffer. So that's what makes me a bit angry."

"There were trees that had a smell in fact. I had never smelled that smell, it was like jasmine, lilac, and it got me! We came out of the first lockdown in spring, so there was an explosion of flowers and there was a smell that I had never felt in the streets."

"When I went out, wow! The nature, the animals, the respect of the nature and the animals for me was huge! (...) After we went out we were able to go further than our sector, and I was in nature, I said to myself "Why don't we stop time for a month to respect nature? We did it then."

Keywords:

FR07

Title: Zoe was saved by family benefits

Narrative: “My name is Zoe, I am 46 and I have a 10-year-old son. I live in the south of France and I am a reflexologist, working independently. At first Covid didn't seem like anything special to me. It was just another announcement, like H1N1 or bird flu. But the following Monday, at the beginning of the lockdown, a little voice inside me said “This is serious”. The lockdown was an emergency measure. They didn't realize the consequences on people. On families where parents don't get along. How do you deal with children who are distressed?

My son saw people wearing masks. Sometimes masks that covered their whole face. He literally flipped out, he was traumatized. I made him draw pictures to express himself. It was very rough, he cried a lot. His father didn't care. He came to pick up his son, and then he told me that he had begun a new relationship three days ago. We had already been in lockdown for a week, but he was not confined, he was living with a group. They are marginal people, he was taking drugs. I wanted to protect my son, which is what every mother does. His father didn't like the fact that his son didn't go to him, so he went to war with me.

He mixed my son up. He told him it was all my fault, that I was holding him hostage. He didn't call him during the whole lockdown. He let him down. My son developed behavioral problems because his father abandoned him. My son started to physically abuse me. (Zoe is crying) It was very hard! It was hard for me too.

I have asthma so I have weak lungs. I had no help at all. Everything was closed, we were not allowed to see anyone! Finally, I called the local service for medical and psychological aide. I had a speech therapist on the phone every day who was the relay with the psychiatrist. I confined myself with another family after the isolation, so that my son could be with other children. We waited several days to make sure we didn't have the covid, and then we confined ourselves together. I found this solution myself. I also had telephone conversations with a friend. For the first week, he came to the house because I was really in bad shape. I knew he was paying attention. Then my son's father said “stop”. He didn't want me to have visitors. That was the last straw!

I had difficulties with my professional activity. The recovery after lockdown was complicated. People were very, very unwell and it was very difficult to take care of them. And every time there was a wave of covid, you could no longer work. Appointments were cancelled at the last minute.

I've been receiving minimum benefits since last spring. This had never happened to me in 22 years of work! I didn't have to go through the application process. The family benefits organization got in touch with all the self-employed professionals in the area and they saw that I was eligible. It keeps my head above water, nothing more. My son's father thinks that's unfair, that I should be entitled to RSA and not him. He wants to get part of what I get! He's a biscuit maker now, and his activity is not working. Tomorrow, I have an appointment at the family benefits organization, I'm going to tell them what's going on. If he hasn't declared that he's living with someone, I'll tell them.

I had gynecological surgery a year later, with a three-month sick leave. I got €7.30 a day

in benefits! And the PCR tests, to be done each time before the check-ups for the hospital follow-up. What's really hard is that visits are not allowed in the hospital. The day after the operation, I walked out to the hospital gate to see my son. The medical staff were unpleasant, very harsh. This situation leads to an overload for the nursing staff. It's hard for the staff, but they are not in a vulnerable position like us. I left the hospital angry. Since lockdown, things have been precarious. It's a vicious circle: you feel like things are picking up again, and there's a new wave of covid, and it starts all over again. It's a sword of Damocles. It's instability, permanent anxiety. And there were all these conflicts around the vaccine. People were afraid, so many people have shut themselves off from their families. 90% of people are vaccinated and they are still bedridden, vaccinated or not. For me, all this was a revelation, a highlighting of all the failures, on all points, at all levels. All the problems, the illnesses, the deviations, the imbalances. Before, we couldn't really see them. But now it's all too obvious. Something positive? The spontaneous call from the family benefits organisation... But I can't say it's really positive. Put it in down as positive if you like, but I would have preferred not to have it happen!"

Specifically telling quotes: "We tried to make it more fun [at school], we put funny cloth masks on them (...) It caused tension if the children didn't have their mask, or if it was badly put on. I could see that the children had lost their cheerfulness at school, being masked."

"[My son's father] refused to confine himself so as to have an affair with this woman. She lives in a collective. He was going to live with her, mixing his miasma with her and in a collective!"

"In fact my son was rubbing his willy against me. He was followed, there was no sexual assault on him. Because obviously, that's the question that everybody asks in these cases, me too. His father never told him that he shouldn't do that. He told me that it served me right."

"My son's anger at his father was taken out on me. (...) My son's father, he creates the knots, and then I have to find the solutions."

"Before I had a great relationship with my son. It's difficult to talk about it (she cries). But since then, my son also believes that what happened was my fault. My son has developed a loyalty syndrome. He is always crusading for his father, for his rights."

"Now we have to make up for all the lost time. [Her son] has a great teacher, he changed schools. We help him, his father and I, his father used to be a teacher. He doesn't teach anymore."

"There is a part of me that perhaps thinks it's good that I didn't have to take the step [to request minimum benefits], that it was the [family benefits organization] that did it first. In the Drôme department, if I had had to ask for it, it would have been complicated. (...) The spontaneous approach of the CAF... I can't say it's really positive. Put it in the positive if you want, but I would have preferred not to have that happen."

"[Minimum benefits] keep my head above water, no more. I've discussed it with other therapists, osteopaths, etc... It's the same for everyone. We don't know... One of them is 60 years old and has been working for a long time. He told me that he has as few calls as when he started."

"People think that if you are in private practice, it means you are rich. But you don't have

a pension plan, insurance... You're not entitled to unemployment, to anything. I didn't know, but my mutual insurance company has nothing for self-employed people. So it was as if I was begging the social security system. It was like begging!"

"The fact that we are fighting over the vaccine has an impact on our lives, on the good times. You can no longer get away, take the train or the plane. You can't escape from your dreary life."

"I was lucky with my gynecological surgery. (...) I was operated on in the hospital where my sister works, where she is a doctor. She was not allowed to come and see me but she didn't care. She put on her gown and came to see me morning and evening."

"So that I could see my son, so that he knew that his mother was well, I went out, just after the operation. (...) Normally, when you are tired, you are visited, you don't go out to see people in the car park."

"[The hospital staff] Really not compassionate, not empathetic. It's not pleasant for them to work with masks. (...) I got my period on my third night in hospital. I was very scared. I was bleeding, I was afraid it was a hemorrhage. Especially because they were also afraid that I would hemorrhage, because my blood pressure was very low. I called at night. Nobody came! I was losing a lot of blood, I didn't know, I was afraid. I went crazy in the early morning when someone deigned to come and see me."

Keywords:

FR08

Title: The pandemic put Paul under deep stress

Narrative: "My name is Paul, I'm 45 and I live on the outskirts of a small town in the southeast of France. I share an apartment with two flat-mates.

I don't listen to the mainstream media, I was totally unaware of the pandemic! I went to vote [in the municipal elections that were held just before the first lockdown], people had gloves and masks. I was told that some kind of flu was coming from China. I was hallucinating! For me it was something completely out of proportion to scare the population. Fortunately, my roommates had the same point of view. We were lost. We listened to the president's speech saying "This is war!" What is this nonsense? What is he talking about? Where did that come from?

A roommate was working at a nursing home. She was very afraid to pass the disease on to the elderly. We wondered if we were going to disinfect the door handles. If one of us had it, would we each go to our own room? We couldn't go to funerals. We were self-testing. It was like being in high school!

I realised that it was very virulent at first. I looked at different media to get a perspective. There wasn't enough time for vaccine trials, so I decided not to get the injection. People were being injected so that they could keep their jobs and walk around. I felt very guilty about having access to nature, to a garden. People in the government were saying everything and its opposite, more and more absurd things. Wash your hands. Put yourself at a distance. You couldn't catch covid in a church, but in a cinema you could.

But not seeing the people you love, telling children that they will make their grandparents die by hugging them. The little kids with the masks... It made me feel really bad. Very serious illnesses were no longer taken care of. The condition of the people in the nursing homes deteriorated quickly. All this scared me, more than the virus. I was in complete terror twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It awakened my childhood fears.

I asked the psychiatrist who was treating me for an authorization to be able to go outside as much as I wanted. My exemption allowed me to visit friends. I rode my bike over long distances but I was afraid of being caught. Potentially I was a delinquent. I did activities on the quiet: yoga, walks, games nights, sleeping at friends' houses. A hallucinating calm settled here, in the countryside. It was like a meditation, like in a monastery.

One of my roommates had been in the psychiatric ward twice before. There she decompensated. She had terror attacks. I was the one who took care of her. I was able to see my GP and my psychologist face to face, which was extremely important. My GP told me how to apply for handicap benefits. There was a shortage of psychiatrists and the doctors were afraid I would commit suicide. I went to a clinic where I was welcomed with respect and humanity, I was able to settle down and take a step back.

I have a small part-time job as a hypnosis practitioner and I my rent was only 315 €, that was nice. I had the minimum benefits, the activity bonus, housing benefits and my hypnosis practice that was declared. I was not allowed to work during the first lockdown. A friend told me how to ask the state for the amount I had earned the year before. During the second lock-down, we were able to practice. I was very lucky, I was able to get handicap benefits too.

The pandemic revealed that we need social links, exchanges. For my mother, who was alone, and for people in my family, it was complicated. Some people helped the farmers. One person made a website to promote local consumption. The planet is being destroyed. I really hoped that it would be a general slap in the face, that we would rethink our consumption, that there would be more solidarity and sharing. I was pleased to be able to get information on Internet, via groups. But this pandemic has shown that computers and laptops can never replace social ties, which are more important than hygiene, or a beautiful but empty environment. It's rougher, less pretty, but there's more depth. I liked it, afterwards, to be able to move around whenever I wanted, not to be under a dictatorship. "

Specifically telling quotes: "Everyone was scared of being responsible for someone's death (...) and of having to bear an extremely high level of guilt on the part of the media (...) when there were 0.5% of deaths on the news. So it was really nothing."

"(...) pro vaccines, anti vaccines... (...) It's a kind of psychological pressure to put people against each other, to accentuate guilt, to prevent reflection."

"It's not a vaccine for me. It changes the RNA (...) We don't know the composition, the contracts are not clear, we don't really know the side effects. There have been several studies done, but how are they done and by whom?"

"They lied about the masks, they said there was no need for them but because they didn't have any (...) There was nothing tangible in what we were told."

"All the small shops had to close, while the big shops stayed open. As a result, there

were incredible queues in the supermarkets and yet you couldn't walk in the forest"

"The fact of forbidding nurses, care workers to choose between being injected [Paul says "injected", not vaccinated] or not. Otherwise they were thrown out without any allowance, without anything. They were all applauded at eight o'clock (...) and now they found themselves in the greatest poverty and treated like the scum of society."

"And I was thinking about the figures, how do they know exactly how many people die from this disease and what the co-morbidity rates are."

"This sort of sudden break in freedom with a government in which I already did not trust and with the fact that laboratories were making billions and billions in profits and I did not see the logic of what I was being told."

"My mother (...) didn't see anyone, she lived alone. She communicated (...) by e-mail (...) Afterwards she said "But if I am to live without human relations, I prefer to live less long". (...) She was really starting to lose it. (...) An aunt stayed locked up at home because she was extremely afraid. She is asthmatic and old. They would do a whole circuit where her husband would put everything in the garage for seven days before bringing in their food"

"Among young people, there was a hallucinating suicide rate (...) psychiatry, psychologists, etc... it was packed"

"And when it started again, I had the impression at one point that there would never be an end (...) First wave, second wave, third wave, people were being injected, injected, injected."

"There was even a shortage of anxiolytics and antidepressants in the pharmacies, so many of them had been taken over by covid. I was able to get my treatments, that's what saved me."

"What I found quite amazing was that there was this possibility of being taken charge of, but if you didn't know where the information was hidden, it was a real problem (...) to have access to the fact that you can be reimbursed without having to search for three hours on a website where there is no logic."

"The transmission of information, that is to say all the groups that have joined together, people like the person who made a website with the local farmers, that should be something much more widespread (...) To say that there is hope, that everyone can do something, and not just to remain frozen in fear and wait for death to come knocking at your door and prevent you from breathing, or someone in your family. I would hope for that."

"Magnificent stories of people who helped the elderly in the depths of the woods, with garbage bags at the beginning to protect themselves because there was no equipment."

"This proves that we can stop private jets, and much transport, and many industries etc... We can take drastic measures, and that would be justified in terms of the planet, of living species that are being exterminated at every turn. And to go back to the local level." "We realised how precious the few contacts we had were, (...) how fundamental all activities (...) beyond the "utility" ones are (...) everything artistic, everything that is restaurant, everything that is outside, well, it's good that it exists. "

Keywords: stupor, fear, manipulation, decompensation, medical care

FR09

Title: Stéphanie gets out of isolation thanks to her friends and neighbours

Narrative: “My name is Stéphanie, I am 35 and I live in a rented house on an estate outside a small village in the west of France. I have been living alone with my three small children (7, 6 and 4) for six months now. Covid and the lockdown, didn't change things much for us. We were already isolated. I was home-schooling the children. We didn't go out much except to the library. I wanted them to go to school, but their father was against it. I did everything: housework, schooling... He was a paid market gardener, he worked. He did what he wanted. He was against everything: school, children's vaccinations for school, against Christmas... I understand now: he just wanted me to do what he wanted. The children too. He denigrated me in front of them. It takes time to understand.

Concerning the lockdown, I thought they should give people the choice about going out or not. You can have safety measures, put on a mask, not be too close without necessarily staying at home. I found the lockdown long, alone with the children. I have type 1 diabetes, I was freaked out. They said that with autoimmune diseases, covid could do a lot of damage. My endocrinologist finally reassured me that for my kind of disease there was really no danger. I had confined myself even more strictly for nothing! I took a break with doctors. I used to send my ex-partner or a neighbour to fetch insulin. My ex-partner said that diabetes was in my imagination.

Staying at home all day is like being in a pressure cooker, after a while you can't take it anymore. My ex-partner didn't understand that at all. This accelerated what was obvious afterwards: the separation. He already had a paranoid tendency and now, in the evenings, he was tuned into the conspiracy networks on internet. He talked about it all the time, I couldn't stand it. And also in front of the children. It was quite anxiety-provoking at home.

I should have got minimum benefits during this period, but he didn't want to do the paperwork. I couldn't do anything in the administration! Even using the computer was complicated. I was stuck, I had to knock on his door and he decided. Even for a cigarette or something, it wasn't allowed if we'd had a bit of a row before. I took things onto myself, I didn't have much choice.

It was less difficult after the lockdown. I was able to go back to work up to thirteen or fifteen hours a week. It's not much, but I was also doing home schooling, that's a full time job with three kids. The children found it hard to stay at home, not to see grannies, grandpas and all that. It was as if things had become established: “You'll stay at home and I'll go out”.

My partner insulted me every day. When it began to be in front of our friends, the neighbours, the children, that gave me the courage to say stop. When you live in isolation, it's not that you like it, but you get used to it. You become more and more afraid to go out again, it's a vicious circle. You have to regain some courage to learn to go out again, to communicate. Once that started, things got better.

After the separation I was able to do something. My ex-partner took the computer but a friend gave me an ipad. I started to think about myself again, to apply for a new job at

the local school and for the minimum benefit supplement. So now I am financially independent. My mother and friends helped me to get out of all that. They sent me articles about emotional dependence. They all gave me a bit of money. It was a springboard for me, otherwise... And now the children go to school too !

I was worried about my mother who was confined to her home, who lived far away, but she was able to rest like never before, she needed it. The telephone is also good in these cases. Another good thing was that the lockdown left nature a bit alone. And a lot of artists were doing concerts for people via the internet. We've become more tightly knit in the neighbourhood since then. When we were let out, we realised how much freedom we had when we were no longer confined. It's still hard, I still have a lot to do, but I wouldn't want to go through that period of covid again."

Specifically telling quotes: "[The children and I] were already confined and I had the impression that people were actually experiencing what we had already experienced rather than the other way round (...)"

"(...) a neighbour was terrified, even afterwards, she wouldn't open her door. She is alone and old. She stayed in that atmosphere for a while (...) it didn't help her at all."

"I was convinced that with my illness [type 1 diabetes] I couldn't go shopping. Because they were really saying on TV and radio that if you have an autoimmune disease you have to stay at home. (...) I told myself that I shouldn't risk it either (...) It was a period of pressure and stress. So my blood sugar levels spiked (...) I sometimes thought that if I can't get my insulin, maybe I should use less."

"It became even more impossible (...) my mother and friends told me that his behavior was not normal. But then it got worse, and I really started to think that it couldn't go on like this."

"We weren't in the same phase at all. (...) He was anxious to isolate himself in his music room to get some fresh air in his own way. (...) We didn't end up saying to each other "This is a difficult time, but we're together, we're united". (...) Once he woke me up in the middle of the night and told me: "It's going to be very serious what's going to happen. They are going to take our children away from us, they are going to put them on trains". (...) he was terrified of all this, of what could happen with the covid."

"I felt that I had to protect myself in fact. So I said stop and then it all happened quite quickly in fact (...) I had to make a request [for minimum benefits] for myself (...) If I had stayed with him I would never have had that."

"He took the computer with him. He took away the things that were important to me and the children: the computer, the children's beds that I had to buy again, and even the fridge, which is essential for me to keep the insulin."

"After the confinement, I went back to work (...) cleaning in a private home and then in a rented cottage. That gave me a little bit of income, but by the 15th of the month I had nothing left, I had to go and knock on his door to get a little bit more and it was up to him (...)"

"Now I only do 25 hours a week, but I get the activity allowance and the family benefits, so in fact I'm doing better than before! (...) I have school holidays and Wednesdays, and that makes it easier for the children. They went back to school for the first time in September and they are very happy. (...) I'm only now resuming my medical

appointments.”

“I remember, during lockdown, the children were in the garden and they started to make a hole (...) In fact they wanted to make a hole to go to their grandmother's house ! (...) That marked me.”

“Except for my friends who helped me. Afterwards it's true that it created more solidarity with the neighbors, and now it's stuck. And when I separated, the people around me supported me, in the neighborhood.”

“The children were playing through the fence. And when we talked with the neighbors between the hedges, it was nice. When [my partner] came home from work, he would go and distribute vegetables to all the neighbors. So it's true that it created a sense of solidarity.”

“You could observe the animals coming back (...) there was much less pollution. If you want to see something good in all this (...) in a way nature has taken over. (...) My mother even saw foxes downstairs! And she is in the city.”

Keywords: domestic prison, hold, home-schooling, dependency, aggravation, violence, friendly support, awareness

FR10

Title: Nawal lived through the pandemic as a sex-worker

Narrative: “My name is Nawal [a she], I am 43 and I live in Marseilles. I come from Algeria and I applied for asylum in France in January 2019.

I have two brothers and two sisters. I'm the only one who went to university. My parents were happy. I was an engineer. I was the breadwinner of the family. After my studies, I worked. I got married late, because of my family, at 36. My husband used to throw tantrums. He didn't hit me, but he talked loudly, banged on doors. I did everything. He was a profiteer, over money, everything. After two years, I said “I'm getting a divorce”. He wouldn't sign the papers. I got ill, I got a goiter because of him.

I left Algeria after the divorce application. My brothers said they would burn my face if they saw me with a boyfriend. My mother was afraid I would get pregnant. It was complicated to live as a free woman. My father was kind, understanding, but always sick, he was bedridden. He died on 6 February this year (Nawal is in tears).

In France, I stayed with a girlfriend for a few months. She lived with her ex, each in their own room. He was ill with cancer. And they had two children. I had arrived with a bit of money but soon I had none left. My girlfriend told me to look for a job, that she couldn't keep me any longer. I had another girlfriend, she lives in a hot neighbourhood and her husband beats her. He drinks, smokes cannabis. Then I lived in a squat, that was tough. I worked at my girlfriends' houses, I looked after the children, did the cleaning. They were taking advantage of me. Before the lockdown, I had an undeclared cleaning job on building sites. The boss was taking advantage of everything, and with the covid it was even more complicated.

A girlfriend told me that a guy wanted to get married. But it wasn't like that. I have been

in prostitution since 2020. In March 2020, at the beginning of the lockdown, I spent nine months with a 79 year old Algerian man who was nice, really nice. He was sensitive, he cried with me. His family was in the countryside, he was alone here. For me, he was like my father. He died of covid in 2020, in the first wave. Everyone took advantage of me. My girlfriend told me that an old lady needed someone to take care of her. It lasted six months. Then she went back to the village. I found my stuff on her doorstep one morning. She hadn't told me, I don't know why.

During the covid, prostitution was difficult, there were fewer clients. A lot of people who were in an irregular situation or who had no money were doing it too, they had to. The men knew that, they took advantage of the suffering. My girlfriend suggested a man who was very mean. It lasted eight months. He caressed me in ways I didn't want. He insisted. It was rape. He was physically and morally harassing me, insulting me. I was afraid.

So I looked on the internet for associations, to get help. I found the Amicale du Nid [a well known CSO specialized in helping sex workers], I said to myself that this was for me. I told my story to an educator. For a fortnight now, I have accommodation thanks to the association. For several months before I got the accommodation, I was cooking for them as a volunteer. I could see other women like me. We could talk to each other, tell each other what we are going through. It took them 13 months to get me accommodation but now there are three of us in a flat, each in a fully equipped room. We don't pay much money. We have a food delivery twice a week. There are workshops and also meetings, in several languages. There are many foreigners. This is international! Here everyone is nice, it's a physical and psychological relief. Now I feel like a queen! I sleep in peace, with no blackmail.

The associations, the hostels, there aren't enough of them. Accommodation is the problem. I prefer a job, even a hard one, to stealing or begging, but without shelter and accommodation, it's a disaster, especially at night. We need to provide shelters, so that people are not afraid, so that they can rest and look for work. During the covid it was even worse. At the association, the lady offered me to call the emergency housing number [that gets people off the street but only a night at the time], but there are too many people there. I said no. People should be informed, told that there are associations.

One day I'll make it. H. suggested that I enter a programme to get out of prostitution, to get papers. There are a lot of requests. I'm waiting. I want to train to be a drugstore assistant. I would like a home. I would like to adopt children. I had two miscarriages, that was tough. I don't even know what confidence is anymore, but I feel good here, so good. All the people are nice, they hug each other, they speak softly. I would like to see my mother, she is ill. She cries, but she tells me that I was right to leave, that I have to live my life."

Specifically telling quotes: "ed at Nawal's request. The interviewer took notes. These quotes are therefore somewhat approximate]

"My brothers are authoritarian: no talking, no going out, coming home by a certain time, no friends, no parties... (...) My brothers are with those guys with beards, so they said I had to wear a scarf."

"My mother was born in 1960. She too was under the control of her brothers. She did

not want to marry my father. My mother is blonde. He is black. But as he had money at that time, his brothers forced my mother to marry him.”

“At first my husband worked, for about a year. Then he stopped and I brought in the money. For the family and for my husband.”

“(the kind man) He gave me money, sometimes 20 euros (...) Money for shopping, or photocopying, or for transport. (...) It all happened very quickly, he went to hospital and died three days later. He was already ill before. He had chronic diseases, high blood pressure and diabetes. (...)”

“The covid was complicated. The boss didn't want to stamp the certificates [to allow people to go outdoors]. (...) He made certificates with the names of the employees who were declared. And when he wrote cheques, sometimes for large sums, five or six hundred euros, he said that if someone checked, we would have to say that he had lent us money, that it was not a salary. I would really like to denounce him, but I'm afraid (...) I knew I couldn't do anything.”

“One day I fell in the bathroom (...) The boss paid nothing. I had to pay the doctor, the medicine. And the boss told me to come back when I was better. My leg still hurts, I've been suffering for three years (...) Because of the fumes from the cleaning products, I had spots on my face.”

“It was not declared. I had €50 a day for 7am to 4.30pm, with a half-hour break. We ate in six or seven minutes. If we had a health problem or an accident, the boss didn't want to know, so we were out of work.”

“One day [my boss] said to hide in the cupboards, that there was going to be a labor inspection. I asked him how he knew. He said he can buy whatever he wants, even inspectors.”

“Sometimes I think I'm not normal, but it's the others who took advantage of me who are not normal. These people don't have a heart, they have a stone instead. They want to take advantage, again and again. And to do harm, that's it (...) I could never do everything they do.”

“You know, Madam, in prostitution there are all kinds of people: married women, divorced women, single women, even pregnant women... (...) My suffering is 0.0001% of that of the others (...) Those who are in an irregular situation... The men look for the weak points. They say they want to get married, and after a month, two months, they send them into prostitution. I've never had a pimp, I'm shy. I got into prostitution through my girlfriends. They used to pick up girls.”

“I hated the night. At night I lived in hell. So in the morning, I pretended I was working, I went out sometimes at six in the morning. And I would stay out all day. I would go to the parks, to the beach, anywhere to avoid going home.”

“I preferred just one person who treated me badly than being with 10 people. I know women who have been to the emergency shelters. They told me about it. Some of them steal, they hit, there are homosexuals. And then you have to call again for the next night.”

“I want to get into a plan to get out of prostitution [PSP] for 24 months. Every six months you get a renewable residence permit receipt. If people do the course but then go to sleep instead of working, they won't get it (...) There are a lot of requests: 22 and they only take 12. At the end of the 24 months, if you have a permanent contract, you can have a residence permit for one year or ten years. It's case by case. (...) They read

everything in detail. The situations are all difficult: women with children, disabled people, battered women, homosexuals...”

“Here in France, I have the equivalent of second year university diploma. So I can take a course. The director of the Amicale told me to write into my file that I had studied and that I wanted to go on training. Because then, when they read the file, they’ll say “she wants to get out of it”. (...) I want to work and be safe.”

“We give 60 € deposit to the association, and 15 € per month. And a percentage more when I work. It goes from 50 € to 150 €, depending on what we earn.”

“We can make jewelry, photos... The meetings have themes: parental aggression, prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases and other things. I learned a lot of things.”

“For 15 days now, I am not afraid anymore, I sleep at night. I had to wait thirteen months for accommodation. (...) There was no room.”

“When I call my mother on the phone, if I hear noise behind, my sisters or brothers, I tell her I’ll call her back. I can’t hear any more noise, any more arguments, I can’t. ”

Keywords: enslavement, migration, exploitation, violence, destitution, indignity, impoverishment, despair



Greece

GR01

Title: Gender identity

Narrative: My name is Manos and I am a trans man. I am 21 years old and I am a student in a small town in Greece. I have spent the lockdown with my family -my mother and my twin brother- in Athens. I have not transitioned yet and I have not come out to my family. The fact that my family doesn't know my gender identity was a problem for me because I could not be myself in the house where I was isolated. I had to struggle in these difficult conditions without being able to express my true identity. I couldn't bring my friends at home and I couldn't speak openly to them on the phone as I was afraid that my mother and brother would listen to what I was saying and realise my true identity. Hiding was a struggle for me. I have spent the first year of the quarantine at home studying to pass the exams to go to the University. It is a very stressful process. We were not allowed to go to school and all classes were moved online. The next year, I passed to a University outside Athens, but I couldn't go because of Covid-19. The University classes were carried out online during the second year of the lockdown. This created problems for me because I couldn't meet my fellow students and I couldn't move to a new town to escape the situation at home and meet new people. I felt isolated and also I could not express myself freely. I had no help by state agencies or NGOs, for example there was no support by the school or by social services. I've managed to get by by: (a) going for frequent walks and meetings with my friends outside the house. We had to send automated messages explaining the reason for living our houses and we would put "exercise" and go to the nearby parks and streets and (b) by starting photography, which helped me express myself better. These activities helped me keep in touch with those I consider as my true family, with people that know me and accept me for who I am.

Specifically telling quotes: "In general, my family doesn't know about my gender identity, nor do they know where I belong as a human being. They don't know how I am. So in general, is difficult for sure, but in the period of the lockdown, since one couldn't be open, it was even more difficult. For example I could not speak openly with my friends on the phone and we could not have more personal conversations, obviously to bring them home was impossible. There was no room for expression, when you are in the same space with someone who doesn't know how you are".

Keywords: gender identity, youth, family, friends, hobbies.

GR02

Title: Migration as a way out for LGBTQ

Narrative: During the first wave of the quarantine, schools closed and we were forced

to stay at home. My house is in an isolated area, in a suburb of Athens and it was difficult for me to meet my friends. I was glad that schools closed, but I didn't like the fact that the cookery school that I attended in the afternoon raised the fees and became online. I could no longer afford to pay these fees and it was difficult to follow the classes because they were only showing us how to cook on camera, we were not cooking. I did not like the fact that I couldn't see my friends. At first, I could only meet friends who lived close by and we were going for walks outside, but then I decided I wanted to meet more friends and so I started going to friends houses and sleeping there. I also invited friends to my house. I was at home with my two sisters, my father and my grandfather. 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. During the second year of the pandemic, I attended the public school of cookery. It was online but at least I didn't have to pay. I graduated and then I moved out of Greece. 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.

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: GBV, LGBTQ, social class, migration

GR03

Title: Some fathers were more present at home during the pandemic than in normal times.

Narrative: I am a 43 year old woman from Germany. I live in Athens for many years now. The pandemic was very difficult for me because we were very restricted. We couldn't go out, we couldn't meet our friends. We also had to be very careful not to get ill because I was pregnant and also not to pass it to my partners' parents live next door to us. For me it was especially difficult because I couldn't meet with family, friends and relatives in Germany. However, I had my baby in the middle of the pandemic in 2021 and this was very challenging because I didn't have a lot of help and support. One positive strategy we used to get by was to take long walks, to be outside with the baby. When the baby was born, it was a very hot summer in Athens, and the baby needed to go out. In the afternoon when the sun was not very hot, we would go out and stay out for hours. This was very positive for us, it made us feel much better. I took four months only parental leave although I am entitled to a year, but my work is precarious and I couldn't take the whole leave. Going back to work, although remotely was hard not only because the baby was small but also because my work partner died. It was a very sad period for me and the fact that I couldn't travel to be with my co-workers in Germany made it even more difficult. Nevertheless, I felt also that there was a very positive aspect in the lock down, the fact that my partner didn't have to work but received a small financial support by the

state. As he is a music teacher at school, he was not employed during the lock down and was compensated by the state. This allowed us to share care responsibilities, which we wouldn't have been able to share in normal times. During the first months, I had the baby more and he was doing all the cleaning and cooking, but also took care of him when I needed to rest. It was a very positive experience for me and for him. Parental leaves for fathers are usually only few days and so he would have missed all that and I could have been without support.

Specifically telling quotes: "The pandemic had a quite positive influence in that way because my partner is an afternoon teacher in school for individual music lessons. And so he was close when the baby was born and also afterwards. So he got some (little) money from the state but he was not working. That means that from May to September in the first months when the baby was born he was at home for the whole time. So actually after the birth for two weeks, I had a cesarian as well, so I was not very mobile physically. So I was spending the time with the kid and he was doing all the housework: cleaning, cooking, whatever. And we were very lucky that it was like this because normally you don't get any time off. I think one day or two. Friends of mine, male friends, they had to go immediately the day after the next to work, or they worked from the hospital. We didn't have this very very strict schedule and this was very good for us."

Keywords: work-life balance, parental leave, fatherhood, care, gendered distribution of labour

GR04

Title: Having a routine and using new technologies as strategies of coping with the pandemic

Narrative: The pandemic was not so difficult for me as it was for other people because I am used to being alone in my house. I did not face any serious health problems and so I didn't have to go to doctors. My age helped me because some of the lock downs did not have a major impact on my life, as it had for younger people. What made me happy was to walk in nature. My main problem was that I was worried about my friends and family. I do not see them very often anyhow because they are too busy and so I was OK if they were OK. It also helped me a lot to use electronic means to communicate with my friends. I was using digital means before and so it was easier for me to adjust to the pandemic, compared to other people of my age group. For me reading was also a great friend, I have spent a lot of time reading and this helped me. On the contrary, when I was watching or reading the news. This depressed me. My neighborhood has all that I need in close proximity. There is a super market, coffee shop, pharmacy, hospital and also a green hill, where I could walk and spend time close to nature. What helped me a lot was that I introduced a routine in my life: after 6, I would always go out for three hours to walk and this was essential. Before that I was at home, doing my reading, watching films and communicating with friends and family. Three hours walking 3-6 before the sunset, was

extremely helpful. To organise and have a program was extremely helpful. (In her previous narrative, in cycle 2, she emphasised more the problems that she faced, but this time she focused more on her agency and on getting organised, using technologies and becoming resilient. I think that she felt that she was in control of her life and this was important for her despite the isolation, fear and loneliness that she often felt)

Specifically telling quotes: "I would spend the mornings at home reading and communicating with friends and family. Then, after lunch I would go for a long walk of 3 hours. It was usually 3-6 and this made it easier for me to organise my life and feel well. I had a program. This was what kept me in a good mood and helped me cope with the isolation"

Keywords: elderly, organising, routine, walking, reading, use of new technologies, digital literacy

GR05

Title: Overcoming class and gender during the pandemic

Narrative: I have been working since I turned 17. My parents could not afford to support me, so I had to find a job. Because I was a woman and I didn't have any skills because I was a bad student at school my mother told me to go and look for a job at my uncle's bar. I started cleaning there and then I went to a hotel nearby and cleaned there too. Then I asked my uncle if I could work as a waitress and this was better because I could get tips also. Gradually I learnt how to do drinks and I became a barwoman. But my true passion was music, so I moved to Athens with my boyfriend to start here again. This was in 2016. I spend few years working in bars here, I also did some work in a clothes shop, but I never had time for the music. So for me it was not a question of getting out of the pandemic, or getting back at what I had, because I loved the pandemic. In 2018, I had split with my boyfriend and met another one who is a musician, a guitarist. We moved in together and then the pandemic started. We started playing music at home and recording it. And there was one of his friends too who is a drummer and bass player and we were all playing music. I had time to write lyrics and sing. It was great for me that I had an income, because as a waitress, I was entitled to government support. It was not a lot, but it was sufficient for me to survive and have a nice time. I really miss the quarantine now. I have managed though to send a sample to a record company and they had made our first album. We recorded it in the studio in 2021. I think that the main obstacles that I faced were poverty and the fact that I am a woman, which makes it harder to find a well paid and good job.

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: class, gender, work, music, creativity, labour market.

GR06

Title: Overcoming alcohol addiction during the pandemic

Narrative: Katerina had her son when she was 22. She met the father of her child while studying abroad but that split up as soon as her son was born. She moved back to Greece and stayed with her parents who were very supportive sharing a flat and the responsibilities of child rearing. At first, she got a job as a translator in an editorial house in Athens. While she was at work her mother took care of the child, but she died suddenly of a heart attack and Katerina was forced to quit her job. Her employer would not allow her to work from home even though he knew of her difficult circumstances. Katerina continued sharing a flat with her father, who supported her financially to become a stay-at-home-mother. She gradually began to go out two or three times per week and became addicted to alcohol. She would leave her son to her father and spend time with friends all night drinking. She had two serious accidents while drink driving and her license was removed for long periods of time. She got out of this situation during the pandemic. As bars closed, she got motivated to stop drinking with the support of a psychologist. She then focused on getting a new job and she managed to get a new job as a translator for a medical company in January of 2021. She can now work from home, so she avoids going to bars and drinking. Stopping drinking and taking care of herself was at the beginning a strategy she used to get by during the pandemic. As months went by, however, she realised that she could overcome her addiction and turned to a psychologist for help. The main events that made her take this direction were: the realisation that she was an alcohol addict -a fact that she wouldn't even admit to herself previously. She felt that she was a good mother and just needed time off but didn't realise that it had become hard for her to quit. Also the continuous lockdowns and bar closures helped her avoid "temptation". As a result of these circumstances, and the advice of her psychologist, she was able to get out of the deadlock she was in and also find a job that she enjoys.

Specifically telling quotes: "For me the pandemic was a blessing. At first, I stopped drinking to get by during lockdowns, because I felt I was getting crazy drinking alone. It was not fun anymore. I stopped drinking, going out, and getting wasted. All of these together. This saved my life because I was drinking and driving and this was dangerous. I also got a wonderful job that I really like and no longer need this type of entertainment to spend my day. I work from home. Cook and take care of my son and my father while also working. For me this is ideal after all these years of being a stay at home mom and an alcoholic. I know now that I am an alcoholic and I am making a huge effort to never start again. I also feel that the lockdowns helped me get out of the harm I was doing to myself. Of this addiction I mean that I brought to myself"

Keywords: addiction, single motherhood, lockdowns, unemployment.

GR07

Title: Getting out of the loneliness and isolation of elderly care

Narrative: I have managed to get out of my isolation in Greece after many years. It was lonely before but during the pandemic it became even more lonely for me because I couldn't risk infecting Mrs. L. She is very fragile. I had to protect her, because it is also my job, without her, I have nothing. I used to talk to my family for hours on the skype because it was the only way for me to communicate with other people. Before the pandemic, I was taking Mrs L. out everyday for a walk and I had a day off during Sundays where I met with fellow Ukrainians. However, this was no longer possible as most of us work in houses with old people. When the war broke out we were all very scared and I was mostly scared about my son in law who went to the army. He is still fighting. My husband and my daughter left Kiev before the heavy fighting started and they came here. I welcomed them with a mask and then went back to the old lady. It was very sad for me. They first stayed in the house of a fellow Ukrainian and then I managed to rent a house for them near the place where I live. Now we no longer use skype, we meet at the park. I take Mrs L. with me, she walks and likes the outside. It is good for her because she has dementia and being in lock downs is the worse for dementia. Meeting people is good for her. I also like it because I can see them and talk to them and be close to my grand children, which before I couldn't see growing. I am still very anxious about my son-in-law, but I was able to get out of my loneliness and isolation. The main event that changed everything for me was the war in Ukraine. This created a lot of anxiety for me and as I was in isolation in Greece, I felt really bad. When my family arrived here, it became much better, but I was still anxious because I couldn't meet with them often and I couldn't quit my job because it is all the income that we have. When I found a place for them to stay near the place where I live and we can now meet at the Park, I felt relief. As a migrant woman in Greece, I have no other option but to work in the sector of elderly care and now that Ukraine is in war, I cannot even go back. I have an apartment in Kiev, and I was planning to retire there but now it is very difficult. I was hoping to get a pension and stay there because here I do not have enough stamps to get a pension. It is a combination of being a woman and a migrant that makes it hard but I feel much better now that I am with my family again every day.

Specifically telling quotes: "I go to the park everyday with Mrs L. She enjoys it a lot because it is a big park and it is very beautiful with trees. We always go near the entrance of the park to a bench near the children's playground. My grandchildren, M. 5 and S. 7, go there everyday with my daughter- their mother- and my husband. We sit altogether and we talk. I buy Mrs L. orange juice that she likes a lot and we all sit there. And my grandchildren are playing. I am so happy, even though I am still isolated for most of the day. It just improves everything. Human contact and talk is what I was missing the most being isolated with Mrs L."

Keywords: elderly care, war, migration, labour market, care, family, isolation

GR08

Title: Divorce and abuse during the pandemic

Narrative: I am from Estonia and my husband is from Greece. We met in Estonia. We are both IT people and had a lot in common. I felt that I could trust him although he was always very jealous and this was a sign that I should have taken seriously. But I didn't know a lot back then and I was also in love. I thought that it was a cultural issue, because he is Greek and he is more expressive and more open about his feelings. I had my first daughter in Estonia and then we moved to Greece while I was pregnant and I had my son here. I learnt Greek and I was very happy to be here because I liked Athens. His family and friends were also very nice to me and I felt that although I was a foreigner, I was in a good place in my life. I work online, I am an online content manager and my work is very flexible so I could plan my life and be more flexible in order to take care of my children. He also has a good job and a good income. I could say we were wealthy. However, he was abusive. I don't want to share a lot. It is still new to me but I decided to leave and I rented an apartment, small but nice, and moved there with the children while he was on a business trip abroad in 2019. It was just before the pandemic started and we arranged for him to take the children every weekend. At first, I was very happy that I had moved out because I was thinking what could have happened to me if I was still in the same apartment with him. It would have been a nightmare. But he began to visit and he became abusive again. It was very embarrassing and I had no one to turn to because all the people I knew where his relatives and friends. Mine are in Estonia. I couldn't even travel there to meet them. I got a lawyer and asked him to help me get a divorce during the pandemic and my husband became very angry. He came outside the house and he was shouting but I didn't open the door. It was difficult but better than being with him locked in a house with the children. I was lucky. What changed everything for me was the me-too movement that started in Greece in 2021. It was all over the news, famous people, actors, athletes all talked about it. And ever since it is everyday on the news in Greece. Women who were successful say that they were abused. It made me feel stronger and it gave me a lot of courage and ideas about what to do. I spoke to my lawyer about getting a restraining order so he will not bother me any longer. I also got more information about moving back to Estonia which is what I want to do. But as a foreigner this is almost impossible because it will be like kidnapping the children and I am obliged to give him access to them. I feel stronger, but I am here and I cannot leave. Even now that the quarantine is over, I have no friends to go out with. My work is online so it is difficult to meet people. However, I feel relieved that he can no longer abuse me and I can protect myself. I feel stronger although my life is more difficult. I am afraid sometimes but mostly I feel that I was lucky and also that I did the right thing. When I get the divorce, I will have more control over my life, but I might have to stay here in Greece. I cannot get out of the country, although I did go out of the violence of my marriage. I am proud of that and I am moving on.

Specifically telling quotes: "For me, it would have been a nightmare to be forced to

stay with him 24h per day in our house. He was so abusive, that he made me cry all the time. Psychologically I couldn't cope. It was very lucky that I left just before the lock downs started. Then he wanted me to go back. But my door was locked and he couldn't force me. He still comes outside my house and creates problems, but I keep it "low" for the children. But it was very lucky that I left. And then the me-too made me understand that I have rights and I work with these with my lawyer because before I didn't know what these rights are"

Keywords: GBV, abuse, divorce, empowerment, lock down.

GR09

Title: Reducing expenses to survive the pandemic

Narrative: I was one of those people that became poor during the pandemic because I was not entitled to the government compensation that others were. I am working in private houses cleaning and I have good clients for years now. But when the pandemic started they were too afraid to let me clean so they asked me to stop going. This was without warning and without compensation. It was very difficult because I have two children who are teenagers 15 and 16 and they need not only food and clothes but also private lessons because they are at that stage when they need to make progress, go to University, learn languages. All these expenses we couldn't cut them so we spend all the money that my husband made on private tuition and there was very little left for everything else. We didn't have savings because my husband had an operation few years ago and we had to spend all our money there. To get by, I had to use the strategy of economizing, which is the same thing I did when we first arrived in Greece. Less food, less heating, no clothes, no shoes, no unnecessary expenses. We explained to the children that we had to make changes and I started making the best I could to reduce the expenses for the basics. When we were cold, we were wearing a lot of clothes in the house. When we were hungry, I would bake bread with just flour, water and oil and we would eat that. I also started getting food and clothes from a charity of the Municipality. We did not tell our relatives because it was shameful, and we stopped going back home for a while. We also stopped using our car and used mostly public transport. This was all to make sure that our children get a good education: they continued private tuition in English and also in the subjects that are important for the University exams, so they have not lost their connection to the educational system. Many other children in Greece stopped studying when school became online. For us, this was the main strategy to avoid the negative impacts of the pandemic.

Specifically telling quotes: "For me it was better to give children all the private tuition that they need to move ahead in life rather than to have heating, lots of food and nice clothes. These don't matter in life. The important thing is to have a good basis, to get a good job, become someone who can earn a proper living. So, whatever my husband was earning we would put into this". "I became an expert in economizing. I went to the

open air market last, when the prices were very low and I would find the best offers. Also I would go to the cheapest super market to get food and would cook on loaf of bread with water, flour, salt and oil everyday to make sure that we were not hungry. My children never complained because I explained to them the situation, that I wasn't getting paid anymore. I also went to the charity of the Municipality for clothes and food, which was embarrassing.”

Keywords: domestic work, migrant women, education, children, food, heating, poverty, charity

GR10

Title: Domestic work and Long-Covid

Narrative: I am from Poland and I moved to Greece to support my family. I was working on a hospital as a paramedic, but I needed more money as my daughters were growing up. My sister was already in Greece working as a cleaner and she was making a lot of money. After two years , I had 6 good clients, I was working 6 days per week and I was sending money back home for my children. The lock downs destroyed everything for me because only one client who is a single male living near my house told me that I could continue going to his house to clean. I lost all my income in one day and then I could not send anything back home because I was not allowed to claim government compensation in Greece. When the first lock down eased I got a second client back, but after few week I got Covid and had to stay home. When I was no longer positive, I started working again, but I was extremely tired, I had headaches, nausea and dizziness. Some days I couldn't even leave my bed and I couldn't do my work as I did before. I could not lift heavy staff and felt dizzy while I was cleaning. I explained this to my clients and they were very supportive. I took breaks to deal with the problems but it was difficult. I was all alone because miss siter had decided to move back to Poland when the borders opened. She couldn't stand being away from her children any more and was feeling depressed. I decided to stay because I thought the lock downs will stop, and then when I got Covid I was alone. After the lock down stopped more clients returned, and I started going to their houses and cleaning them. But it is hard labour and I couldn't do it properly. I was getting tired, dizzy and I had to take frequent breaks. One of my clients asked me what was wrong because I never took breaks before and I told her. She told me that I was probably suffering from long-Covid. She opened my eyes and I started doing research, I found that it is probably what I have and I went to the Doctor of the national health system (IKA). The doctor told me that the symptoms I describe are long-Covid symptoms but she could not diagnose me officially. She told me that I needed vitamin D, sleep and time off. It wouldn't make a difference if I got diagnosed because I could not take it to my clients and ask them to pay me to sleep and take time off. So I decided to quit and leave Greece. I am hoping that going back to Poland like my sister did will improve my health. Financially this is not a good prospect, but I like the idea of going back, being with my children and husband and also my friends and other relatives.

Specifically telling quotes: “I had 6 clients, one for each day of the week except from Sunday when I would take time off to go to Church and meet other Polish friends. After the pandemic started, I had one client who is a divorced man and cannot do housework who told me that I could continue cleaning his house while he wasn't there. I was sending a lot of money back home and suddenly I could only support myself and pay the rent.”
“Leaving Greece and returning home is for me the only way out. I hope that we will make it. I hope and pray that my daughters will not live a life of poverty because I got long-Covid. But for me this is a good prospect because I want to be with them, I want to rest and stop feeling tired. So it is a nice return not a sad return.”

Keywords: long-Covid, migration, domestic work, remittances, psychological problems, isolation



Croatia

HR01

Title: Hell is behind me

Narrative: “My name is Iva. I am 43 years old, divorced, with two teenagers. I graduated from the secondary school and later earned the certificate for a makeup artist. For almost twenty years that has been my profession. I married as a very young woman. I live in a small town badly hurt by war, economically devastated. My ex-husband started to work in a foreign country and he was coming home sporadically. As years went by, our relationship got weaker and weaker, and in September 2019 I decided to apply for divorce. I was not aware that it meant opening a door to hell. I informed him that I fell in love, but also knew that he was living abroad with a woman who he called his roommate. Ten days after the fatal conversation, people started to call me saying that very explicit pictures have been sent to them. Of me, naked, in provocative poses, with full name and address. I was in a state of shock. Those were the pictures I sent him at the beginning of our marriage because we lived apart. Revenge to a woman who dared to annule marriage existing only on paper. But it gave him the benefit of a tax reduction which he didn't want to relinquish. I learned that he did not act alone. An ex-girlfriend of my new partner and her male acquaintance gladly co-created the whole plot. Pictures and videos were posted on several porn websites, sent to my clients, social workers, almost to everyone in my town. Subtitle was: This is a woman who wants to become your mayor (I was a candidate at the last elections, but then left politics completely). The material was sent to my family; the father of my children showed them to our son. Strange people started to call me, I could not walk the streets, go shopping, drink a coffee in a café. My e-mail was hacked, and I lost all correspondence. I contacted the police, but their only advice was to stay calm and change the mobile number. Just to stress that I have changed ten different mobiles and numbers so far. There was no legislation on revenge porn. I had to close my craft business, naturally. The only thing they could do was to file the charges against the guy (one of the trio) who was bombarding me with messages full of threats and dirty words. He was sentenced to eight months conditionally, for the period of two years. Finally, after six months and hundreds of complaints, police decided to submit my case with the names of all three perpetrators to the public prosecutor. It took them a year to invite me to give an oral statement. The first hearing at the criminal court of justice was held in September 2022. I also had to wait for my divorce papers. Three judges were changed. The excuses were - it's the pandemic. In all the institutions - social services, hospitals, courts. Delay after delay.

But, in a way, the pandemic and the lockdown saved me. I wore a mask, a hat or a wig, and finally could go out. I was spared and saved from curious gazes. I felt like I was alive again. But I was wrong. At the beginning of 2020, I started to feel poorly - I fainted often, had fever, felt weak. My doctor thought it was just anaemia, and when I wanted thorough exams at the hospital, they offered me a date in five months. I borrowed money and went to a private clinic. The same day they diagnosed me with the colorectal cancer. They

arranged an exam at the public hospital, and soon, thanks to their intervention, I had an operation. Luckily, there were no lesions and metastases. I didn't have to go through chemotherapy but need to have checks every four months.

All in all, I lived through hell, but feel stronger than ever. I learned how to fight for myself, I learned how to survive. I am working again, have new clients, have children who love me and we support each other. I just need to wait patiently for evil people to be punished. As I contacted one women's human rights organisation, and due to my story, they initiated a campaign inviting women to tell their stories about revenge pornography. The Parliament introduced changes into the Penal Code, and since 1 January 2022, revenge pornography is going to be prosecuted officially. It's still far from being perfect, but the first steps were taken.

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Specifically telling quotes: On one hand, the pandemic saved me as I could walk the streets or go to stores without being recognised, but on the other it was used by institutions as an excuse for not doing their job as they should; Can you imagine, he showed pictures to our children, its monstrous; one child doesn't want to see him; one policeman said to me but you look great on these pictures; I am alive, that is important; albeit I became a person with disabilities (80 per cent), I am proud of myself; nobody can mess with me, I am survivor

Keywords: revenge pornography, cancer, persistence, institutional inefficiency

HR02

Title: Living for others

Narrative: My name is Rada. I am 61-years old, a member of the Serb minority in Croatia, married to a Croat, with one child. I was often perceived as a betrayer of Serbs, and he as the betrayer of Croats. My main characteristic is that I am a fighter, never willing to give up no matter what obstacles I am facing. Luckily, my mother is still active and supports me with performing many household tasks. Women supporting women, as usual. You know how poor Serbs are in this part of Croatia, and how only few stayed here. Predominantly older people who did not want to leave their homes, farms, animals. Realising that I need to do something, I started in 2018, with two other women, to collect donations and distribute them to those in need. I visited almost every household, some in the middle of nowhere, without proper roads, some even without electricity. I decided to engage in politics too but not as a member of any party. The party that claims to represent Serbs in Croatia somehow didn't have time to reach us. And then, as the life was not hard enough, the pandemic and a terrible earthquake hit us. It was horrible. I was infected at the beginning of 2021 and survived without any serious consequences. Second infection, in March 2022, was more serious - pneumonia, weakness...three weeks of staying in bed without any energy. It was not a surprise as I was running around, visiting people, often stuck in mud, often without proper footwear. But when I compare

it with people living in containers, I can't complain. I will never forget a woman diagnosed with cancer, infected, with high temperature, laying in the cold container. She didn't have a toilet. Horror. I don't think of myself as a victim when I see other people and their poverty. I decided to stay here not knowing exactly why. Probably memories, and my mother who did not want to leave her household. And I was raised by her. My father died when I was a child. I was employed as an economist in the town's communal firm since I returned in 2010, and I was degraded after the mayor who employed me died. But I didn't give up. I had a smaller salary and survived. After my decision to start helping other people, I had to buy an old car with a bank loan. And now I can reach the furthest locations. After the war, Serbs here were extremely discriminated although they were not engaged in the conflict. Sometimes I think I am fighting against windmills, but I am stubborn. I still have some hope, although I see that everything is devastated. No jobs opening, no economy in perspective. All that was repaired after the earthquake was not done by the government but by private donations. They only recently started to be more present here. I think I get on the nerves of many politicians and decision-makers, but who cares. People who I communicate with support me, want me to be politically engaged and give me the strength to continue my work.

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: ethnicity, discrimination, humanitarian work, politics, sacrifice, common good

HR03

Title: Marching forward in pain

Narrative: My name is Olga. I am 35 years old, single. I am a public management specialist and a person with a 60 percent disability rating as diagnosed in 2018. Additionally, I was diagnosed with depression three years ago and I regularly take medicine prescribed by psychiatrists. An MRI recently showed huge malformations of my cervical vertebrae which causes 24-hour excruciating pain. But I reject perceiving myself as a person with disabilities. I am trying to pretend that everything is normal and I can deliver the same performance as healthy people. After graduating from university, I obtained a diploma in managing EU projects, then public relations and the basics of business administration. Oh, one more thing - I am a member of the small minority community - I declare myself as Czech. I lived in a small town but moved to Zagreb a year ago. I found a job that made me economically independent. Now my position is jeopardised, but I will fight and try to stay here. On weekends, I go, as often as I can, back to my hometown to help my father who lives alone and is very ill. And to see my old friends, of course. My mother died in April of 2020, and I think that her death provoked depression. She was my shield, my friend, my everything. She was diagnosed with cancer during the total lockdown, which significantly diminished the quality of her healthcare. My father, who was an alcoholic and an abuser, suddenly woke up as a

different person and the two of us took care of her during the four months before her death. We had to have official permission to travel to hospitals in other places, didn't receive any advice on how to feed her through the tube, she didn't have hospital transport, but, weak as she was, had to travel by our car. It was inhuman attitude towards a dying patient. After her death, I thought of committing a suicide. My father also had huge problems - he was accepted at first into a group of patients who received experimental medicine, but during the pandemic our haematologist left, and he was forgotten. Without a doctor's receipt he could not get the medicine. I did not have regular contacts with my doctors too. The pandemic was a horror to us. I don't know how I survived and how I became the person who never gives up. When someone tells me: No, I immediately jump and say: Oh yes, I can do it. One civil society organisation saved me. I was continuously applying for hundreds of different jobs, but nobody even invited me to an interview. When I met them, friendly and supportive as they were, I felt like re-born. I could work from home and from time to time go to the head office in another town. Now I hope they will open an office in Zagreb and employ me. When I decided to leave my hometown and the small appartement my father and I were sharing because I felt as suffocating, they did not have the financial resources for opening an office in Zagreb. Now the situation is much better, and I am looking forward to working with them again. At my present job nothing is ok. My boss received incentives for employing a person with disability, but he would like to get rid of me. However, if he fires me, he will have to return all the money to the government. I am now on a long sick leave, hoping not to have to return to that job. In the beginning of the sick leave, I thought of returning to my father, but realised that it is too depressive. So, I go back and forth. Here, in this rented room I feel safe and sound. I started to write a book about my life, my feelings. Hope to finalise it before the end of this year. I write a lot on my Facebook profile and have a very positive response from many Facebook friends. One editor approached me, and we are now discussing how and when the book may be published. It helps me survive from one day to the other. I love life no matter how difficult mine is.

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: disability, pain, employment, depression, strength, persistence, honesty

HR04

Title: No more violence

Narrative: My name is Diana. I am a 39-year-old maths teacher, living in a small town, almost divorced, with one child. And a former victim of violence who finally said no more. He is in jail at the moment. He violated a restraining order and was sentenced to 45 days in prison. During the lockdown he was working abroad and it was the only time of peace and tranquillity. Unfortunately, the moment the restrictions were removed, he came back, and torture started again. He is an alcoholic. He followed me everywhere, controlled my mobile, stole my money, called me dirty names, shouted, and screamed

while I had online education with my students. At the beginning of 2021, I finally decided I've had enough and started reporting him to the police and demanding protection. But, what usually happened - I would call, they would come, take him, keep him for one night, and then he was back home. When I wanted a divorce, I had to go to the social service because of our child. He rejected to attend these meetings and sign the parental care plan. However, according to our social service centre, "he has some good days when he may be able to establish a contact with his child". They suggested, and the court ordered him, a treatment for alcohol addiction. He spent one month in the psychiatric care, but then demanded to be let out. And then the heavy drinking started again. I was persistent, and finally in December 2021 the court decided on a nine-month restraining order. However, he successfully violated it several times. He wasn't working anymore but sat in the park and stared at our apartment surrounded with beer cans. Each time I would call the police. It took them almost nine months to send him to jail. People suggested I should leave and move to another place, my profession is welcomed everywhere, but I declined. My parents begged me to return to their house in my hometown. One school offered me a job there. However, I didn't want to go, to surrender. I love this place, love my work, colleagues. My child loves his friends, classroom. My soon to become ex-husband should leave. He is the perpetrator, not me. We have an apartment owned by the government. I initiated a process of deleting him as the co-owner of the right to use this flat. When I wrote to the respective office, I learned that we owe a significant sum of money for rent since he was regularly skipping payments. I also found out that he didn't pay kindergarten for six months. I had to take a bank loan to cover all the debts. After not coming to an agreement at the centre, I filed for divorce in the court. The judge could not proceed with the case as his address was unknown. His family rejected to accept the papers sent by the court, and no other address was known. Finally, when the judge recently learned at the hearing that he was in jail, the court sent him the papers to prison, where they are going to be undoubtedly delivered to him. It is important that he is informed. He doesn't have to come to the court. Soon, I will officially be free. I don't know how he will behave upon being released, but I am not scared any more. I informed everyone in the institutions about our situation, I demand their reaction prescribed by the law, have a lawyer, have friends and colleagues who support us. I will not let him ruin my life and the childhood of one innocent creature.

Specifically telling quotes: I was lost, ashamed of myself, but then I woke up. I knew I have to fight for myself. Cancer did not stop me and prevent me from demanding institutional protection. I was hiding from other people, and the pandemic saved me for a while. Behind the mask I felt protected from curious gazes. Now I feel stronger. I know who I am and how I want to live.

Keywords: domestic violence, alcoholism, debts, parental care, institutional obstacles, persistence

HR05

Title: I am happy

Narrative: My name is Darya, I am 41 years old, have the status of an asylum seeker together with my three children. I fled from my country three years ago. That was the only reasonable solution if I wanted to spare my life and bring all four of us to safety. My father prevented my mother from helping me. He has always been violent towards her and us, his daughters. He was the one to arrange my marriage when I was 16 with a guy ten years older whom I have never met before. One of my sisters was forced into marriage when she was 14. And the violence continued with my husband. Almost from the very first day. I had to wear chador and was not allowed to leave the house without his permission. For six months I was locked in the house. He would beat me without any reason. He liked to pull me by my hair and drag me around. I cut my hair and deprived him of one of his pleasures. I begged my parents to let me return, but they rejected. They told me that is how women should live and be quiet. He didn't permit our son to go to school and planned to marry daughters as soon as possible. He started to bring women to our house, one after the other. I was fed up, dreamt of a different life for me, and especially for my children and filed for a divorce. However, nothing changed. He would follow me, attack me, and beat me severely. I had broken bones, injuries on my face, back, all over my body. In the end, he threatened to throw acid into my face. I went to the police and begged them to help me. They said, but you are beautiful, nothing happened. When he throws the acid, come back and we will then act against him. When we were married, and I would call the police, they told me: "If he beats you, come with four witnesses who will testify. Only then can we do something". How to find witnesses when everything happened behind closed doors?! I was working there all the time. He didn't give us money for clothes, footwear. I opened a salon in our house. For women, of course. Behind heavy curtains, I would take care of their hair and make-up. You don't have schools in our country, but I went to a hairdresser and cosmetic salon, again at another woman's house, and after six months obtained two certificates. I am a hairdresser and a make-up artist. After divorce, I continued to work as a hairdresser, but had to go to clean other people's houses to survive. I decided it was time to leave. There was no future for us. If he murdered me, my children would be left to his mercy. My son supported me and started looking for the country where we do not need to present visas. Luckily, I had a passport with all three children in it. If I did not have it, I would be forced to cross the border illegally. You can get any document only if it is signed by your father or husband. My father would never sign it, and I had no husband anymore. He was in a good mood once, when we were still married, and he put his signature without thinking what it may cause in the future. So, my son and I found out that we can go to Serbia without a visa. I bought four tickets, and we embarked on a plane. That was how our adventure began. Since I had a very close friend living in Sweden for more than fifteen years as an asylum seeker, I dreamt of joining her there. Sadly, when we came to the Swedish embassy in Belgrade, our plea for visa was rejected. Sweden didn't want us. I was wandering the streets, hungry, lost. Finally, I went to the police, and they transported us to a camp. We stayed there for eleven months. A difficult time, I must say. Three families in one room. No heating in the cold winter. Terrible food. Nobody to help you. Even the UN didn't do anything. We decide to leave. We walked through the woods

and came to Bosnia. Without food and water. We continued to walk, helpless and in poor health. When we reached Croatia, we asked people to inform police, and when they came, I expressed a wish to get asylum seeker status. They took us to a hotel where only immigrants are placed. We had to have operations on our toes. They were severely infected and had to be removed. To all four of us. And since then, my bright future began. The children were enrolled in schools, food was decent. Didn't have any complaints. We stayed there nine months, and then were given a small house to live in, and monthly financial support. Every person with approved asylum status receives financial support for two years. Just when we moved there, the lockdown came. The children had online education, and I was arranging our new home. When the schools opened again, they brought Covid home, but we were vaccinated, and recovered fast, without any consequences. My children learned the new language fast. I attended lessons too and can communicate quite well in Croatian. I started to look for a job. I knew two years will pass quickly. My son helped me a lot. He filled all the forms, went to the institutions. Now I share a hair and cosmetic salon with a Croatian woman. I don't earn enough to cover all expenses, but I am positive about our future. My children are excellent students, and every morning when I wake up, I say, oh, I am not in danger anymore, I am happy. I will fight and have decent living in my new home.

Specifically telling quotes: I want a different future for my children and myself. I only miss my mother and my sister. I escaped, but how many women are forced to live in violence, without any possibility to do something for themselves. Once I was sad and helpless, now I am happy and strong.

Keywords: domestic (gender) based violence, escape, asylum seeker, persistence, activism

HR06

Title: I dare you

Narrative: My name is Hana. I am 41 years old, married, with one child. I graduated from the Faculty of Law, worked for several years as a lawyer, and then found a job in the public sector, moving from one post to the other. My last position was at a Croatian government agency, where I was the director. I was fired two years ago, immediately after the lockdown, upon rejecting to sign and approve documents with decisions I found irregular and completely against the law and prescribed procedures. I warned the Steering Committee, the minister, all relevant bodies, but there was no reaction. I was asked to approve exemption from payment for several renters of government space, all connected with high positioned politicians. They were not paying any rent, and I think that one owed more than a million kuna. My problems started several months before I was fired. Other people (predominantly women) were warned not to communicate with me and not to support me. Otherwise, they were told, they could lose their jobs. I found more irregularities and did not want to listen to instructions given from above. I sent

papers to the public prosecutor's office but did not receive any reaction. After being fired, I was trying to find a new job, but nobody wanted to hire me. Even a man who had engaged me for a while as a contracted consultant, told me after two months that I should leave as he has to work with the Government, and does not want to jeopardise his business. I became a persona non grata in Croatia. Finally, I had decided to go to the media and tell my story publicly. If I were alone, I would have starved. During the pandemic it was even more difficult to find any sort of engagement. Meanwhile, they had selected another woman to take my position although she didn't have qualifications set by the agency. I filed a complaint to the court. It took two years to get the first level decision in September 2022. It was in my favour. But they are not giving up, and I must wait for the new trial in the higher court. However, in between, two ministers were arrested, the woman who took my position lost it, but was kept there in a lower position. And I am jobless anyway. Whistleblowers are not popular in Croatia. On the other hand, the response of the several commercial media was fantastic. Journalists started to dig deeper and found out many irregularities. Then the people who pointed to irregularities in their workplaces and were fired started to contact me. There were many and I realised we should organise and do something on a broader scale. For example, one woman auditor was fired three months before her retirement. Their cases are in courts, but things don't go smoothly and last too long. And people need to live, eat, pay bills. We founded an NGO but it is difficult to find financial support. I was recently engaged by one NGO and participate as an expert in a project. New local government in another city invited me to analyse their real estate situation. The situation is similar the one at the national level - corruption and nepotism everywhere. Change is not visible on the horizon. Yet. I am not giving up and will continue to demand changes. Too many people left this country because of the situation we are living in. Hope dies last. I don't know why I am so persistent. I don't know how I survived, but here I am. The most difficult moment was when my mother was diagnosed with brain cancer and died after three months in pain and despair. Last year. She was my pillar.

Specifically telling quotes: I am who I am and don't want to change no matter the price I have to pay. They tried to ruin me, shame me, but I have evidence and know what I have seen.

Keywords: whistle-blower, corruption, public good, justice, action

HR07

Title: Battle after battle

Narrative: My name is Barbara, I am 40 years old, an economist. I am a mother of a child with disabilities. I say it at the very beginning, because it changed the course of my life and will continue to be both my blessing and a curse. Before my first pregnancy, I was a brand manager in a private foreign company. When I gave birth, everything looked perfect. I returned to work after his first birthday, and my father, a person with disabilities,

took care of his grandson. When he reached the age of two, it became clear that something is not as it should be. At first, I rejected the truth. When he started to go to the kindergarten, they called me after two weeks and told me I should go to a doctor as they'd witnessed strange behaviour. He wasn't talking, did not interact with others, had furious reactions. To make a long story short - after waiting for thorough exams for months, I got the final diagnosis when he was almost five. My son has autism. Long before that, I had to leave my job. My fulltime occupation became motherhood. Nobody gives you information on your rights. And my son's problems grew with every new day. Naïve as I was, I thought I was going to cure him. Other people don't know, but I will be the one to find a way to help him become like other kids. Finally, one speech-therapist told me I could get the status of a caregiver of the child with special needs until the age of eight. Now I ask - and what after that? How to survive after that age? Isolated, with a child I could not reach and communicate properly with, I became depressed and lost. Sometimes I cried from dawn to dusk. Even thought of committing suicide - me and him together. One doctor told me I looked worse than my child and advised me to do something urgently. No help from anyone with expertise, had to explore, read, learn by myself. I found on the Internet a private firm that organised playtime for kids like mine. We went to the bank and took a loan to be able to pay that treatment. It helped me to pull myself together. It was his first true therapy. In public hospitals I was told I could put him in a special institution!!! I knew it was not an option for me. It was not right, I thought. Why wasn't the government doing anything? Serious problems that occurred when I wanted to enrol him into primary school forced me to go public and express my rage. No schools for my child. They wanted to put him in a specialised classroom, which I rejected. I knew it was just a space to spend time and not to learn. I wanted to offer him the most, and then adjust schooling to his capacity. For a whole year, I was looking for a school where he could get what I wanted. I was going from one school to the other, and in the end, I even had to change my resident address to be able to enrol him at the school where they were welcoming him. The integration process was difficult, but I didn't give up. I found an assistant to help him at school. And then I started to communicate with other parents, predominantly mothers, who had children with disabilities, and joined an NGO. I knew we had to start advocating and pushing the government. And I have not stopped since then. I didn't want to join existing associations of people with disabilities as they just think of their positions and salaries. My private fights became very public and supported by many. Nothing is given to us without a fight. Bureaucracy and a lack of interest at every step in the institutions. During the pandemic, online education. How to expect a child with autism to understand that home has become a classroom. How to make him focus on a screen and learn. The Ministry forgot that such children exist. They gave him a small tablet he didn't know what to do with. We forced the Ministry to make arrangements for such children. They organised education for children with disabilities at schools, secured assistants, and one teacher to watch over them. It took them three months to prepare everything. Moreover, I discovered that I was pregnant. It made me happy. A girl to be born. And then, in the middle of the lockdown, when I was four months pregnant, during the ultrasound exam, my doctor started to breathe deep and sigh. Finally, she told me that something was very wrong with the foetus. Hell became my reality. Exams diagnosed severe malformations, and abortion was advised.

There was no chance for this baby to survive. I don't want to go back and think of that period. Of the cruelty of the whole procedure. It is not for doctors and nurses to be blamed. Conditions at the hospital, overburdened staff, and miserable patients to sum it up. When a woman told me how it looks in Slovenia, I started crying. All in all, I want to forget the pandemic as soon as possible. Now I am focused on our organisation, on advocacy, on the future. Battles with the authorities have to be won. On 15 December, new public protest in front of the Government building is going to happen.

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: mother, child with disability, caregiver, advocacy, battles with institutions

HR08

Title: Escape from war

Narrative: My name is Olga. I am 32 years old, and I came to Croatia from Ukraine. I obtained an MA in psychology and human resources management, which was not planned. When my partner and I decided it was time to leave the war zone, we planned to go to Montenegro without knowing much of that country. I just wanted to go to the seaside, stare at the blue sea, in some small place. We didn't know anything about the country itself. Only later, we learned that many rich Russians have a lot of property there and are quite influential. But, anyway, it was not meant to be. When we wanted to take a bus in Budapest and travel to Belgrade, the driver didn't let us board with our cat, our beloved pet we would never leave. We then took a train to Zagreb and thought of finding a way to reach Montenegro. Then in the morning, when we woke up early, and walked the streets of Zagreb, we both felt we should stay and not look for another place or country. And then our second new beginning was launched. We left two war zones behind us. At first, we lived in Donbas, but due to the Russian occupation, we moved to Kharkiv in 2014 hoping to stay there permanently. We were successful professionally. Before the pandemic, I was a director of human resources at a private dentist clinic and my partner held a private practice. The pandemic changed the situation for me. We were really in danger of being infected as dentists work with patients who may easily transfer the disease. Each time someone was infected, we had to close the clinic and stay home in a quarantine. You lose patients, you lose money. I think I was infected too, but did not go to the hospital as it would mean once again a closed clinic, no work. I was young and expected to get better without being properly diagnosed. During that period, I had time to contemplate, and realised I had enough of that hectic and demanding job. I quit. Depression was to be blamed. Probably as a consequence of the corona that was never properly diagnosed. Everything was happening at the end of 2020. Then, I received an offer to become a partner at a private consulting firm. It was challenging. Due to the pandemic, we had to work hard if we wanted to survive. Anyway, Kharkiv was a city where hard work was expected from everyone. Competing and not allowing to be left behind was a must for private business sector. I liked my work. Young as I was, it was rewarding

to invent new programs, new trainings, to be fast and creative. We were very successful, and everything seemed perfect. I planned future work for the year 2022. And then the war started. Once again for me. In February of 2022, from the eleventh floor appartement, I was looking at the first attacks. The airport was the target. Although the atmosphere was poisoned before that (it started in January 2022) we still hoped there would be no war. Especially to us, it would be unfair to experience it for the second time. To live again without electricity, water, heating. But we've had to face the facts. And this time it was not local - the whole Ukraine was being attacked. We did not have a choice. Lines for bread, food, money were seen all around us. We decided to leave once again. First, we went to another part of Ukraine, but then realised we should leave the country. Hoping to return soon. Expecting the war will end soon. Stupid thoughts. As I told you, we did not plan to go to Croatia. A Serbian bus driver is to be blamed. We went to the Ukrainian Embassy and got basic information. Then I wrote a post on the Facebook asking for advice on how to rent an apartment. The response was unbelievable. Hundreds of people responded offering their space, giving advice, and soon we met our new landlords. Fantastic people. We soon became friends. We are still living there. The government gives us a little bit less than 200 euros for the rent, and the rest is on us. My partner works online. He continued to communicate with his clients who, at the moment, live in 22 different countries. For several months he did not charge them, but then they insisted to start paying for his services. I established connections with women from Ukraine living in Croatia. We supported each other. The three of us realised there was a lot of work to be done and we established a civil society organisation in August. We knew we had to be better organised if we wanted to have long-term results. I became a manager, and since then we've organised many events and became quite visible and successful. We help women who have not been able to find a job, have no money of their own. The sum received from the Croatian government doesn't cover the rent. And you need money for food, clothes, living. We fundraised money, and continue to submit projects to different donors. I am quite happy with what we have accomplished so far. We organise language trainings. Without learning a langua

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: war, refugees, new beginnings, strength, skills

HR09

Title: My partner died

Narrative: My name is Lana. I am 45 years old, with an MA in economy, but working in the IT sector for a long time. I am lesbian. I had lived with a girlfriend Ana for sixteen years. I have initiated a new start up after losing her. With her, I had a small, quite successful firm. She was a designer. We led quite a stable life. Some may even call it boring. We loved each other, worked together, planned jointly. And then everything changed. Upside down. She often had stomach aches, but rejected to go to doctors. She

persuaded me that it was just inflammation. She was taking some pills which could be obtained without prescription. Otherwise, she was strong, went to the gym regularly, ran, walked, exercised. During the lockdown we were very careful, followed every recommendation, and worked from home. But, last year in July, everything changed. I was at the seaside, and one Sunday my friend informed me that my partner was taken to the ER. We spoke before that, and she told me she was tired after the gym. As I realized from the way she spoke - heavy breathing, pain - I asked our friend to go to our place and check on her. At the hospital, they thought it was a burst ulcer, but when they'd opened her, it was obvious she was facing cancer. They closed her. I had problems with eliciting information from the hospital staff. They'd claimed I was not her relative, and were only obliged to inform close relatives. As she did not have any relatives - her mother left her upon giving birth at an orphanage, and then her grandmother picked her up from there after several months and raised her. But she died, and her mother never asked to see her or contact her. It was a horror for both of us. When I finally succeeded in visiting her, a young doctor informed us of the diagnosis. I will never forget that moment. He invited us behind one dirty plastic curtain, did not offer us a chair, and bluntly said - it is stomach cancer. Without any advice on what to do, where to go, she was dismissed from the hospital. After consultations with other people, and internet research, we decided to go to a private clinic. Luckily, we could afford it at that moment. At the private clinic, they performed an operation. However, they didn't have capacity for the whole process. She had to go to the public hospital for chemotherapy. We were lost, and nobody was seriously helping us. So, we continued to go from one place to the other, from private to public clinics and vice versa, trying to understand what the best procedure in her case would be. You are lost, devastated, and nobody truly cares. One doctor we'd paid privately even told us not to do chemotherapy and offered us a silver cross with Christ. And she was getting worse. She was in terrible pain, had a stoma, a catheter. I was devastated. Her final days we'd spent at the home for the elderly where they had full medical care, and I could stay 24/7 days with her. Today, I don't know if we could have done more. According to the existing National Cancer Strategic Framework, a team of doctors has to be established for each patient and it jointly decides what treatment may be the best. I have not seen any team and did not get any useful advice. At one point, I even thought of going to court, but then chose to leave everything behind me. Nothing will bring her back. When it was obvious that she was not getting better, we decided to register formally. And now, albeit we were registered as a couple, I have to wait for the final decision at the inheritance proceedings. As we did not have children, her mother has the right to get half of her property, meaning half of our firm, money, everything. Although she never asked for her daughter, although she left her as a baby, I have to wait if she answers the call and shows up at the notary's office. I will not leave it like that and will go to court. She should not get a penny. I know she is alive, but don't know where she lives. I started a new firm, and decided to turn a new page in life. I will not forget her ever, but life goes on.

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: cancer, health care, same sex partnership, childless couples

HR10

Title: Surviving strategy

Narrative: My name is Luna. I am a 36-year-old freelance writer, dramaturge, and theatre director. Or rather, before the pandemic, I had been a freelancer, but have since decided to sign a fairly permanent contract with a commercial television station, having learned what it means to be locked in an appartement without any steady income. I must pay the rent, and I must eat and drink. I could not return to my hometown and share an extremely small space with my parents (apartment of 34 square meters). Too old for such a life... And they do not have any savings to help me - working class parents, and my mother lost a job several years before retirement. I have been independent since the age of twenty and learned how to support myself. Of course, it meant that I was forced to work hard. But I was quite successful. Despite being a woman coming from a province, without any connections. In Germany, for instance, feminists forced one festival jury to decide that half of the awarded young writers must be women. We will see how this experiment works. When I'd told my colleagues in Croatia about their decision, they'd declined it with disgust. Art does not have gender, they'd said. 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. My small amount of savings melted fast. I was lucky, on the other hand, as my landlady had cut the rent by half, and that did help me a lot. Shameful support given by the Government could not help someone like me, and many other artists. They had decided to give us three-month support - the first month 3.500 kuna, and then 4000 kuna (less than 500 euro and then 530 euros). How to pay the rent, eat, live? Not to mention the bureaucracy - all the papers you had to submit. Then, in September 2020, they'd started to publish calls for proposals. What is this, I thought. Are you going to support us in such a specific situation, or have you planned to torture us and evaluate everything as normal. Competition during the pandemic?! Entrepreneurs were receiving money throughout the pandemic, but artists were left out. When we raised our voices, we received additional support for two months. And that was it. To compare Croatia with France - my drama was selected to be performed there, and I was invited to give several presentations and lead workshops. With the lockdown it had to be cancelled, but they had called me and told me I would get the whole honorarium as they knew how difficult that situation was for freelancers. In Croatia, they had to cancel many previously planned events and performances, but, of course, they'd cancelled the payment too, although nothing was my fault. And I knew that I must change something. An offer from a commercial television saved my day. And life. I accepted it without knowing how demanding it is. In the

beginning, I thought I will combine theatre and the new job. During the day, I was working from 9 to 5 or 6 p.m., and in the evening and night I was writing. Nervous as I was, with heavy smoking, in February this year I collapsed. Ended in hospital. First, second, third. It took doctors three months to decide what is killing me. Chron's disease. I stopped smoking, changed the diet, took the prescribed medicine, and started to feel better. And wrote down several decisions. Now I know that I have to earn decent money, I have to have savings for future crises. My new job is quite demanding, but I'd learned a lot and continue to learn. As an activist to the bone, as an artist, I now know how the content is created and sold when you need to fight the competition. I think it will help me in the future. I will not leave my art, my love for the theatre, but I need to be financially independent. And only then will I be ready to devote my energy and creativity to the things I truly love, and believe in - feminism, democracy, solidarity...

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: free-lance artist, culture, the pandemic, lack of measures, discrimination



Hungary

HU01

Title: widowed single woman with 3 young adult children working as a medical assistant

Narrative: “The interview from the first cycle

I am 58 years old, I have 3 adult children, a boy who has already moved into an apartment with his girlfriend, a 33-year-old daughter who is still alone and still living with me and a 20-year-old daughter who has just graduated and is still living with us. My husband died 9 years ago at the age of 51. The big ones are already making money, my daughter is also helping me financially to maintain the apartment. “I have a Swiss franc loan that is still pushing my shoulder, during the Covid I used the option of the credit moratorium for three months.”

I am a midwife originally, but I have been working as a cardiology assistant for 3 years. I worked as a senior nurse in obstetrics for 28 years, but when the institution closed, I had to come. My husband was a soldier, so he retired early and after my job ended, we wanted to start rural tourism as we have a house in Mátra mountain.

“After my husband’s death, I have worked at a private obstetrics clinic for 7 years, but I couldn’t stand the capitalist approach of how nurses were exploited”.

I’ve been in this cardiology as a medical assistant for 3 years, which I love, but it’s professionally not challenging.

Later I had a relationship with whom I was with for 7 years. He lived in our holiday home, I worked in Budapest, and I commuted between the two places. “During the Covid, he died of a sudden cardiac arrest in the fall of 2020. It never turned out, but I think it could have been Covid. Next to him I was happy, and it was a fantastic relationship. The life is very unfair.”

I was very scared of the Covid, I saw a lot of people going to the hospital. My son did not come to visit us, my 20-year-old daughter did not meet anyone, my working daughter was the only apart from me who went out to work. I had to come in every day to work on the tram and I tried to follow every rule. Sick people with Covid could not come here to the cardiology. At the same time, there were colleagues who was transferred to Covid de-partments, but those over 50 were not taken to anywhere.

I also worked in the frontline in the sense that the GPs did not admit the patients, so everyone came to us with what they would have gone to the GP before. Since then, I meet a lot of post-Covid patients and I see that the Covid has also caused mental damage, which then affects others as well.

“I have a very hard time coming out financially, especially since prices have risen during the Covid. I don’t stock up food anymore, I watch the promotions or sale and buy that way.”

Now I go down to the cottage on the weekends alone and I plan again to start the rural tourism while I keep my job because I need a fixed salary as I have to pay the mortgage for another 10 years.

Update:

I also took advantage of the credit moratorium twice for three months during your covid, so that I could build up a little reserve, so that I would have some money if I had a problem. But now I'm paying the loan steadily.

My youngest child is already working and supporting him self while at university. Now all my children are independent, and I'm very proud of that.

In the spring I got another partner who lives in the next village, and I feel more and more connected to him. The plan is that we will live in my village house and rent out his house because it is closer to the motorway. There is also talk of nationalising the municipal clinics, which means that I will not necessarily work in the clinic where I am now, but I could be transferred to any clinic for periods of time. I've got 5 years until retirement, I have to survive somehow until then."

Specifically telling quotes: The burden has come off and I have realised that I can survive which is a good feeling because the children are independent now, but you have to look after them and have a little bit of a reserve so that if they get stuck you can help them.

Keywords: single mother, widowed women, independent young adult children, working in the underfinanced health care, frontline worker

HU02

Title: 32 year old Roma single woman with a daughter with autism spectrum disorder from Budapest

Narrative: "From the first cycle:

I am 31 years old, I lived in the 8th district of Budapest in all my life. I live with my parents and my daughter in a two-room apartment whom I raise alone. I grew up in a Gypsy musician family, my parents are graduated musicians. I also played music, but now I have moved away from making music. "I grew up in a conservative family, among strict morals, where it was important to marry as a virgin girl. I couldn't do much, but I don't mind that, I love being a Gypsy. But of course, I had a lot of anxiety, there was a high expectation from my family, it was sometimes hard for me not to be able to do what I wanted."

I met a musician Roma boy at the age of 17, we also got married at the age of 19. My Mom wanted me to study, so she was unsure in the marriage whether I would be allowed to study by my husband. In the meantime, though, I graduated in the high school, I worked as a jazz singer, but my partner was jealous of me and tried to limit me. "I wanted to walk my path, but it was hard as a Gypsy girl, even though I love being a Gypsy and the family life." In the end, we divorced because he was constantly raping me. My parents would have refused to understand me if I wanted to divorce, so I had to tell them that he also sexually abused me. Even so, it was a scandal my divorce because of its fame among Roma musicians.

Then I met a jazz pianist, but my parents were very scared of him. We moved together,

but it also became a scandal because we didn't get married. It turned out very quickly that this relationship wasn't working either, which I was very ashamed of. We lived in Japan for 6 months, but my boyfriend looked down on me as a novice singer, but he was constantly staring at himself. In this period, I went to hospital twice with my stomach, I so suffocated myself with my troubles.

When we came home from Japan, my friend broke up with me, but then we reconciled and "I really wanted to become a mother, but heaven sent a signal that this would be a problem". Finally I had a baby girl. She has autism spectrum disorder. We have gone to many therapies and because of that she has been developing nicely. Psychically, she has more problems, but she is mentally normal. She received the so called „special education need“ (SNI) code to get more development therapies in kindergarten, but that didn't happen. We now have a year to prepare for school.

She went to kindergarten in the fall, but the kindergarten was always closed because of somebody had always covid, so practically she could not go. "It had the bad effect on her not to go to the kindergarten and I had to take care of her all day. I tried to give her developmental exercises at home, but it was much less effective than the therapies she got normally."

I was alone with my little girl for 6 years when I met a Roma boy in the fall of 2019. We were happy, she loved my daughter, the kid developed a lot, we also planned to move in when the covid came in.

Since my musician dad also lost his job because the restaurant where he played music was closed and he used to basically support the family, my dad went to work in a factory, but there were 2 months when all the family relied on my salary. Meanwhile, my brother also moved home after 8 years from Japan, where he also worked as a musician and his life was totally ruined. My brother got our room and I moved into the living room with my little girl.

In November 2020, my boyfriend died in covid. Even before that, my parents opposed this relationship because they were afraid of another disappointment. We met very rarely during the time of the covid, maybe every two weeks on the street and in a mask. We planned to buy an apartment together.

It wasn't easy at home under Covid either. We were locked up together and we quarrelled a lot. At the same time, I was glad to be home with my child and not to lose my job in the first wave.

I am trying to escape to work and my child since my boyfriend died. "My soul is tired, I can't be happy about things."

Update:

I appreciate my life more, the good versus the bad has become more prominent. I appreciate things more than I did before. I live a more active life than before and I have found paths that I did not take into account before. My singing career has stalled in the last 4-5 years. I suffered so much pain in the past years and that's why I didn't give way to joy and I had to see that there is a way out of this too and above all I should have discovered this in music. After covid, several of my friends told me to sing about my sorrow. It started with the song "Little bird". Although I studied jazz, now my emotions led me elsewhere, and in this song, the lyrics, which I also helped with, and the music

itself, became something in which I could sing out a lot of pain. My emotional life has reached a higher level. I was able to experience the depths and heights in music. There are bad days and setbacks, the daily struggles, parenting, when I feel like I'm going five steps forward and three steps back. There are so many things to solve every day that I can get very tired mentally. I always take stock of what was two years ago and what is now, and then I realize that now is better. That I can come out as a winner, but of course I am often insecure about this. Even during my work, I often feel that I am stuck, but then something comes along that calms me down. If my child has a sense of success, that is also a joy for me.

I was able to move with my child separately from my parents. I used to think this would never happen to me. The apartment was given by the municipality, I can live in it as long as I work in one of the institutions of the municipality. I thought that it would never be solved, my mom always said that it wouldn't work anyway, because I'm alone and I can't do it. I'm home in the evening and I can hardly believe that it happened. The severe situation of covid, that we had to be together day and night, this strengthened me to move from home. At home, my parents constantly scolded me for what I had done wrong in my life. By moving, I also saved my relationship with my parents. I was able to monitor myself 24 hours a day during covid, I was able to face myself and this also helped me get up from my troubles. My cousins and my aunt who live in Slovakia are the ones who can support me spiritually the most in my decisions."

Specifically telling quotes: "I've had so much pain in the last few years and so I didn't give way to joy and I had to see that there was a way out and that I should have discovered it in music. After the covid, several friends told me to sing my sorrow out."

"There are bad days and daily struggles of raising children, when I feel like I'm five steps ahead, three steps back."

"I could move away from my parents with my child. I used to think that would never happen to me. I sit at home at night and I can hardly believe that it happened to me."

Keywords: single woman, Roma woman, single mother with a disabled child, starting independent life, starting a new carrier

HU03

Title: 36 year old Roma woman running a refugee camp for Roma people from Ukraine

Narrative: "From the 2nd cycle:

I am Erzsi, a 36-year-old Roma woman from a village, I escaped from an abusive relationship 7 years ago. I have one daughter, she is 17 years old.

I grew up in a small village in East Hungary and I have three brothers and sisters. My parents have been day labourers all their lives, now they work as public workers. Today, I run an association in my village, which I set up under the first lockdown when I was forced to return home because of the closures. I have two brothers working in the association, which deals with housing, health, education and employment of local Roma.

My association also deals with environmental pollution, because we Roma, because of our poverty, live in a very polluting way, for example, we burn everything to keep the house warm, but this releases a lot of toxic substances into the air.

Two of my brothers and sisters have a school leaving certificate, and I am now applying to university, one brother and sister have a vocational school certificate, and one has eight primary school degrees.

My parents wouldn't let me study, but I went to a secondary vocational school to study health studies. My parents did not want me to study, they said a woman does not need education, so I hid from my parents and I could prepare for classes. I was bullied a lot by my parents when I was in the primary school because I wanted to study. I raised my brothers and sisters, because my parents worked all the time, coming home late at night from the work. We were not raised by our parents, we didn't even know them, my younger sister calls me her mother. Now that's completely changed, I support them and now they are very proud of me working for a famous foundation in Budapest, and I think they also feel guilty that they didn't support me. My life is fucked up now, it was ruined by the expectation that they wouldn't let me do what I wanted to do. If they then support me in talking to a boy without having to marry him straight away, my life won't turn so tragic. In our culture, if a girl goes out for the evening, it means she is already a woman and is forced to marry the boy she has met. Even though I could prove that nothing had happened, and I hadn't lost my virginity, I was forced to marry a boy I liked when I was 16. I was forbidden to meet him for a year, from the age of 15, because they did not want me to marry an Vlah Gypsy boy, but wanted a Romungro husband. At 16, when I had to move to my father-in-law's house, I was not allowed to go to school. My parents wouldn't let me go home, and in the new house I had to cook, do the washing and cleaning, and I couldn't go anywhere.

I got my first slap from my husband after two weeks we had been together. In that family, aggression was commonplace, my husband's sister was in an abusive relationship too. We never had that at home. I remember every moment of the abuse over the years, I felt so ostracised, I learned to keep quiet, and it led to depression. It never occurred to me to seek professional help, a Gypsy woman in the countryside has no one to turn to. I was also treated badly because I didn't get pregnant straight away, even though we tried, and I gave birth to Jasmin when I was already 19. My life was hell after that, even before Jasmin, I was constantly beaten. After a long time, I found out that there was another woman, but to this day I don't know if she had a child with that woman. I didn't want to find out because I was always running away from the knowledge so that it wouldn't hurt so much. When things got really bad, I would go home with my little girl to my parents, but I would always go back to him because he begged me to go back and I loved him very much and my daughter also loved her father.

After a while they let me work because they needed the money I earned from my work. My husband had a bad temper, he was aggressive, so the other Roma who had work, they didn't take him with them. One New Year's Eve, when I came home, my husband wanted to have sex with me, but I didn't want to, so he tried to strangle me with a string. I could feel death coming, I was about to let go of my life, but then he looked me in my eyes and let me go. Then I went out into the cold night without a bag, without a coat, leaving my child behind. I asked my sister-in-law to help me bring the child, but she

couldn't manage. After one night I went home to my mother. Jasmine was 10 years old at the time, but I never got my daughter back who stayed with her father. I wasn't allowed to see her, I was on the verge of death for six months, I wanted to die and I couldn't see my daughter, but I couldn't have done it.

In the meantime, I met my current partner, who is a gift from God, and finally after six months I was able to see my daughter again. My daughter is 17 now, she is still with her father, although legally I have the child, but she would go crazy if she had to be separated from her father, because that is how she was brought up. I live in Budapest now, but she can't come to see me, I have to travel to the countryside to see her. I see him every three weeks or so. I can't have another child for medical reasons.

Update:

I run a camp for Roma refugees from Ukraine in Fonyód, next to Lake Balaton. My daughter turned 18, since then I can see her and she can come to me. I have a lot of work to help my daughter to stand up for her own interests and fight for the things she wants. If she wants to go to another school, she can do that. Her father tries to pull her back, but he can't. Our relationship is much more direct, better and calmer. Her father doesn't like the fact that his daughter goes out in the evening, but he wants to get his daughter married, so he lets her go in the evening.

This work in the refugee camp helped not only me, but also my association, because the development here is also done by the association.

My life has improved in the last two years. I work a lot, but I do my work in a way that suits the good Lord, I give love, respect and support to people, and that's how we managed to fulfill our dream and build a house in my village. It exceeded all our expectations. And this confirmed that I can now take care of myself, not just fighting for survival. I will finally finish my graduation so that I can go to university. I don't need to eviscerate myself so much now. Now I have the freedom to take care of myself.

The covid period gave us a lot. We founded the organization because of this, which completely changed my position in the village, now the stakeholders take us seriously. We never get help from outside, but my partner and I do everything together. Now our money is fine, we can live normally."

Specifically telling quotes: "I have a lot of work to help my daughter to stand up for her own interests and fight for the things she wants."

"My life has improved in the last two years. I work a lot, but I do my work in a way that suits the good Lord, I give love, respect and support to people, and that's how we managed to fulfill our dream and build a house in my village. It exceeded all our expectations. And this confirmed that I can now take care of myself, not just fighting for survival. I will finally finish my graduation so that I can go to university. I don't need to eviscerate myself so much now. Now I have the freedom to take care of myself.

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Keywords: Roma woman, escaping from an abusive relationship, foundation of a social assistance association, running a refugee camp, desire for higher education

HU04

Title: young newly-graduated Eastern European woman gets dream job in London

Narrative: "I was a second year Sociology BA student in England when the first lockdowns happened, and the university went online. It came at a bad time because I was about to start looking for an internship for my future career, which was completely cancelled because of Covid, and I felt that it would affect the rest of my life.

I'm in a very lucky position now, because six months ago I couldn't have imagined I'd be where I am now. Life is totally unpredictable and I hope that life will continue to surprise me in such a positive way.

In December I quit my job in Hungary and was replaced by a young guy who had also studied at LCE in London and he connected me with a man who lived in London and worked in a research institute. I sent him my CV, but that was it at that time. I was also very lucky that I found a room in London, although two things are impossible in London, finding a good job and finding a room.

Earlier, I saved money from England that I didn't need to spend while I was at home in Hungary, where life is much cheaper, so I had money for a deposit on a flat and a month or two's rent. I had originally put it aside for my university studies in the US, but even though I was accepted to NYU, it wouldn't have been enough to pay for anything. So I knew that if I spent it on rent in London now, America would be gone for good.

Finding a room seemed also hopeless, then I saw an advertisement of a Hungarian girl, and through her I found the flat where the boy who has since become my boyfriend was living. I now live with him here in London.

Then, a few weeks later, the boy I had sent my CV to wrote to me to ask how my job search was going, because if I didn't have a job yet, they had a vacancy. But as I was reading the description of the position, I saw that they were looking for a senior researcher, which I don't fit.

There were hardly any juniors at this company, but then I wrote to them every week saying how much I liked the job and how much I would like to work for them, which ended up with me being hired for three months as a junior to help them in especially busy period. I had already applied to 30 places before that, and I was only invited for one interview. So I felt it was simply impossible to get a job without a reference.

After 3 months, they extended my contract at this dream research company for another 3 months, but at the end of the 5th month I asked them what was going to happen to me, because if they told me at the end of the 6th month that they didn't want me any more, I would be in big trouble, because I would be out of job. Finally, at the end of the 5th month, they told me that I would be hired for an indefinite period from September.

I also really like the fact that almost everyone in the company is woman.

What is a big dilemma for me is that this job is too good and so it will be hard to leave

this job to do my MA. The people who work here don't really have an MA, work experience triggers the MA, at least in this field. If there are no gaps in your CV, then work experience is enough. Anyway, I want to go to MA, but only to New York, because I want to study food studies. I don't want to ask my parents for money for my studies again, I would only go if I could get a scholarship for it. But it's very complicated and I have to start two years earlier to have a chance to get the scholarship. However, I also need to stay here in London for a few more years so that I can keep my permit to work in the UK after Brexit.

My boyfriend is finishing his MA, he is also looking for a job, as now he works in a Japanese restaurant.

I often question myself and feel anxious, but having a supportive family behind me makes a huge difference in terms of always knowing that if necessary, they will help me. If I hadn't found this dream job, I would have worked in a restaurant, I also love to do that. I have a lucky personality, that in the end, whatever it turns out to be, it would have been good. But still, in the 5 months I did not have a permanent contract, I had been pretty anxious about what was going to happen and how I was not good enough and not pushy enough for this corporate world."

Specifically telling quotes: "But as I was reading the description of the position, I saw that they were looking for a senior researcher, which I don't fit."

"There were hardly any juniors at this company, but then I wrote to them every week saying how much I liked the job and how much I would like to work for them, which ended up with me being hired for three months as a junior to help them in especially busy period."

"I often question myself and feel anxious but having a supportive family behind me makes a huge difference in terms of always knowing that, if necessary, they will help me. If I hadn't found this dream job, I would have worked in a restaurant, I also love to do that. I have a lucky personality, that in the end, whatever it turns out to be, it would have been good. But still, in the 5 months I did not have a permanent contract, I had been pretty anxious about what was going to happen and how I was not good enough and not pushy enough for this corporate world. "

Keywords: young age, immigration, finding a good job, housing difficulties, uncertain career paths

HU05

Title: Single mother of three chooses a new job that brings her real joy

Narrative: "I am a 51-year-old university graduate from Budapest with 3 children from two fathers. My second child was born with a rare genetic disorder why he needed

movement development from his birth and he had many difficulties in all areas. My son, now 20, who is close to mentally disabled and also has severe diabetes, will always live with us, for now he lives with one week with me and one week with his father. My eldest son is already studying abroad, he is doing his MA degree, and I have to pay for his accommodation, which is a very heavy burden at the current HUF/EUR exchange rate. I don't even live with the father of my youngest son, who is 10 years old. He became very abusive after our child was born and finally left us 6 years ago. Since then he doesn't pay me any money but at least he visits his child, they spend every other weekend together and he has a very good relationship with his son. Since we have stopped living together, I have also completely normalised my relationship with him. I work as a sociologist, sometimes in research, sometimes in NGOs, but I have never been able to live from one salary from one job, I have had to do several jobs at once in all my life. The future has always been very unpredictable, project after project, and I always have to be anxious to see if there will be a next one.

Even at the time of the first lockdown, I had difficulty wondering if it would be a problem if the children also met their father, if it would be more dangerous to catch the virus. But in the end we decided to take that risk rather than not have the children meet their dads. I even enjoyed homeschooling to a certain extent, we had a lot of laughs with my youngest child, but the morning and evening meal preparation was exhausting, as my eldest son had moved home from abroad too. During the first lockdown, there was also a panic that there wouldn't be enough food in the shops and everyone did panic shopping.

The lockdown meant I couldn't do the work I should have done because it meant travelling to the countryside a lot, so it was getting harder and harder to find meaning in work and that's when I started thinking it would be so nice to find something inspiring to do. I was like, it's OK if I don't get paid or barely paid at all, because I was still earning well enough from my jobs at that time, so that wasn't really a consideration, just that I finally love the work I do. That's how I got into science journalism, which has given me a lot of work and a lot of pleasure ever since.

The lockdown finally showed me how unenthusiastic I was about my work and somehow this deep point gave me the strength to finally do something completely different."

Specifically telling quotes: "The lockdown meant I couldn't do the work I should have done because it meant travelling to the countryside a lot, so it was getting harder and harder to find meaning in work and that's when I started thinking it would be so nice to find something inspiring to do. I was like, it's OK if I don't get paid or barely paid at all, because I was still earning well enough from my jobs at that time, so that wasn't really a consideration, just that I finally love the work I do. That's how I got into science journalism, which has given me a lot of work and a lot of pleasure ever since.

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Keywords: single mother, disabled child, uncertain existential life, new job activities, gender care gap

HU06

Title: Local Roma activist woman found an association to help Roma children and their families

Narrative: "I live in a midsize city in South Hungary, I am 43 years old and I am still living in the same house where I grew up. My mother was 16 when I was born. I was not planned at all, my father, who was 17 at that time, never accepted me. My mother wanted to have an abortion with me which hurts me so much. I have a 17 years younger sister from my mother's other relationship. I was raised by my grandparents, because my mum moved out early, she had a job and she only visited me, but as a mother she didn't take care of me. My grandparents were very angry with her for that. I never felt connection to my mother, I felt bonded with my grandmother. They had 4 other children so I grew up with them. I had a good childhood, we had everything, we were not starving.

My grandparents were also divorced 30 years ago.

I was the first to graduate from high school, my grandparents were illiterate. My grandmother was always telling me to study, and I studied very well, I was taken to all kinds of academic competitions. I may have escaped into learning, hence I tried to compensate for the lack of my parents. I always sat down to study after school, I was very hard-working.

So I went to a secondary vocational school that gave me a high school degree and my teachers were very supportive to complete the school. The reason I didn't go to general secondary school was because I wanted to get a vocation too, not just a school leaving certificate. I was the only Roma in the whole school, but I was never bullied, but they also did not use positive discrimination. I had friends from there, but I also had Roma friends who lived next door.

During secondary school, boys tried to court me, but I didn't want to get married. When I was 16, I was allowed to go to a disco once a month, later more often.

I wanted to go to college and live in a dormitory, so I found the Teacher Training University in midsize city. Nobody supported me, my grandparents didn't want to let me go, they were afraid, and the Roma looked down at me because I wasn't married yet at 19 and I would be too educated.

But I wanted to be free and I wanted to leave, I wouldn't have stayed here for anyone. I got so many scholarships at university that I could live on them, and I even gave money to my grandparents. Those were carefree years, I loved them!

I met my husband in my last year. He's a half-Roma. After 5 months we were married. I brought him home to Kalocsa, but my grandparents were not happy because he was only half-Roma and divorced. But after a couple of months they accepted him completely.

Then my grandmother refused to let me go and we stayed in her house.

To this day, I have no answer as to why I wasn't hired as a teacher in the city. Finally I was hired by the Family Support Service, where I worked as a social worker. I liked it so much that I decided to do a degree in social work at university. Again, nobody supported me, my grandmother and the other Roma said why don't I have children, I'm 28 years old

and why do I want to be so clever. And my husband didn't support me either, he told me not to go anywhere, that he would support me, but I told him that no one should support me and that I wanted to have an independent existence.

And I didn't want a child while I was still studying, but the unborn child must have felt it because I couldn't use protection and I still didn't get pregnant. During my 4 years of college, I worked in family services all the time. I got a degree in social work. And it's an interesting life because when I got that degree, all of a sudden I got a job as a teacher here in town.

And then I moved with my husband to a separate apartment, but my grandmother had a stroke a year later, and my husband and I took care of her for 13 years. We moved back in, started renovating the house my grandmother left me in exchange for us taking care of her. Her other children didn't care for her.

Then I started working in an old people's home, and it was there that I first felt mistreated because I was a Gypsy, and I was given all the jobs that I was much more qualified to do. I managed for six months, then I got pregnant with my daughter and stayed at home with her for 3 years. I had no one to help me, I couldn't rely on my mum, it's a real thorn in my side.

In 2018 I joined the Child Welfare Service, first working as a mentor and helping Roma women and families. It was a project, but when it ended, I was hired on a permanent contract. Now I work as a social worker in kindergartens and schools.

They brought children to me when I was in college, when I was only 20 years old, to help Roma children learn, and the Roma got used to that, that I could help them.

Then the pandemic came and suddenly the Roma children had a lot of problems: no internet at home, no tablets, no electricity in the houses, no desks, no separate rooms. I joined forces with another Roma activist to say that we have to do something. I told my workplace that this was going to be my job, because of the covid it was a home office anyway. I got 3 laptops from my workplace, I had two tablets and a computer, and then the Roma children came to study with me.

The Roma were not afraid to meet each other, there was no fear of each other, of catching the virus. But at home we wore masks when the children were here.

Already in April 2020, 18-20 children came to our house to study. But I also kept in touch with the schools about how and what we were learning. A small church also helped us so we could give the children food when they were here. We saved the children from dropping out of school.

In January 2021, it popped into my head to make a civil association for this. Several Roma and non-Roma educational and social professionals and parents joined us. We found this organization in order to receive donations and grants.

But in the meantime I had my own child who was in first grade when we were homeschooling. I had to study with my own child in the morning and in the afternoon the kids would come and I had to help them. It was a tough period."

Specifically telling quotes: "But I wanted to be free and I wanted to leave, I wouldn't have stayed here for anyone. I got so many scholarships at university that I could live on them, and I even gave money to my grandparents. Those were carefree years, I loved them!"

"Then I started working in an old people's home, and it was there that I first felt mistreated because I was a Gypsy, and I was given all the jobs that I was much more qualified to do."

"The Roma were not afraid to meet each other, there was no fear of each other, of catching the virus. But at home we wore masks when the children were here. Already in April 2020, 18-20 children came to our house to study. But I also kept in touch with the schools about how and what we were learning. A small church also helped us so we could give the children food when they were here. We saved the children from dropping out of school."

"In January 2021, it popped into my head to make a civil association for this. Several Roma and non-Roma educational and social professionals and parents joined us. We found this organization in order to receive donations and grants."

Keywords: Roma activist woman, segregated education, empowerment, founding an association to compensate disadvantages, prejudices, Roma segregated settlement

HU07

Title: Young university student girl with a strong Roma identity working as an intern in a multinational company

Narrative: "I grew up in the 8th district of Budapest in a poor Roma family, I am 22 years old now and I still live at home with my parents. I have two older sisters, they have also graduated from high school. I don't look like a Gypsy, but after my mother, who is obviously a Roma, came to the teacher-parent meeting at the school, the teachers started to bully me because of my origin, especially one of the teachers. It was a school where primary school was combined with high school and I was already in the high school. The end of the bullying was that I was expelled from school. From there I went to a second chance secondary school, where I was treated very well and managed to graduate. I am now at the university studying tourism, but I will end up with a degree in economics. At the beginning my parents helped me a lot, but then I was working so much that they didn't have to help me. During the covid I was already at university, I was doing online education, I was doing small jobs, civic campaigns and earning small money, but I was always doing something.

I got into a programme for Roma students, and they still help me to go to English classes. This year, this organisation advertised an opportunity to get into some trainee positions, for example in the Municipality of Budapest. And there was a paid internship at an international TV channel, where I was hired, much to my surprise. In my CV I made it clear that I am a Roma girl and I also wrote in my hobby that I dance traditional Gypsy dance. I put it in my Cv so that I would not be placed in a job where Gypsies are not welcome. I have been working for them since autumn and I have never experienced any

discrimination, positive or negative.

I'm a trainee in the business development department, I'm doing database building, data research, market research and I have to do materials in Hungarian and English. This internship will last until the end of January, so after that I don't know what will happen. I have some previous work experiences in the civil sector and tourism, but this job appealed to me as well. I'm learning a lot about myself and I'm constantly improving. I get paid normally. I have a strong Roma identity that I wouldn't give up for any job. For now, I feel that everything that has happened to me is getting better and more interesting compared to my previous state."

Specifically telling quotes: "I don't look like a Gypsy, but after my mother, who is obviously a Roma, came to the teacher-parent meeting at the school, the teachers started to bully me because of my origin, especially one of the teachers. It was a school where primary school was combined with high school and I was already in the high school. The end of the bullying was that I was expelled from school.

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"I have a strong Roma identity that I wouldn't give up for any job."

"For now, I feel that everything that has happened to me is getting better and more interesting compared to my previous state."

Keywords: Roma youth, discrimination, bullying, multinational company, university, poverty, strong community

HU08

Title: An 18-year-old girl whose high school years were ruined by lockdowns, which also put her at a learning disadvantage

Narrative: "I am 18 years old, I live in Budapest, this year I will graduate from a private school. We've always lived quite well, we've had everything throughout our lives, we've traveled a lot and my parents have a great social life. I had a sister three years older, she had psychological problems started 4 years ago. This was already very difficult for everyone, she kept repeating that she wanted to die, despite receiving medical help, she was in the hospital several times, and shortly after his 18th birthday, just when I started the high school, she committed suicide in September and died. This was half a year before the schools closed due to covid. Then the following year we were quarantined at home almost the whole time. Although I arrived in an already existing class, I quickly got used to it and made new friends from there. By the way, these online classes went much better at our school than at other schools, as I heard, the classes were

held properly, which meant that you had to sit in front of the computer almost all day, but luckily you didn't even have to work alone.

At the beginning of the quarantine, my mom still allowed me to meet my friends, in the middle, we only met others within the family, then from May, I was able to meet my friends again, but only outdoor.

When I didn't meet my friends, I used to video chat with them a lot, but it really put a damper on our lives.

During the second quarantine, you could feel that the teachers had also lost their motivation and they really didn't want to teach like this anymore, this was already in the 2020/2021 school year. When it would have been possible to go until the end of October, if someone got covid, everyone was sent home again for weeks.

We couldn't see the end of when we could finally go back to school, it was already April. On the other hand, it was good that my parents let me meet my friends, and then we were constantly at each other's houses and often slept at each other's houses. So it was bad that you couldn't do anything, everything was closed, but it was a good strategy that I was always with my friends.

The class community was also badly affected by not being able to go to school, but I'm not really part of the class community anyway, I only have a few friends from there, the others are from elsewhere. Now that high school is about to end, the class community has also gotten better.

I regret that I was a high school student during covid, but I feel that I got the most out of it.

In terms of my studies, however, covid did a lot of harm, apart from Hungarian literature, which I really like, I don't remember anything from the other subjects, because I couldn't follow them online. In this way, I think we will have a serious disadvantage at the graduation, compared to if we could have attended school all the way through.

When it was finally possible to go to school, the teachers didn't even write papers with us, so as not to waste time, but they were finally able to teach. Everyone was very happy that we could go to school.

The result of covid is that I now enjoy school classes much more and my friendships, those I had, have become stronger, because I could not make new friends during covid."

Specifically telling quotes: "When I didn't meet my friends, I used to video chat with them a lot, but it really put a damper on our lives."

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"The result of covid is that I now enjoy school classes much more and my friendships, those I had, have become stronger, because I could not make new friends during covid."

Keywords: grief, high school student, online teaching, strong friendship, social life, peer group

HU09

Title: A young woman from a village who is the first in her family to go to university while teaching Roma children in rural primary schools

Narrative: "I am 28 years old, I live in Nyíregyháza, but I spent my childhood in a small village a few kilometers from the Ukrainian border. I graduated from the art high school in a nearby big city, Nyíregyháza, in the department of folk music, where I studied the zither. Today, I study as a music teacher, ethnography and folk dance at university. I have also been working as a folk music teacher for 3 years. I have a younger brother, he works as a mason, my parents work in agriculture, and my father is a car mechanic, and my mother most recently worked as a social worker. They still live in the village. I was the first in my family to graduate. My parents always left me free to decide about my future. I went to the school in the village where I still teach, then half the class was Roma, now every child in the school is Roma. It was completely natural for us. So that there was no discrimination in this respect. And now, for example, I teach the children of my old classmates. Nobody in my age group lives in the village anymore, everyone has moved away. When I was accepted to high school in the big city, I had to move to a girls' dormitory, which was very strict. They didn't let us do anything there, so we went to school at 6 AM in the morning and stayed there until the evening, practicing music there so that we didn't have to be in the dormitory. I teach in three schools, two of these schools are part of my mandatory practice we have to do at university, and I also teach in a school which is independent from the university. I teach a lot of underprivileged Roma children, which is a great experience for me. There are 12-year-old children who were not taught to read by school, so I had to start everything from the beginning with them. I also went back to my village in order to show them an example that it is possible to start further education from there. I'm about to finish university and my teachers want me to go get a PhD.

During covid, the dormitory was closed and I had to move home. I already went to university at that time, but I also started teaching in a school, but I had to move back home to our small village.

I had the digital skills for teaching and learning, but very often there was not enough internet signal strength where I lived with my parents. Moreover, giving a music

instrument lesson online was not easy.

I lived in relative peace with my parents, but it was difficult for them to get used the fact that I have to close the door now, because now it's class and I can't always help them when they want. I was at home for a six months, because I couldn't even move back to the dormitory in the summer.

Luckily, we have a pretty big garden and I'm pretty good at herbs, so I made myself a garden. Specifically, I had a herb garden, so I gardened during covid. So I wasn't scared by that. I learned about herbs and wrote a study on them. In addition, I also previously dealt with jewelry design, and I started dealing with this again during covid, now I also have my own website where I can sell them. I also made educational tools for the child I teach the zither."

Specifically telling quotes: "I am 28 years old, I live in Nyíregyháza, but I spent my childhood in a small village a few kilometres from the Ukrainian border. I graduated from the art high school in a nearby big city, Nyíregyháza, in the department of folk music, where I studied the zither. Today, I study as a music teacher, ethnography, and folk dance at university. I have also been working as a folk music teacher for 3 years. I have a younger brother, he works as a mason, my parents work in agriculture, and my father is a car mechanic, and my mother most recently worked as a social worker. They still live in the village. I was the first in my family to graduate. My parents always left me free to decide about my future. I went to the school in the village where I still teach, then half the class was Roma, now every child in the school is Roma. It was completely natural for us. So that there was no discrimination in this respect. And now, for example, I teach the children of my old classmates. Nobody in my age group lives in the village anymore, everyone has moved away. When I was accepted to high school in the big city, I had to move to a girls' dormitory, which was very strict. They didn't let us do anything there, so we went to school at 6 AM in the morning and stayed there until the evening, practicing music there so that we didn't have to be in the dormitory. I teach in three schools, two of these schools are part of my mandatory practice we have to do at university, and I also teach in a school which is independent from the university. I teach a lot of underprivileged Roma children, which is a great experience for me. There are 12-year-old children who were not taught to read by school, so I had to start everything from the beginning with them. I also went back to my village in order to show them an example that it is possible to start further education from there. I'm about to finish university and my teachers want me to go get a PhD."

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Keywords: social mobility, regional disparities, young woman, teaching disadvantaged Roma children, living alone as a young girl in a big city

HU10

Title: Roma rights activist woman who survives covid to create small religious community

Narrative: "I am fifty-seven years old; I was born in Kalocsa. As the seventh child of a traditional gypsy family, I grew up in a segregated Gypsy settlement. I grew up in a one-room-kitchen house without running water, where we could at least grow a garden. My father worked; my mother was a housewife. But when someone in the family died, even their five children came to us, and my mother raised them as well. My father died early. I was preparing to become a teacher, but all my dreams were dashed because my mother was also ill, and I went to work at the local printing house as an apprentice worker after the eighth grade. Three of my brothers have already died, three of them at the age of 47, and one of them at the age of 20. I think I became a civil rights activist because I couldn't bear the injustice. My brothers do not have work in the 70s, but it was considered as a crime in socialism, they were taken to prison. One of my brothers was walking on the street when he was 15-16 years old, he was taken away because he was condemned to shoot a rooster. He was released from prison when he was 18 years old. My mom tried to fight for him, but she could not do anything. And he is the one who died at the age of 20, it is impossible to know from what disease. My sister is the only one whose life turned out well, she got married, they live normally, her two children graduated from high school and her children also went to university.

I started going to the city Gypsy club when I was 15 years old. This was actually created by the local communist party to monitor the Gypsies. But luckily, we had a local leader who made us a real community and taught us how to stand up for our rights. We were all over the country with the club, we also went on trips to several places. At the age of sixteen, I was chosen to be the leader of the club. They let me go here, but I also liked to play football, my brothers didn't let me, they said a girl can't run around in short pants. The Gypsy club got word, and intellectual Gypsies from Budapest came to visit us. They noticed me and arranged for me to study animator without a high school diploma. I went to Pest every weekend for four years. Of course, my mother didn't want to let me go, but

my mentors came down from Pest and promised my mother that they would pay the travel expenses and that they would take care of me.

In the meantime, in a restaurant that belonged to the local police, they didn't want to serve us because we were Gypsies. I went to the municipality to complain, and the result was that they had to apologies for the discrimination.

I became friends with the head of the municipality (it was called Council during the socialism), and we started to organize the life of the Roma so that they would have a job, and I was hired as a Gypsy caregiver.

When I was 20, they made a portrait film about me, which made me a big star and the city leaders were very proud of me.

Then I also worked for a while in the Hungarian public television in Budapest in the "Gypsy half an hour". In 1993, the first Gypsy minority municipality was established, and I became the president. The following year, I already made close the segregated Gypsy school. I also achieved that the Gypsy settlement had a canal. But when there was the skinhead scandal in the city, we demonstrated for 8-9 days afterwards, even the president of the republic came to us. In the end, the law on equal treatment, which is still in force today, was adopted.

My family life developed in such a way that the Roma community always had expectations of me. They wanted me to marry according to Roma traditions, to honour my family and everyone else, and to have a husband to whom I would give birth to many children. I said no to that by running away on my wedding day.

I was also in love, but I would never have agreed that if anything happened somewhere in the country, my partner would hold me back so that I wouldn't go.

I caught the covid virus in the first round and became very sick. I also ended up in the hospital and saw how people around me were dying. And here in the city we lost a lot of people. Among the Roma, there were a lot of anti-vaccination people, but I persuaded many people to get vaccinated. It was easier to get women to do this than men.

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. The election will be held now, but they want me to become their leader, but women don't usually lead churches. I want to take it on to show that a woman can do almost anything and that Roma women dare to take on what they want to do."

Specifically telling quotes: "I was preparing to become a teacher, but all my dreams were dashed because my mother was also ill, and I went to work at the local printing house as an apprentice worker after the eighth grade."

"I think I became a civil rights activist because I couldn't bear the injustice. My brothers do not have work in the 70s, but it was considered as a crime in socialism, they were taken to prison. One of my brothers was walking on the street when he was 15-16 years old, he was taken away because he was condemned to shoot a rooster. He was released

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Keywords: Roma woman, human rights activist, segregated Roma settlement, community building, religion, poverty, discrimination



Ireland

IE01

Title: Megan, a 34-year-old beautician, had a baby 11 weeks before the first lockdown in Ireland. Despite a traumatic birth and her son having colic which caused him to cry a lot Megan learned to listen to herself and found strength and resilience she previously did not think she had.

Narrative: "My name is Megan, I am a 34 year old married woman and I work as a beautician. I had my first baby a little boy called Sean 11 weeks before the first lockdown. I had my first baby a little boy called Sean 11 weeks before the first lockdown. I had a really difficult birth and needed surgery afterwards. Sean had colic and cried all day and all night. So being at home with him all the time without anyone being able to visit was very difficult. Under normal circumstances after the type of birth I had I would have had counselling or something, but I didn't get any emotional or physical support. At the start of the pandemic my husband was still commuting into the city for work. "Eventually I said to him, because his office were very much like 'you have to keep coming in', I [said] 'we've a new born you are not going into work. Because if you bring something home on public transport'... because at this point I didn't know what was going on with Covid and I was obviously worried for my baby. And I was like 'I'm not seeing my family, but you can travel in every day with strangers? No, sorry, you're not an essential worker, I don't care, you need to stay at home'". Things were still difficult when my husband started to work from home. His employers were awful "it was like 'can you shut that baby up we're on a conference call', and my baby was screaming crying. And I was like 'this is not your office this is our home'. It was bad, it was really bad". On the upside my husband didn't miss any of the stuff with the baby. He got to be there for everything, first words, first steps. Anytime Sean did something new or different he was there so that was great. I had great bonding time with Sean too. It forced me to be really present with him. "The positives were the family [and] I realised how much I need them. And then the fact that my husband could be there for everything, and then I got that bonding time as well as him".

Applying for the Covid payment was very difficult. I was "basically coming back off maternity leave it was the least straight forward thing in the world. It was mad, so much more difficult, because you were on maternity benefit. It was like you were being penalised for having a child. Where anybody else could just go in and be like - my job is closed down, ok here's your payment. For me it was a month before I got my first payment. I had a new born at home, and it was already stressful". All the stress of applying and waiting for my payment "was just like everything else on top of everything else. The whole system didn't do anything for new mothers at all". Thankfully my previous boss helped me out with getting my Covid payment and that made my life a lot easier. Really, being at home with the baby during the pandemic "taught me that I was much stronger and resilient than I thought I was". I was able to cope much better with Seans crying and recovering from the surgery than I thought I would have been able to. I had

to go to the doctor with Sean during one of the lockdowns and I was really struggling at the time. My usual doctor was not there and the doctor I saw that day noticed that I was finding things difficult. She said she could see it in me. I opened up to her about how I was feeling, and I felt so much better after talking to her. "She was kind of a good pillar in that moment". I dug deep and focused on getting through the day. For me every day was about getting by "and then when I did see people Sean was that bit older and I'd established my own routine and my own confidence". In the end "I got to learn how to do it myself, like I said - sink or swim. I got to know my child, and I got to do it my own way, and what worked for us without everybody sticking their oar in". When restrictions lifted and I was able to have "an outside network and not just being confined with just my baby" - that really helped me a lot. Overall, the pandemic taught me that "the little things don't matter. I learned that I don't care as much about what other people think. At the end of the day it doesn't actually matter, because you might not be there when I need you. This is why I have to do what I want. It made me far more confident in my parenting ability now. I would have maybe questioned myself more if there had been more people around me. So that's kind of a positive in some ways because I only had my instinct to go off. The fact that I feel like I did everything right. He was my main focus, he was prioritised, and that is a positive. Just more confident in myself".

Specifically telling quotes: "Eventually I said to him, because his office were very much like 'you have to keep coming in'. I [said] 'we've a new born you are not going into work. Because if you bring something home on public transport'... because at this point I didn't know what was going on with Covid and I was obviously worried for my baby. And I was like 'I'm not seeing my family but you can travel in every day with strangers? No, sorry, you're not an essential worker I don't care you need to stay at home'"

"It was like 'can you shut that baby up we're on a conference call and my baby was screaming crying'. And I was like 'this is not your office this is our home'. It was bad, it was really bad".

"Yeah, definitely, the positives were the family [and] I realised how much I need them. And then the fact that my husband could be there for everything and then I got that bonding time as well as him".

"The pandemic taught me that I was much stronger and resilient than I thought I was"

Keywords: New mother, Resilience, Confidence, Covid Payment, Mental Health

IE02

Title: Kate a 21 year old student made space for personal and professional growth during Covid-19 by drawing on support from family and friends.

Narrative: "My name is Kate, I'm 21 and in my final year of university. I live in the West of

Ireland in a rural area. Recently I moved closer to my university. Before that it was me and Mam at home.

I started university in September just before Covid-19. Everything was normal until the lock-downs. Then "it was unsettled in a way. You didn't know what was going to happen". I stayed in my rented accommodation for a while even though classes were online. As the lockdowns continued and restrictions intensified, I was "always anxious" because of staying at home and not meeting friends. I kept the rules about not going places and meeting people. Sometimes I would meet friends outside because I really needed to meet people and get out. Keeping in touch with my friends helped me keep going.

My mam was very supportive; she helped me maintain a routine like "getting up at a certain time every day, trying to read or go for a walk and facetime people, trying to keep up little tasks to keep normal." That was when I was at home but "when I moved back [to the university town] it kind of fell apart". I struggled with isolation and loneliness because I was living on my own. Eventually, I reached out to the university counselling services. The therapist suggested moving back in with my mam. Once I did that, things improved. Me and my mam get on great but sometimes we annoyed each other. Being able to see our neighbours who we were really good friends with gave us both a break. We moved from Wicklow to the West of Ireland because of rent prices in the East of Ireland. That was another challenge on top of everything else!

In my second year at university, we had to do interviews to get a work placement for third year. The university were bad at communicating with us about this. This all added to the stress and to the uncertainty I was feeling. Where I did my placement was great. Hybrid working was good for me although "I definitely learned more when I was in the office". "But there is a lot you can do online and get more done throughout your day. A good balance is the best of both worlds, 2/3 days a week is perfect." Hybrid work meant I didn't have to commute very often. My colleagues were able to spend more time with me than if we'd been fulltime in the office because they didn't have to commute or attend a lot of face-to-face meetings. "Their work ethos was lovely" and they were "open and willing to teach me. A lot of places wouldn't do that". Some of my friends were totally online for their whole placement and felt forgotten, whereas I got to learn loads and was able to figure out how to carry myself professionally. I'm not intimidated by people in senior positions anymore. I did miss out on "meetings in person, openings, events, conferences all those things. I would have gotten to meet more people and expand my network [before Covid]". Despite the positives "it was difficult and definitely unique doing my placement" during a pandemic.

Being back in university is overwhelming; it's my first 'normal' year and my final one. The school I'm with want us to have exams "the traditional way". I've haven't had in person exams since being in university, only online exams and "they were open book". In person exams will mean having "two hours to write as much as possible and [have to be] handwritten which we're not used to. We're used to typing everything online." I'm going to have to practice writing a lot! "We're really trying to advocate for an exception to be made this year because of the way things went for us. We have three different class reps so we will re-ally push the [school] to change the plan. We're trying to think of different ways we can compromise because having the exams online is very unlikely. We can also email the school individually or sign petitions. It hasn't gotten to the student union stage

yet, but it could.”

Looking back “there were a few challenges, but I would always just push through and keep going, I didn’t have a choice”. Overall, I’ve learnt a lot professionally and personally, in many ways “my experience was very mixed” but “I embraced it”. Now I’m looking forward to graduating, travelling, and getting on with my life!”

Specifically telling quotes: “When I moved back [to the university town] it kind of fell apart.”

“Getting up at certain time every day, trying to read or go for a walk within your 5k, facetime people trying to keep up little tasks to keep normal.”

“It was difficult and definitely unique doing my placement”. “My experience was very mixed” but “I embraced it”.

“I definitely learned more when I was in the office”

“We’re really trying to advocate for an exception to be made this year because of the way things went for us. We have 3 different class reps so we will really push the [school] to change the plan. We’re trying to think of different ways we can compromise because having the exams online is very unlikely. We can also email the school individually or sign petitions. It hasn’t gotten to the student union stage yet but it could.”

Keywords: Personal Growth, Support, Professional Lessons, Challenges, Hybrid work, University

IE03

Title: Rachel, 45-year-old woman, found Covid-19 has led to improved work life balance, increased time for self-care and changed how she lives her life for the better.

Narrative: “I am Rachel, I’m 45, and I live with my wife and daughter in Dublin. 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”.

Not commuting daily was better for me. I had been travelling two hours for four days a week; some days it took longer. The company I work for were great. The CEO is into staff wellbeing and “we’d get regular emails to check in with us” and there were online sessions in stress management or physical activities that we could do. Those resources

were good for a while but then I began to find them “very tiring”. We’re hybrid working now but I’d happily work fulltime from home. Although, “you do have to push yourself to interact [...]. That is happening now, so I believe it’s a good balance”. I did “observe a couple of things that changed in me”, I felt fine, but when I went to present or something “I was less confident in my own ability, I mean like impost-er syndrome. I never saw that happening but it did - an unconscious thing. I had to work on get-ting that back. That was the negative side of being on your own in the house working. You’re not interacting with people. Mindfulness helped me with that because it helped me to delve into why”. Also, “my driving was affected. I suppose because I hadn’t driven in a couple of years. When I got back into the car, I was a nervous wreck. I would never have been like that before. These are subtle things that changed that I was surprised by”. I make myself get out and drive to deal with that. “With the other stuff you have to tell yourself, nearly like a mantra that you are good enough. You’re giving yourself a pep talk - put your game face on. You have to actually do that, whereas before I had more confidence. I’m sure it will come back. It’s just any sort of big change like [Covid-19] has an effect”.

Supporting my parents was “quite challenging with what they had to deal with. My father has Alzheimer’s, all of the supports and services that you could go to stopped”. Thankfully, I could access the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Alzheimer’s NGOs for advice and support. The HSE “suggested that the rules that would apply to the general population sometimes wouldn’t apply” to us due to “the gravity of the situation” we were in with Dad. During one of the lockdowns Dad went missing, “the police were absolutely brilliant, they helped find him, but they also gave the personal touch [...] We got wonderful support from the police. I didn’t have any negative experiences with service providers. Everyone was trying their best”.

A friend of my mine was seriously ill during the pandemic and was in hospital for eighteen months. “The hospitals were brilliant: the care workers, the doctors, the nurses. They helped her so much”. “The rule in the hospitals was you couldn’t have visitors. But I felt that she wasn’t going to get better unless there was going to be a visit from a friend or her husband”. So, “I wrote a letter to the head medical person in [the hospital] explaining where I was coming from - that there should be an exception made”. They replied saying “we agree with you and we will let you in [...] I was in there twice a week for four hours each time. The rest of the week her husband was there for the same amount of time”. “I believe that bit of leeway we were given [to visit] helped her”.

Learning about “managing stress was a big thing, mindfulness and being able to say no. Having that in your back pocket really did help a lot”. “A part of mindfulness is being kind to yourself and that to me is giving myself more time. If it hadn’t been for Covid I wouldn’t have gone down that road. It’s kind of changed how I lived my life. I don’t feel as guilty for taking time out even when I’m really busy. That was another positive thing that came out of it that was quite powerful actually”.

Specifically telling quotes: “I wouldn’t have traditionally taken breaks, even lunch breaks I tended to work through. Whereas with the new regime at home I took more breaks. I went out into the fresh air, rejuvenated myself and went back in. I felt that

helped and I started a mindfulness class. That was helpful as it taught you techniques – how to be in the moment, that really was good”.

“I was less confident in my own ability, I mean like imposter syndrome. I never saw that happening but it did – an unconscious thing. I had to work on getting that back. That was the negative side of being on your own in the house working. You’re not interacting with people. Mindfulness helped me with that because it helped me to delve into why”.

“A part of mindfulness is being kind to yourself and that to me is giving myself more time. If it hadn’t been for Covid I wouldn’t have gone down that road. It’s kind of changed how I lived my life. I don’t feel as guilty for taking time out even when I’m really busy. That was another positive thing that came out of it that was quite powerful actually”.

“Managing stress was a big thing, mindfulness and being able to say no. Having that in your back pocket really did help a lot”.

Keywords: Personal Growth, Self-Care, Work Life Balance, Support, Elder Care, Advocacy

IE04

Title: Hilary, a 49-year woman living in the east of Ireland, found that Covid-19 gave her the space to make life changes with the help of everyday coping strategies and a strong support network.

Narrative: “My name is Hilary, I’m 49 and I live with my dad in a village in Kildare. I am a project worker with an NGO in West Dublin. “The two years of Covid were the hardest two years I’ve probably ever had to go through in many ways.”

The pandemic meant I couldn’t ignore the problems in my life anymore. I began to walk more and engage with nature. Being mindful was a great way of noticing all the good things around me. “I’ve never been so mindful of a season or of the growth every day, because that was all you had to look at.” No amount of walking was going to change my marriage though, so I left, and I moved to a town near the sea. Working and living on my own in a small space was difficult. It was nature, swimming, “appreciating a sunrise, and, because I moved to a place where I didn’t know anybody - appreciating a smile from a stranger. Appreciating a friendship that developed from meeting somebody walking”, these were the things that helped me to get through the pandemic.

Professionally it was a strange time. We went from being a people-centred service, meeting people all the time and being in the office all the time, to having to learn a new way of working to stay connected to the service users. “Almost immediately everything went online. That was not some-thing we would have ever considered doing. We’d never considered doing a baby massage class online. Then suddenly that was the only way to do it [...] There were many highs and lows to switching to online. It’s amazing that you can go completely out of your comfort zone and find a way. I thought that collectively as

a work team we figured it out as we went along, as was common at the time. That seemed to be the commonality between all the services that we link in with". Work was really exhausting, because when you are meeting face to face it's easier to read behaviours and to read a room, compared to online. Then suddenly, we had to figure out how to do that via a screen. "One of the amazing things that came out of [the pandemic] is that it is possible". It wasn't ideal for the parents that took part in our online programmes, but it also meant that they had a place to meet other people in similar situations. "We could normalise that fear and create a space that was safe." Also: "Covid highlighted the absolute need for connection that we all have, and how challenging it was to have that. All these ways that we would normally connect were pulled out".

Working alone all day with lots of zoom meetings was draining. I wasn't the only one struggling, so I suggested that we should involve a group facilitator to create a safe space for sharing how we were finding working from home. That worked well and provided support and connection for our team. The outside facilitator put a buddy system in place which meant everyone had a colleague they could have a weekly chat with. Connection is a really big thing for me. That was really brought home to me during the pandemic and the buddy system helped with that work wise. Our organisation collaborated with other organisations based in West Dublin. "A lot of groups that might not have really worked together came together. It solidified the community, that bit of 'we're all in this together and nobody has a clue, let's see what we need to do and pool our resources'". That was really useful. "The community response was overwhelmingly positive."

Just before the pandemic started, I began a master's degree and that helped me to deal with Covid. This is because part of its curriculum was on self-development, so the strategies and skills I learned during the masters helped me with the lockdowns and everything else that was going on. The people I met through the course were a great support to me as were my friends and family. My dad was an inspiration really. He's elderly and had to cocoon, but he maintained a positive attitude which rubbed off on me. Covid, "highlighted how important connections are for human beings and, how detrimental it is to our spirit to remove our connectivity. I found a lot of connection, almost superficial connection spaces but by God I found loads of them!" The pandemic created space for thinking, being on my own and pushed me to make changes which improved my life. Now I want to focus on my career and champion the importance of relationships and connection - particularly for babies. It's important that relationships are nurtured from the very start. For myself, I want to keep being vulnerable and strong in equal measures! The pandemic meant I couldn't ignore the problems in my life anymore. I began to walk more and engage with nature. Being mindful was a great way of noticing all the good things around me. "I've never been so mindful of a season or of the growth every day, because that was all you had to look at." No amount of walking was going to change my marriage though, so I left, and I moved to a town near the sea. Working and living on my own in a small space was difficult. It was nature, swimming, "appreciating a sunrise, and, because I moved to a place where I didn't know anybody - appreciating a smile from a stranger. Appreciating a friendship that developed from meeting somebody walking", these were the things that helped me to get through the pandemic."

Specifically telling quotes: “Almost immediately everything went online. That was not something we would have ever considered doing. We’d never considered doing a baby massage class online. Then suddenly that was the only way to do it”.

“There were many highs and lows to switching to online, it’s amazing that you can go completely out of your comfort zone and find a way. I thought that collectively as a work team we figured it out as we went along, as was common at the time. That seemed to be the commonality between all the services that we link in with.”

“Covid highlighted the absolute need for connection that we all have and how challenging it was to have that. All the ways that we would normally connect were pulled out.”

“A lot of groups that might not have really worked together came together. It actually solidified the community, that bit of ‘we’re all in this together and nobody has a clue, let’s see what we need to do and pool our resources’”.

“[Covid] highlighted how important connections are as human beings and, how detrimental it is to our spirit to remove our connectivity. Also, the ingenuity to find it wherever you can. I found a lot of it, almost superficial connection spaces but by God I found loads of them!”

Keywords: Resilience, Struggle, Personal Growth, Connection, Support

IE05

Title: Naomi, a 53-year-old business owner living in Dublin’s south inner city, felt supported by the Covid-19 payments the Irish state provided, found purpose by supporting friends and family during the lockdowns and realised that both her personal life and business are resilient.

Narrative: “My name is Naomi, I’m 53, I live in a flat complex in Dublin’s south the inner city. I have my own holistic health and beauty business. I live on my own. My mother lives in the same block of flats as me which was very handy during the pandemic.

The first lockdown was very hard for me because I had to close my business. There was uncertainty about money and about how long I would have to close the business for. I was very anxious at that time because “I’d built up a fantastic business with a broad customer scope - people from all over the city - [and] literally everything that I’d worked for was taken away. The rug was pulled from under me overnight”. Thankfully I was entitled to the state Covid payment and “those state policies saved my business.” The landlord who I rent my business space from halved the rent for a while which was great too. When everything opened up again, I was really busy because “more people [were] looking for a massage than I’ve ever encountered before.” A lot of people were working

from home and had deep tissue injuries from sitting in the wrong chair although “some people were just looking for the company because they were isolated”. Overall, “Covid was very good to me. I always say if I ever meet Pascal Donoghue [Irish Finance Minister] I’ll buy him a drink because of those policies he put in place [...] I don’t stress about the business anymore. [Covid] really taught me how everything can go in an instant. Literally, I had a waiting list the week before St. Patrick’s day 2020 and [then later] that week [...] we had to close”.

In my personal life I had lots to keep me busy. For me staying busy and connected with people helped me to get through the lockdowns. Another thing that helped me was blogging. “I blogged every day. I was very honest in terms of how I felt on the day. I got solace from writing it. I wouldn’t start my day until I wrote about how I was feeling [...] I blogged for 101 days”. The blog helped other people too. For example, a friend said to me ““Oh Naomi that touched a little spark with me today, thanks a million””. Also, one of my clients said ““Naomi, I was following you all the way through Covid, and I really enjoyed your blog””. Really, the blog was a way for me to off load and to connect with other people. Exercising and helping other people also help me get through everything. “I made sure I exercised every day. And I tried to do as many favors for people as I could. If somebody needed to be driven anywhere, I’d say ‘ah feck it I’ll do it’ [...] and I used to do shopping [for people]”.

We have great neighbours where I live, with great community spirit, which really came to the fore during the pandemic. It was great to know that there were people around that I could rely on. We had a WhatsApp group across the various flat blocks so that we could all keep in touch with each other and make sure no one needed anything. My mom is only 3 doors away from me so keeping an eye on her was easy. She didn’t want to move in with me and I didn’t want to move in with her! So, we moved the furniture around in her sitting room which meant that we could be in the same space and be safe. Changing the layout of the furniture meant that “her chair was the furthest away from the sitting room door as possible and that mine was near the sitting room door”. From the start of the pandemic “I was super careful and that’s how I was able to go in and out to her every day”, because I really stuck to the rules.

In many ways Covid was great for me because “I studied more. I trained to become a skin specialist through that time, and I took a postgrad in gynecological medicine to help my fertility clients. I worked on my business [and] got my accounts in order”. Covid meant that “I was able to see a lot of things for what they really were [and] I was able to start putting myself first in business” which I hadn’t done before. Another positive from the pandemic is that I now know that I can “survive financially as a sole trader [and I now have] the confidence to say: ‘wait a minute, I’ve survived Covid’. If anything happens now, I just say - ‘I had a [relationship] break up in 2019, I survived 3 Covid lockdowns and I’m still here””. Now, I’m looking forward to going on a proper holiday!”

Specifically telling quotes: “Covid was very good to me. I always say if I ever meet Pascal Donoghue [Irish Finance Minister] I’ll buy him a drink because of those policies he put in place!”

“Those state policies saved my business.”

"I studied more, I trained to become a skin specialist through that time, I took a postgrad in gynecological medicine to help my fertility clients. I worked on my business got accounts in order, decluttered."

"I can "survive financially as a sole trader [and I now have] the confidence to say, 'wait a minute I've survived Covid'. If anything happens now, I just say - 'I had a [relationship] break up in 2019, I survived 3 Covid lockdowns and I'm still here'".

Keywords: Resilience, State Payment, Social Support, Upskilling

IE06

Title: Bernard, a 39-year-old from Dublin, now has greater work life balance with more family time, largely due to a hybrid model of work introduced by his employer post Covid-19.

Narrative: "My name is Bernard, I'm 39 and I live in Dublin with my wife and son. I am a manager in a community and voluntary organisation in west Dublin.

I found that life slowed down during the pandemic which was great. Previously, we'd been very busy as a family. My wife and I were both working and had to rely on family support with Logan, our son. For example, they occasionally collected Logan from school and minded him after school some days. Post pandemic a hybrid policy was introduced at work, now I work 2 days in the office so Logan "doesn't get dropped from pillar to post like he did pre-Covid. He gets to do his homework with me every day, or his mam."

Mary, my wife, was furloughed from her job at the start of the pandemic. That worked out well, because she was at home all the time and she got the Pandemic Unemployment Payment [PUP, Covid-19 welfare payment]. This meant she did most of the home schooling, childcare and housework. With Mary being at home all the time "I was getting too comfortable because [...] when you'd finish work, you'd get your dinner handed to you. [...] I was getting away with murder in the early days!" After work I couldn't go to the gym or meet friends, so I'd bring Logan to the park. We went for more walks as a family and tried to keep Logan as busy as possible. We played board games and helped him with his reading. Since going back to school his schoolwork has improved. Although we did have a few challenges with Logan because "he missed the interaction with other kids. He missed that a lot". Logan benefitted academically from us giving him extra time, but when he went back to school the emotional issues he'd had before were exacerbated: "when he went back into the classroom setting, he did really struggle." The school flagged the issue and we "got him into a 14-week classroom programme [...]. They talked about their feelings and stuff like that. We haven't had any more difficulty with him in school [since then]."

Pre-pandemic, I worked one half day each week at home, so that I could do the school run. But it felt like my boss considered that as a big favour to me! However, when we had

to close the office, that allowed us as an organisation to see that working from home suits both the staff and the organisation. "Before [Covid-19] everyone used to be in the office daily, 8-4/9-5. That is not the case now. We've moved to a hybrid model of work." Now we "don't need as much office space. That's had a big impact for us, at the moment we're looking at new offices". That's been positive for us organisationally as has the reduction in people taking sick leave. "If somebody is working from home, they'll ring you and say 'I'm not feeling the best but I'm just going to do this and this. Then I'll log on again later', sick leave has dropped dramatically". That's had positive ramifications in terms of productivity. Specifically, deadlines are being met, sometimes before Covid people would call in sick at the last minute and this had negative knock-on effects. I know from talking to colleagues that the hybrid model suits them too. One great thing is that none of us has to sit in traffic 5 days a week anymore. Overall, I think that working from home means "[people] are more efficient. If they are doing something during the day with their child, they can catch up [on their work] that evening. They have that flexibility". We brought in a working from home policy: "If you work from home outside the general hours, you can only send emails between 8am and 4pm [...] you can't contact colleagues outside of that time". One reason for that was to avoid having "5 or 6 emails in the morning off someone from 10pm at night, [that] just sets you up for the day wrong". People have "other stuff going on at home [and] don't need 5 or 6 emails [telling them to] 'get this done by whatever time', waiting for them when they turn on their computer". One of the things that helped me get through the lockdowns was "[getting] to know a couple of the neighbours that I never knew, that's been really positive, looking out for each other's kids and stuff like that". Another thing that helped was going "back to the gym as soon as they were open. We did outside classes [...] It was a coping strategy and still is". The gym keeps me right mentally and physically. I missed being able to socialise with my friends so, we set up a weekly Zoom quiz which was a way to keep connected with people. I did something similar for the staff in work - I organised regular Zoom meetings so everyone could get together and chat.

The pandemic wasn't too bad for us I think we were lucky overall. The big takeaways are that we had more family time and that the crisis led to the hybrid model being introduced at work which has been beneficial personally and professionally."

Specifically telling quotes: "[My son] doesn't get dropped from pillar to post like he did pre Covid. He gets to do his homework with me every day or his mum"

"Before [Covid-19] everyone used to be in the office on a daily basis, 8-4/9-5 that is not the case now. We've moved to a hybrid model of work. So that means people are in the office 2 days a week and 3 days from home"

"[W]ith people being at home I think they are more efficient. If they are doing something during the day with their child, they can catch up [on their work] that evening. They have that flexibility, and it allows them to keep on top of things as well".

Keywords: Childcare, Hybrid Work, Covid-19 payment, Work/Life Balance, Family

IE07

Title: Elaine, a nurse manager on a cancer ward, remained on the frontline while keeping the staff and patients safe from the virus.

Narrative: “My name is Elaine, I am 44 years old, and I am a nursing manager of a cancer ward in a hospital outside of Dublin. I have two sons, the older is now 20 and the younger is 12.

When the pandemic started, we had all these meetings with the hospital management about plans and we were waiting for the guidance on what to do on daily basis. “I was a manager of an oncology day ward and - as you can imagine - our cancer patients would be very vulnerable to contracting Covid. So that was a huge concern for us!”. Back then, in 2020 we were getting a lot of guidance from the National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP), and they were sending us regular emails with advice on how to keep the virus out of our unit, as best as possible. “And one thing I can say that is very positive is that no patient has contracted Covid as a result of attending our department”. We were advised by the NCCP to call our patients 24 hours before their visit and ask them questions about symptoms of Covid, and whether anybody in their house was positive with the virus. These guidelines came from the NCCP, but “it really was down to the dedication of the staff, the nurses, how strict we were with the infection control measures, and how strict we were about checking every person that came to the door for temperature. [...] And I think it was definitely the dedication of the nursing staff that kept [the virus] out of the unit”.

In the beginning they moved us to a different part of the hospital, which had its own entrance. This was advised by the NCCP. But after about 2 weeks, they moved us again, this time across the road to a private sector area. “So we had to move over there, and that was a huge upheaval for us, because it wasn’t just moving the patients, it was about moving our property, it was about moving our stock, it was informing everybody [about the move]. It was a huge project to try and move outside the hospital”. We stayed across the road from the hospital for 3 or 4 months, and then they decided to move us back to the hospital. It is a prefab area, and we are basically trying to make it work the best we can.

During all this, we had one nurse who was cocooning at home because she had an immune compromised disease. Also, the manager that was here prior to me, she had long Covid, so she was out as well. “We were running [our unit] on two staff down, which meant a lot of overtime, it was a lot of overtime wearing PPE, a lot of overtime! So yes, it was a very tough time all together”. Personally, I shouldn’t have an issue with a person that was cocooning, or with the person who had the long Covid. But I was very angry with a situation in which we had the staff shortage, but no extra help was given. So it was us, the nurses who were able to work, who were just left to do all the work. And we had to cover their shifts, regardless. Because at the end of the day, the chemotherapy didn’t stop, and the cancer didn’t stop.

When they moved us outside the hospital area, we asked for a healthcare assistant, just to come back and forth to the hospital with blood tests, and to help us with the cleaning.

The management understood why we needed this and we got it, but unfortunately, once we came back to the hospital, she was taken away from us.

The girls I worked with - we were very supportive of each other. If somebody had too many shifts in a row, we tried to swap and give them a break. But we didn't get much support from the hospital management. If we made any reference to the fact that we were feeling under pressure, we were basically told that 'everyone was in the same boat'. "Which was not the case, because not everyone who was in the same boat was moved outside of the hospital. And not everyone was in the same boat looking after cancer patients".

There was a programme released by the HSE called the 'I Care' programme. That was something I did earlier this year and I found it very interesting. It was a one-day virtual event, and there were professionals from different areas of health at the event/there. And there was maybe 10 or 20 of us attending on that day and it was about listening to everyone else's experience with Covid. And everybody had their own experience of it. "I actually found that really helpful, because it just did make you feel like you were not on your own. You know that other people were in similar situations, although they may have been in different circumstances".

In general, you would hear about different experiences from different nurses. I worked with a friend who was doing palliative care, and her experience would have been very different as she was staying with someone while they were taking their last breath, but the family was not allowed in. Another friend was doing agency work on a Covid ward, and she was told not to spend more than 15 minutes with each patient. She did that on one-night shift and didn't come back again, as she couldn't handle the lack of touch and lack of care for the patient. So, we were on different boats. But in any case, I think it was a team effort, no matter where you worked, it was the nurses who helped each other and who supported each other through the pandemic. "We tried to look after each other and do our best for each other [...] Yeah, just kind of trying to keep the spirits up, more than anything! Just looking back at it - [it was] very difficult time [...] And I know that people had it worse than me, and I know that there are other people who had it better than me, so that is just my personal experience".

Specifically telling quotes: "And one thing I can say that is very positive is that no patient has contracted Covid as a result of attending our department".

"It really was down to the dedication of the staff, the nurses, how strict we were with the infection control measures, and how strict we were about checking every person that came to the door for temperature. [...] And I think it was definitely the dedication of the nursing staff that kept [the virus] out of the unit".

"I actually found that ['I Care' programme for staff] really helpful, because it just did make you feel like you were not on your own. You know, that other people were in similar situations, although they may have been in different circumstances".

"We tried to look after each other and do our best for each other [...] Yeah, just kind of trying to keep the spirits up, more than anything! Just looking back at it - [it was] very

difficult time [...] And I know that people had it worse than me, and I know that people had it worse than me, and I know that there are other people who had it better than me, so that is just my personal experience”.

Keywords: Frontline, healthcare workers, lack of support, difficult working conditions, collective effort.

IE08

Title: Ricardo, 42, originally from Brazil now living in Dublin, has better work life balance, increased appreciation for connection, and a sense of belonging in his life since the pandemic.

Narrative: “My name is Ricardo, I’m 42 years old. I’m originally from Brazil and I’ve been living in Ireland for 5 years. In 2016 there was a financial crisis in Brazil, and, despite working for a large company in a managerial position, I decided that it would be a good time to go abroad to do a masters. I speak fluent English so I wanted to go to an English-speaking country, and because of all the Tech companies in Ireland, I decided that it would be a good place to come to - somewhere I could build a life.

When I completed my master's in digital marketing, it took me a few months to get a job. In January 2020, I got the job I am in now, and then lockdown came in March! I was fine with the actual job because I have had similar roles in Brazil. However, the challenge was the lack of access to colleagues and clients. Knowing who to approach in the company was difficult. I was only working there three months and then suddenly I was working from home. From experience I know that “when you work in sales [...] you need all the other departments inside the organisation to help you [...] You need credit approval, you need people checking your documents, putting your sales through. We need this support internally”. Also, sometimes an email may be misconstrued and that’s why “as soon as I had a problem or something that was very urgent, I used to just call and say ‘Hello, how are you? Can you help me with this?’”. Reaching out to my colleagues and clients over the phone really helped me workwise to solve problems and build rapport. Also, my flat mate at the time was working from home too, so we set up the living room like it was an office. Working side by side like helped us to get through our workdays.

During the first lockdown I was working long days. I was new to the company, and I wanted to make a good impression, especially because Brazil if you don’t work long hours, it looks bad professionally. But then my manager contacted me to say that I must stop working at 5pm, that work life balance is important. That’s what I do now! I give work 100% from 8am-5pm, then my evenings are my own. Since the pandemic my work/life balance has gotten much better, partly due to my employers introducing a flexible work policy. Overall, my employer is very supportive. During the restrictions we had daily meetings which were great. We also had quizzes and fun things to do to keep morale up and to stay connected. “I used to say [that] I couldn’t wait for the time I would be back to the office. But now I see the benefits of working from home. I don’t commute into work in the morning, I can cook my food every day, I can finish work at 5pm and I

have my whole evening to do my stuff. These kinds of things are good for me. We go once a month to the office, we have meetings, we connect with people". On the whole working from home is "good but there's ups and downs [...] For the past week [...] I've been at home so much and it's been so cold, and I haven't gone to the gym in the evening. It was just like a full day at home not doing much. I feel like I need to leave this place for a while' [...] Staying 5 days in a row inside your house that's the bad thing". I might go to the office for a few more days next week. We're lucky that we can do that, and our office is great - we have a barista and snacks!

I love living in Ireland and it's great that Dublin has a strong gay community, "I feel completely safe in the gay community. I've never felt that to be honest, in Brazil [where] you're always concerned -it's a very Catholic place. There is this huge macho culture even for gay people. We need to keep to ourselves; you know, be a little bit discreet. I don't feel that here". When the restrictions lifted, I became more involved in the gay community - like I joined a gay rugby team, "it's good because you have a sense of community, [...] a sense of belonging. It's more than just going to a bar and getting drunk [...] you build friendships inside those kinds of communities". During the pandemic connection became very important to me. I stayed in touch every day with my family in Brazil and regular video calls with my friends kept me going too. Working from home with limited opportunities for social connection made me determined to do more with my down time. During Covid-19 I got into exercise. During the first lockdown I put on a lot of weight, so when restrictions eased, I joined a gym. Then by the time the next lockdown came I was really into working out and I bought gym equipment, so that I could work out at home. Exercising and developing healthy habits really helped me to get through the pandemic. I even gave up smoking!"

Specifically telling quotes: "It's good because you have a sense of community, of belonging to something, a sense of belonging. It's more than just going to a bar and getting drunk [...] you build friendships inside those kinds of communities"

"I feel completely safe in the gay community. I've never felt that to be honest in Brazil, you're always concerned, it's a very Catholic place. There is this huge macho culture even for gay people. We need to keep ourselves; you know be a little bit discreet. I don't feel that here".

"I used to say [that] I couldn't wait for the time I would be back to the office but now I see other benefits of working from home. I don't commute into work in the morning, I can cook my food every day, I can finish work at 5 and I have my whole evening to do my stuff. These kinds of things are good for me now, we go once a month to the office, we have meetings we connect with people".

Working from home is "good but there's ups and downs [...] for the past week I was saying that to my partner - 'I've been at home so much and it's been so cold, and I haven't gone to the gym in the evening. It was just like a full day at home not doing much. I feel like I need to leave this place for a while' [...] staying 5 days in a row inside your house that's the bad thing".

Keywords: Work life balance, community, connection, flexible work, healthy habits.

IE09

Title: Darren, in his early 30s, became a first-time dad during the lockdown and did not have time to think about himself while looking after the baby.

Narrative: “My name is Darren, I am 33 years old. I am married and I have two daughters under the age of three.

When Covid-19 started, I was a year into my job and I work in the civil service, so the worry about ‘do I have a job or not?’ wasn’t there. More importantly, my wife had our first baby a week into the lockdown. So that was a very strange at the time. Becoming a first-time parent during the pandemic was a very, very strange experience. “Luckily the weather was fantastic. So, there was a lot of putting the buggy outside and going for walks. [...] I was literally just doing circles of the back garden with the buggy, just to get the baby outside”. At that stage as well, we were fearful of bumping into someone on the street, so I was putting on a baseball cap and just keeping my head down when I was going out with the baby. “And I remember going to the local shopping centre at one stage, and it was a sunny day, but I put the rain cover over the buggy, just to protect the child”. Just in case somebody came along and sneezed at her. And there were those announcements over the speaker in that shopping centre, saying ‘we will get through this’ and ‘better times are ahead’. “It was very apocalyptic, almost. Very strange and very uncomfortable. And you were also trying to be so protective of your child”.

When the baby was born, the health services were all over the place, as they went through a crazy time. Consequently, “the basic care for our baby wasn’t given; [...] the public health nurses weren’t doing the visits to check on babies, and every contact was over the phone. To ask first-time parents to examine their own child, that is outrageous! That kind of annoyed me the most”. It was just very scary, and “you were worried that something would be missed, it’s your child and you are concerned [...] because you don’t know what is normal and what is not”.

I felt for my wife, it was very hard for her. “What affected me most about it was [that] the baby was born through C section, so my wife was kept in for three days in the hospital. [And] I couldn’t visit the hospital for three days to see the baby or my wife. And my wife had to fend for herself.” She took a year out and spent her maternity leave just cubed up in the house. She couldn’t go out and see her friends, or bring the baby to the park. She suffered from post-natal depression for a good few months after giving birth.

When my wife came home, certain things took over. “You don’t have time to think of yourself when your loved ones are sick [...] and [my wife] was very unwell when she came home, both mentally and physically. So, it wasn’t about me. [...] I just had to put myself aside for a while and take over. I took over all the night feeds straight away, for three or four days. And then, I remember, probably on the fourth or fifth day, mentally, I just had enough”. And I was thinking ‘what have we done? What kind of a world have we brought our child into???’ So, I kind of soldiered through it. Covid-19 was there, and we were

dealing with having a baby - it was hard times.

But having a child also brought a structure to our day, because she was awake in the morning and went to sleep at night. "And I know that if that hadn't been the case, I would have slipped big time. [...] I think having the baby was the distraction that I needed to bring a bit of structure to the day [...] Because even in work, while there was stuff to be done, there wasn't a lot of structure".

"One thing we did find great was going out walking. Just getting out for a walk in the area, as I think a lot of people did. And it was something that we stuck to, where every evening, come around 7 o'clock, we'd go out for about half an hour, just for fresh air, unless the weather was quite bad. That was one thing that we did". My wife's mother also lives with us so that was great. We wouldn't leave the baby with her for the whole day, but she was there if we needed a break for an hour or two.

It all didn't really have an effect on us as a couple, we have a very strong marriage. "There wasn't any inkling of any issues there, it was just kind of 'all hands to the wheel'. I have a lot of admiration for [my wife], and everything she had done, and how she got through it".

From my own perspective of Covid, as a new parent, I feel there were some failings. The government were great at bringing in certain things, like the social welfare payments for anybody who lost their job. But there were a lot of oversights of certain aspects, particularly with the health services around childbirth. It was a much more pleasant experience this time around with the birth of my second daughter. "It was amazing. [My wife] burst into tears the first day when I went to visit her. While with my [first daughter] - she never got" to experience that. "

Specifically telling quotes: "And I remember going to the local shopping centre at one stage, and it was a sunny day, but I put the rain cover over the buggy, just to protect the child"

"[T]he basic care for our baby wasn't given; [...] the public health nurses weren't doing the visits to check on babies, and everything was over the phone. To ask first-time parents to examine their own child, that is outrageous! That kind of annoyed me the most"

"What kind of affected me most about it was [that] the baby was born through C section, so my wife was kept in for three days in the hospital. [And] I couldn't visit the hospital for three days to see the baby or my wife. And my wife had to fend for herself."

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Keywords: First-time parent, restrictions, sickness, mental health, post-natal depression, fatherhood, public health services.

IE10

Title: Dorota, a 40-year-old Polish woman living in Ireland, saved money during the pandemic and was happy that her husband has been able to work from home since Covid-19 started.

Narrative: “My name is Dorota, I am 40 years old. I am married with two school age kids, and I have been working full-time as an administration office worker. I came to Ireland from Poland 16 years ago.

When they announced the first lockdown in March 2020, everything changed a lot. “There was a lot of fear, because nobody knew what was going on. And the biggest fear was when the schools and creches closed. It was the question of ‘oh my God, what we are going to do??? Because I had never worked from home, and neither had my husband”. Because I work in the construction sector, we were also worried that all the sites will be closed and there would be no work. So the other biggest worry was: ‘What is the story with the money???’ But then we were told that we could work from home and that we actually had some work to do, because there was one project that was classified as essential. There was much less to do, but I was still fully paid. And my husband’s job was not affected because he is in IT, and he started working from home and it was great that he was at home. “So, the initial experience was definitely of fear of what was going to happen, but then it was actually kind of OK, because the government stepped in, we were actually working from home, and there will be some sorts of subsidies.”

My husband was working more on the computer and working more hours in general. My work was more about checking my emails and monitoring my inbox or taking a call when someone was ringing me. So, I could spend some time with the kids. I also do administration, so that can be done at any stage, so I was doing some work during my husband’s lunch break. I also remember working late, after he finished at 5 o’clock - I would work for two hours then and do a bit of a backlog. “So yeah, we somehow managed. What helped was that the weather was good, so we could manage to get kids out in the garden a lot. Just the park, garden and home, really, there was nothing else”. The creches and the schools were closed, I think, initially for three months. Both kids at that time were under the school age, and it was only September 2020 when the older one started school, so they were both in a creche before the lockdown. The kids were at home, so the biggest challenge was to actually manage the children while trying to work. “That was a new thing, that was what everybody across the board had to do”. I also saved money in that period, because I didn’t pay for the creche. That was a lot of money at that time, I think 1500 Euros that I didn’t have to pay, so that was great. I also saved some money because shops were closed during that period, and I am not an online shopper. “And then there was this option for stopping your mortgage, so we stopped that as well.

Because we just didn't know which way it was going to go. And that was a great help, I found. That we could do it, and we did just save a bit of money". That was initially for 3 months and then it was extended to 6 months, and it didn't affect our future payments much. "It was worth it, just to have a bit of a break from it, that was really good!"

The one big advantage for us, coming out from Covid, is the working from home for my husband! Before the pandemic he had never ever worked from home, as far as I remember. And during the pandemic he managed to stay working from home for 18 months. So, it was great, for things to be done at home, for saving a lot of money on the commute, the fuel, the parking... And he can do anything from home. And it is still a benefit as he has to go back to the office but not full-time, just for two or three days. "It does help with childcare, yeah. And it does help, even with the fact that you are at home, you switch off your computer at 5 and you are home. You don't have to commute. And if he was commuting, that would be always me picking up the kids, dropping kids to school, and doing things like that. Now knowing that he is at home, it is more shared."

I can work from home, but I prefer to go to the office. It is very close, and I have a printer that I can use! "[Also], at home I am always distracted. It is all this work that I see, and I am doing two jobs. And in the office, I just do the office".

During the lockdowns, I would go for walks, or pop-in to my office to check the post, or chat online with my friends in the evening. I was complaining about [the lockdowns] a lot, but I didn't really resist them or break any rules. Maybe I went to a shopping centre, a half kilometre further than I was supposed to. "You know, in the beginning everybody was scared of the virus, because it was the unknown. I will never forget when the news was coming from Italy, about people dropping like flies, so you were really scared a bit! You were afraid a bit. So, everybody was keeping their distance, but I think everybody was like that. And then it was - towards the end, everybody was just fed up with it. [...] Ah well - we got through it, we managed!"

Specifically telling quotes: "There was a lot of fear, because nobody knew what was going on. And the biggest fear was when the schools and creches closed. It was the question of 'oh my God, what we are going to do???' Because I had never worked from home, and neither did my husband"

"So, the initial experience was that: definitely fear of what is going to happen, and then it was actually kind of OK, that the government stepped in, that we were actually working from home, that there will be some sorts of subsidies, and it actually was ok."

"And then there was this option for stopping your mortgage, so we stopped that as well. Because we just didn't know which way it was going to go. And that was a great help, I found. That we could do it, and we did just save a bit of money"

"It [husband working from home] does help with childcare, yeah. And it does help, even with the fact that you are at home, you switch off your computer at 5 and you are home. You don't have to commute. And if he was commuting, that would be always me picking up the kids, dropping kids to school, and doing things like that. Now knowing that he is at home, it is more shared."

Keywords: Work from home, childcare, financial worries, work-life balance, flexibility.



Iceland

IS01

Title: A trans woman, single mom of three and an activist.

Narrative: “I am a single divorced trans woman, 52-year-old and a mom of three sons from two previous relationships. Me and my ex share custody equally and have a really good relationship raising the two younger boys. I'm an actress and I studied acting abroad but later on added teaching qualifications and now I work as a primary and secondary school teacher. I'm a special needs teacher and I teach children of foreign backgrounds Icelandic. Nowadays I'm teaching Ukrainian children and I can really feel how purposeful and meaningful my work is.

I find it hard to see or find anything positive that resulted from the pandemic, especially for trans people. We became a lot more isolated and marginalized in the health care system. The pandemic hit us really hard because we were not a priority group in any health care to begin with and after the pandemic the few specialists that could handle our situations were taken away from us. It became difficult to get any answers and to get an appointment with an endocrinologist. Trans people are broken after the pandemic.

If I try to find something positive from this covid period is that trans people were fed up and went ahead to find their own ways of dealing with their problems. Those that could afford it went around the system and financed their own procedures abroad. We are more cohesive as a group and have become fiercer in the fight. We are not as patient as before, we have seen the waiting list becoming longer and longer and some of us are looking at waiting for 16 years before getting the procedures we need. We have also become more visible, the visibility is positive because it gives younger trans and non-binary people the courage to come out. We felt a bit up against the wall which made us fight back. When you feel like either to give up and disappear or to stand back up and fight, fortunately most of us choose to fight. During covid seeing that all the help we were promised disappeared made us more bold and ready to fight back. This has given me the courage to use my voice so now every time I'm asked to do an interview or partake in a meeting or a conference or whatever I always say yes. I try to use every platform available to me to speak out.

So many marginalized groups like trans people, especially trans women, often feel like matters relating to us are discussed without our presence. Often some specialists are talking about us without consulting us or letting our voices be heard. There is always someone else speaking for us that is not trans so now we are fed up and we say “nothing about us without us”. Even our own organization (The National Queer Organization of Iceland/Trans Iceland) is divided when it come to the rights of trans people and lacks funding so us transwomen have been talking and meeting up aside from the organization. Out of crisis you get back on your feet because you are forced to. This crisis

has highlighted the vulnerability and weakness of our society and our health care system, not just for trans people.

Recently I joined a multi-art group that consist of marginalised artists, who are queer, disabled, non-Icelandic, non-white or are part of other minority groups, who all gather there to perform and make art. I have found my community in this group, I really enjoy it and there is also a certain activism going on there. I had over the years many acquaintances but not many close friends but through this art group I have made some really good close friends. The group was established a year ago but started online during covid. There are three women behind the group who had experienced prejudice for being different from others and they wanted to form a venue for marginalized people. They have organized different workshops, courses and meetings.

Last summer I got a dog. The purpose was twofold, firstly to break social isolation and secondly to make my children happy. At that time I was not in a good headspace, due to covid I had gotten in the habit of ordering food online and getting it delivered home so when my boys were not staying with me I had no will or urge to go outside my apartment. I just stayed at home watching television and getting fat. When I tried to pull myself together and go somewhere, I often stopped at the front door and broke down completely. The dog really helped in breaking that pattern and forced me to go outside. The breed that I got is often used to help people with PTSD so I look at him as a little savior.”

Specifically telling quotes: “trans people were fed up and started to find their own ways of dealing with their problems.”

“We are more cohesive as a group and have become fiercer in the fight.”

“The dog got is often used to help people with PTSD like me so I look at him as my little savior.”

Keywords: trans women, lack of service, health-care, will to fight, fed up with the system, multi-art group, activism, pets, social isolation.

IS02

Title:

Narrative: “I’m a 37 year old Icelandic woman and I have German husband. We live in a flat and are in an average financial position and childless. We recently got married but we had to postpone our wedding two times because of covid. I work as a freelance musician, I teach piano and I’m also a yoga instructor along with other projects.

I spent a lot of time in Germany during Covid so I experienced a more extreme lockdown

than here in Iceland, over there basically everything was shut down. There were e.g. military wagons driving around saying “danger! look out! and stay at home!”, something that hasn't happened since WW2. So in the beginning I just shut everything down and stayed at home and started reading up and looking for information about this virus. It became evident to me early on that this pandemic and all these rules would somehow have a very bad effect on society, aside from the illness. I saw it all around me, friends and family members who were running small businesses suffered a lot and most of them went out of business. On the other hand there were many who enjoyed staying at home and slowing down the speed of life and I also experienced that. Before the pandemic I had so much going on and I was worried about how to manage everything so I was kind of relieved when the pandemic hit at first because it meant I could relax more. After that I started meditating and practicing yoga almost everyday. I'm not a nervous type so I didn't worry about catching the virus.

I noticed early on that there was always more and more emphasis on vaccinations and I felt controlled, like I didn't have a say in the matter. I remember when I came to Iceland in 2021 and had to quarantine for five days totally healthy away from everyone, I felt so bad. Time is precious and when I finally come home to Iceland I want to be with the ones I care about and I was denied that. I even told the nurse who rang to check up on me that physically I was feeling fine but not mentally. At that point I hadn't seen my family for so long and I was really frustrated that I was forced to isolate myself. I felt this was a violation of my human rights and not promoting health because I know when I'm healthy and when I'm not. I felt caged up and as a criminal when I went out for a walk.

I would have liked that the authorities had reacted to all this with less panic and with more softness and respect to different points of view. I thought everything was taken too far and too panicky. I also felt I wasn't allowed to express my opinion because I was skeptical of the vaccinations. It quickly became clear that the vaccinations weren't helping that much if you weren't infected. It would have been better if the government had made it clearer who needed vaccinations and who didn't. As a healthy young woman that hopes to get pregnant one day I did not want to get vaccinated. The best thing I can do for my community is to take good care of myself and 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 criticized 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, marginalized 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.

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 labeled even more as some alt-right lunatics and nazis.

Being outside in nature also helped a lot, there I could forget about how bad things were. The advantages of this whole situation is to be able to do more online, e.g. can i stay more in Iceland and still do my work. That being said, I don't want the world to become such a place where we can do everything online. We need much more face to face communication than we realize. Communication is nurturing.

My only hope is that we learn something from these difficult times and that if we ever face this kind of hardship again that we will do so more calmly and with more tolerance."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: anti-vaccinations, resistance to covid strategies, firm set of belief system, discrimination, reluctance towards the government, yoga, mediation, finding like-minded friends and allies, protesting

IS03

Title: 34 year old queer (pansexual) woman had time for additional studies and got out of mentally abusive relationship.

Narrative: "I'm a 34 year old woman and I'm working full time as a dentist. Due to covid I was able to get the heart surgery (cardiac catheterization) I had been waiting for over five years to get. The waiting list suddenly disappeared because the hospital was only performing procedures that did not require overnight hospitalization. I was on medication, but if I wanted to have children I was not allowed to be on these medications. I had been pushing and hoping to get the call from the hospital, but nothing happened until covid hit. Now, after the operation, I'm drug-free for the first time in 16 years and I don't consider myself the sick girl anymore as I did before. This gave me a lot of confidence to deal with other things in my life.

I got into a diploma program abroad that I always wanted to add to my studies. Covid made it easier and less expensive for me to attend since I didn't have to fly back and forth and stay at hotels. The whole course was suddenly available online and since I had to shut down my practice for a while I had plenty of time to dive into it. I found more passion at work because I finally had the opportunity to add new knowledge and learn something new. I get so much out of learning something new and then applying it at work. Because I learned so much during covid, things at work are going very well now.

I felt a great need to work on myself during covid and finally made time to see a psychologist. The relationship I was in wasn't great nor healthy and we were together a lot longer than we should have been. Covid prolonged the relationship because we weren't going anywhere. One of our main problems was mistrust and my ex didn't trust

me to go anywhere and be around people and since that was almost wiped out by covid we stayed together longer than we should have. She was quite controlling and possessive of me and she really held me back. She used covid a lot as an excuse or reason to not do the things I wanted to do. With a lot of self-work, I gradually managed to build myself up and finally ended the relationship this spring.

The pandemic has all in all led to improvements in my situation. Even though covid prolonged my relationship with my ex it (the covid time) also helped me to get out of that situation.”

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: Medical care, additional studies, adding a skill, self-work, queer, same sex/gender relationship, pansexuality, intimate partner violence, mental abuse, therapy, empowerment.

IS04

Title: A 37 year old woman, working part time as a key account manager, disabled after an accident.

Narrative: “I am a 37 year old Icelandic woman, born and raised in Reykjavik. I work as a pharmacist at a pharma company that focuses on retail, healthcare & pharmaceuticals. I live in a town in the capital area with my boyfriend and step-daughter.

For me personally the pandemic has worked in favor of my situation. Soon after the pandemic hit I started working from home, which suited me very well. I got more work done at home and could concentrate better. It felt good to slow everything down but this also had its complications, my boyfriend and stepchild were often also stuck at home which made it hard for me to concentrate and work. I had never worked from home before, and I found it to be so much better.

I got into a serious car accident in may 2020 which led to nine month long sick leave. One thing that got me through that difficult time was knowing that I wasn't missing out on any fun activity since no one else was able to travel or meet up. After the car crash I was very sensitive towards sound and light (photosensitivity) and couldn't do the things I usually do and I had to stay at home a lot. This sounds very selfish of me but it helped knowing that everyone else was kind of locked up as well. If not for covid I'm sure my sick leave would have been much more mentally demanding. I'm a social being and I thrive on traveling and meeting people and if things would have been normal with everyone traveling and going places, it would have been so difficult for me to miss out on everything.

I was diagnosed with a condition called POTS (postural orthostatic tachycardia

syndrome) and this condition is common after a viral infection. I've noticed that since I got this diagnosis a spotlight and awareness has been raised regarding this syndrome and that is because so many are experiencing these syndromes after being sick with covid (long term effect). This has helped me since most doctors are now much more aware and knowledgeable about this condition. Before covid few knew anything about POTS but that has surely changed. I am a part of an exercise group that my physical therapist put together with others who have been diagnosed with the same syndrome. There I get advice and support from others who are going through the same thing as me. We also have a Facebook group which is also helpful. Meditation and yoga nidra have helped me tremendously in dealing both with covid time and my syndrome, which is something I never did before covid. Going to the swimming pool has always been a big part of my life, when they shut down it affected me a lot. Since I've been dealing with this illness, going outside and being in the hot tub has had a positive effect on me, especially at times when I felt so bad that was maybe the only thing I managed to do.

Now I started working again (part time: 50%) and my company has made it possible for everyone to still work from home which is great for me. This change was only made possible because of covid. If I have an off day and I'm not feeling too well I can just work from home where it's much more quiet and calm than my office. This change in policy has also made it possible for me to keep my job. Before covid no one was allowed to work part time or at home and I would have lost my job if not for this change brought on by covid.

I have to admit that I was scared of catching covid because of my syndrome. But when I caught it I was only little sick so that was a relief. I've received two doses of vaccine and maybe that helped but I was skeptical and wondered if I needed to get a vaccine.

My family was quite lucky because we only had to quarantine once during the pandemic. My boyfriend and stepdaughter both caught covid before I did and when that happened I fled into a cabin outside the capital area. There I stayed longer than I needed to because it felt nice and I could reboot myself. My family members also more or less enjoyed the quarantine. When the quarantine ended my step daughter wanted to stay at home still. She and her father made the best out of the situation and e.g. made a special covid salat that she still requests to this day."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: Disability, POTS, health-care, labour market participation, work from home, part time work,

IS05

Title: 37 year old single mom on a maternity leave, worked as a nurse during covid. Has a chronic illness

Narrative: "I am a 37 year old single mum on maternity leave. I recently had a baby but before that I was working part time as a nurse. The reason I work part time is because I have a chronic pain disorder called endometriosis.

The last two years are kind of a blur. Last year when I was pregnant and was ordered to a bedrest I started thinking back on how bad and weird things got during the Covid-19 pandemic. I almost didn't see or meet anyone because all the hospital staff was ordered to almost quarantine constantly. There was a lot of pressure put on our shoulders to make sure we didn't get in contact with anyone who might be infected. Then again going to work had its perks, there were always so many colleagues around and we sought support and companionship from one another. While others had to work from home we could always meet in person at work. As a result I've gotten really close with a lot of my colleagues. Other nurses I hardly knew have become really close friends and not only nurses that are similar to my age but all ages. We often went for a walk right after our shift was over just to vent and go over difficult cases. It also happened that e.g. if I had just finished the morning shift and my friends were taking over (the evening shift) I would stay at work longer than I needed just to talk and see them. I experience a lot of empathy and support from my co-workers. Having good co-workers made it less stressful to go to and deal with work.

Whenever any one of us had to quarantine a messenger group was formed and we were constantly in some kind of contact or conversation. This helped me when I had to quarantine. Since I live alone it was comforting knowing that some of my co workers were also going through the same as I was. I also started knitting a lot during that time which really helped in a lot of ways, it helped me to calm down and also to have something to do when I was locked up.

My friend from work got pregnant around the same time as me and we could keep each other company when it came time to give birth. There was a strict visiting ban at the hospital during that time but we were allowed to stay in each other's room. If it wasn't for her I would have been so much more lonely. Visitors were only allowed once a day for maximum one hour. I stayed there for almost a week and my mom was the only one who was allowed to visit me. My friends spouse only helped her settle inn and then he barely made it to the birth itself.

Part of my job was to make sure that every patient had access to a smart device in order to video call loved ones. This is a brand new aspect of my work but it's so important, especially when the visiting ban was the strictest. The situation at the hospital was very difficult due to the visiting ban, both for me and my colleagues and of course mainly the patients. Many patients expressed that the visiting ban was the most difficult part of the stay.

At work it is possible for the staff to talk to a deacon/priest to resolve any issue and get guidance. In the past I've taken advantage of talking to the deacon but I do it more often

after Covid hit. I find that it helped me a lot and I could go into more detailed and deeper conversations with her than my colleagues, without worrying about breaking confidentiality.

When my child was almost three months old we both got covid. At that time I was staying with my mom to get her help with the baby. My mom was the first one to get sick and she got seriously ill. At times it got so bad that I had to call the doctor/covid unit but when they found out that I was a nurse they used that as an excuse for not admitting her, at least that is what I think. So I took care of her, my baby and myself. After going through this ordeal I'm cautious when I'm around people and I try to stay at home for the most part."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: Single mom, health-care, nurse, care-work, workload, social isolation, containment measures, quarantine, child birth.

IS06

Title: 36-year-old married mother, an activist and a psychologist. Chairwoman of organizations that fights for every children's and women's right to be protected from violence

Narrative: "My name is Georgia, I'm 36 years old and work as a psychologist. My interest these days is mostly focused on the grassroot organization that I along with other women founded. The organization is called "Life without Violence" and helps women and children who are victims of violence to navigate the system. I'm currently the chairwoman for the group. The movement started back in 2019 and then the organization was officially established in 2020. The Me-Too movement brought us together and we started a group that wanted to change the system so that no child would have to live in a violent environment. There are now six women on the board and some of them never reveal their identity or faces since they are pretty much in hiding. Many of our clients are hiding away from their children's fathers and can never appear publicly. I was elected chairwoman mainly because I was one of the few who was willing to reveal my identity and appear in public. A big part of why I am chairman is that I was a victim of sexual violence when I was a child. There is so much stigma and prejudice around the mothers who are going through a custody battle so it was a calculated decision to have me as the face of the organization. The vice-chair was also a victim of violence as a child. There was and still is a great need for this kind of organization and it has been good for the women to see that they are not alone in this struggle.

The pandemic has made all work in our organization more difficult. We have used the internet a lot in our work which is something we have always done because the majority of the women who are involved in the organization are single mothers. We are trying to

get members to meet more, but it is difficult since most of them are so tied up. We haven't received any funding from the government. We have received some grants from individuals and we are now in the process of allocating that money. In reality, we have been working on this pro bono for three years. During this time we have mostly focused on online activism, writing articles and publishing in the media. What covid has meant for our work is that when we have tried to get a meeting with a minister, it has constantly been delayed or put on hold. All kinds of activities stopped or were delayed in the public sector and we have had to wait a lot. On the other hand it became normal and standard for people to meet remotely and we have been utilizing that to our advantage.

Our organization has not received a lot of negative feedback or backlash, just a few comments here and there. We think that because we have done our job so well in pointing out how broken the system is that nobody can criticize that. We have often had to expose and criticize media coverage that does not cast a good light on victims of violence. It happened often that men that had violated/maltreated their children and/or partners appeared in the media to tear down their child's mothers for preventing them from being around their children. We have become very fatigued on taking on these battles and have reduced responding to it. Also there is less reason now to deal with such instances because it appears that the landscape has changed a lot due to our activism. It is not like our job here is done but we notice that we are being heard and listened to. For example it looks like the media has stopped covering custody battle cases. It's been a while since I last saw an interview with a man who was allowed to blame and state false accusations towards their child's mother. This is a good thing but on the other hand we fear that that could also mean that women have a hard time making their story known in the media. We have also noticed that it has been more difficult for us to get coverage when needed.

This has truly been a learning process and you learn by doing and avoid falling into the same trap over and over again. I get most support from the women in the organization, I find it better to talk to them about difficult matters than my therapist. There is no one who understands this better than them. Sometimes I feel that I've exhausted myself and then I really need to take a break from everything. Then I go to the gym or to my summer cabin. I sleep badly if I don't go to the gym because then I'm in so much pain from fibromyalgia. When my gym shut down in covid I started working out at home. That helped me to function better and made my work in the organization more manageable."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: Gender based violence, intimate partner violence, violence against children, NGOs, activism, care work.

IS07

Title: 32 year old married woman, recently had her first child, went into burn-out due to

covid.

Narrative: "I'm a 32 year old woman and a nurse with additional education in oncology nursing. I've worked in the blood and oncology ward at the National University Hospital of Iceland since 2014. I'm married and we have a daughter together. She just turned two years old. I'm interested in everything related to health and fitness.

I got pregnant in December 2019 and around the same time I was asked to become the assistant administrator/manager of my ward. I had been a manager for a short period when covid started. Our patients are a sensitive of immunosuppressive group and it so happens that my husband suffers also from a disease that makes him immunocompromised. He has a disease which he has to take immunosuppressive drugs for. In the beginning we didn't know how our patients and pregnant women would handle getting covid so there was a lot of stress and uncertainty. It felt like dodging a bullet trying to avoid my husband and patients from getting covid. We couldn't draw on any previous experience because this was unprecedented.

I had to quarantine early on and back then you had to quarantine for at least two weeks. Everything felt really stressful and there was so much fear going on, both at work and at home. My husband was immediately ordered to isolate himself (protective quarantine) so he couldn't go out. It didn't make a lot of sense that we were quarantining together but we didn't have any other choice.

The workload as an administrator was massive, there was constantly someone ringing and notifying me that this and that staff member couldn't come to work due to covid related instances. Often some staff members were away for over a month. That was very demanding and the labor shortage was enormous. I was responsible for organising the shifts and I was being called day and night, letting me know that people were needed on shifts. The rules regarding our patients and the whole quarantine process were constantly being changed which added to my workload. I quickly got stress related and physical symptoms because I was working too much while pregnant. I should have cut back on work but it was impossible as I was the one in charge. I found it surreal that I was planning for other pregnant colleagues to cut back on work, while it was completely out of the question for me. If I wanted to cut down to 70% work, I had to find someone else to work the other 30%. It ended in me going on a sick leave when I was 30 weeks along. At that time I had severe pelvic pain and premature aches, all pointing to and threatening a premature birth. That period (the sick leave) was also very difficult as I was very careful not to get covid so that my partner could be present at the birth. I was also afraid that my husband would get covid because at that time people with covid were being emitted to the ICU.

I gave birth in September 2020 and that was a rather traumatic experience for me. I think covid added stress to my situation which made everything a bit worse and I got postpartum depression as a result. I think it all played together, the fact that I had a difficult time before the birth and then everything became much more difficult

afterwards. My daughter was born in the third wave of covid so we weren't allowed any visitors. This was very trying and socially isolating. Breastfeeding was going badly but I couldn't get any lactation consultant because no one wanted to come to our house. My baby is and was a restless child and I couldn't sleep so it was recommended that we get someone to look after her during the night. That wasn't possible because of covid. My mom came over for one night but it turned out that she had been in contact with a sick person so that didn't work. In the end my mother in law decided to self isolate so she could help us out. She ended up staying with us for a whole week. I always had to go alone with my child to every appointment, which in retrospect was not ok not responsible as I was so depressed and far down. When my baby was one and half weeks old I tried to have myself committed to the psychiatric ward. This was mainly because I could not sleep and I haven't slept for a long time. The covid rules at the ward did not allow my child to come with me so I decided to skip it.

When the third wave went down a little, I received some psychological services at my local health care center. That service was fragmented because there was always some cancellation or delay caused by covid. Then I thought why bother, it took so much willpower to seek help and when I couldn't get any I kind of gave up. It was hard enough getting out of bed in the morning. I got however some psychotherapy during my daughter's first year and then I was diagnosed with PTSD. I started working again when she was 11 months old. Then covid was still a problem at the hospital but everything had become much more manageable. We had learned from the experience and knew better how to handle things. Everyone was kind of getting used to existing with covid instead of trying to avoid it. I got an extension to my maternity leave, so I was only working part-time in the fall of 2021. The last spring I burned out and have been in vocational rehabilitation ever since. I think that everything that happened to me is connected and I don't think any of this would have happened if it wasn't for Covid. If I had been in a different job and e.g. working from home, I would be in a better place today. If the situation at my workplace had been different and less stressful and more understanding from my superiors, I'm sure nothing like this would have happened. I'm still to this day dealing with the stress that came with covid.

What kept me going through this difficult time was mostly the fact that I am a resilient person and I have a good support system from the ones closest to me. Although they could not be physically there with me, I used the technology to hear and see them everyday. I tried to seek out as much social stimulation as I could and I didn't stop trying to get help and solutions. The lesson I draw from all this is that we are social beings and we need to connect and belong to others. I was so isolated the last two years and it caused me a lot of."

Specifically telling quotes: "everything at work felt so heavy and hard, the stakes were so high."

"It felt like dodging a bullet making sure my husband didnt get covid"

"I should have cut back on work but it was impossible. I found it surreal that I was planning for other pregnant colleagues to cut back on work, while it was completely out of the question for me."

"I think covid added stress to my situation which made everything a bit worse and I got postpartum depression as a result."

Keywords: Health care worker, nurse, maternity leave, mental health, postpartum depression, PTSD, burnout, lack of support, lack of health care services, immunosuppressive, social isolation.

IS08

Title: A Syrian young woman, fled her home country back in 2016, starting a new life in Iceland.

Narrative: "My name is Aria, I come from Syria and I'm 23 years old. I came as a refugee to Iceland two years ago. Before that I was in Greece for three years. I went from Turkey to Greece and then finally to Iceland. First I stayed in a hotel in the outskirts of Reykjavík for one month and after I got an Icelandic ID, I moved to the place where I'm living now. I have a big family, we are 12 members plus my grandma and everyone is now here in Iceland. I took two courses in Icelandic because I wanted to improve my language skills and now I'm studying in a high school. This is something that's important to me to continue with my studies since for the last few years that hasn't been possible for me. My hope is when I finish high school I can go to university. I'm interested in cinematography and I want to learn cinematography one day in university."

Covid hasn't affected my life too much. I didn't do anything in Greece, I didn't have a job and I wasn't allowed to study, I just stayed at home. I watched movies to practice my English. When I arrived in Iceland the pandemic was still going on but I could go to my courses, I just had to wear a mask. I'm really happy that I'm in Iceland now and get to continue my studies.

In Greece it was another story, I had so much trouble finding a job or getting any education. There were always some papers missing and it was difficult to get the right information from the authorities. Me and my family could really sense that they didn't want us there. I wear a hijab and I could really feel other people staring at me in a bad way. When I rode the bus I stopped sitting down and I would always stand to get away from those angry looks.

My family fled Syria back in 2016 and we went to Turkey. The journey there was so difficult and we had to split up in small groups because we were so many. We were four siblings trying to enter the country and the third time we finally got in. The Turkish police treated us so badly, they even pointed a gun towards my brother's head as a joke. We

stayed in Turkey for a little more than a year. My siblings and I wanted to continue our studies but my father and older brothers were the only ones who could find a job and they worked like animals. They worked from 8 in the morning to 8 in the evening all day, often without getting paid. That's why our father decided there was no future for us in Turkey and we left.

When we arrived in Greece the police picked us up and we had to sit on the floor for many hours without getting any water or anything. Everything was so chaotic and we didn't get any help or information. They just told us to find a place to stay. We just sat on the ground and tried to find shelter. For one week we stayed on the ground at the camp without any tent or anything to shelter us. Finally my brother's friend offered us his tent and we stayed there for two weeks. After that we got ID's and permission to move to Athens, everyone except my three oldest brothers. Once my fathers ID expired we moved to Iceland but my three older brothers weren't allowed to come with us. Finally a year ago we were all reunited.

My stepmom was the only one who caught covid and she was sick for a week. Everyone else was healthy and strong. All my family had to quarantine together and it was fine. We like spending time together, drinking tea and chatting and laughing. It reminds me of the good time in Syria before the war broke out. I didn't get vaccinated because I have a needle phobia (back in Syria I had an accident and I had to get so many shots that I developed this fear of needles). Instead I try my hardest to make sure to always wear a mask and wash my hands to protect others.

It's hard for me to share our story because we have had a hard life. I also thought that nobody would want to listen to our story and didn't want to bother anyone. While we were on the run, I tried to learn everything I could during this difficult time. I listened to everyone around me, asked a lot of questions and I learned a lot from my older brothers. My teacher asked my class the other day if we loved to travel and I answered no and everyone was so surprised. They don't know what I went through and don't understand that I never want to travel again. For me traveling is not something enjoyable but a hard traumatizing thing. One of my goal now is to give back and help others in the similar situations.

I'm very happy about my situation today. I want to continue my studies and give back to the community. I'm aware of the talk in Iceland about refugees coming here to take away the jobs and living of the system. For me and my family it's important to help and give back as much as we can, we want to work and be of use. The other day we heard about an Iranian family being denied residence permit and sent back to Greece. One of the girls of that family was in my class and we have been in contact. My family really wanted to help them so we have been sending them money and doing whatever we can to help. I'm glad that I'm a part of a big family and we all help each other out. We are also very lucky to have great neighbors who have helped us out a lot and are always willing to assist in any way."

Specifically telling quotes: "I came as a refugee to Iceland two years ago"

"I didn't do anything in Greece, I didn't have a job and I wasn't allowed to study"
"I wear a hijab and I could really feel other people staring at me in a bad way"
"The police treated us so badly, they even pointed a gun towards my brother's head"

Keywords: Syria, civil war, refugee, lack of resources, human right violations, education, violence, hope

IS09

Title: 24 year old non-binary high school teacher and an activist

Narrative: "I'm 24 years old and I work as a high school teacher. I teach mathematics. I'm non-binary and I go by they/them. When the pandemic hit I had been out for some time and was well established in my (queer) community which proved to be beneficial for me since I had my relations there throughout the pandemic. I have no children, I'm single and I do a lot of volunteer work, mostly for the national queer organisation of Iceland.

I spend most of my spare time on activism and fighting for human rights, especially for non-binary people. I realize that it is a great privilege to be able to do it, such as having time and financial security, and I am taken fairly seriously because this is the only minority group I belong to. I'm white, young and well educated and thus fit well into the Icelandic community. By being prominent in the discussion, I can act as if there is a purpose in the adversity and harassment I experience. If I spend my time educating and fighting for a better world I find purpose and a piece of mind in the adversity. I would have thought that the adversity and aggression against non-binary would have gone down with the pandemic but that has not been the case. The society totally moved away from the discussion about queer people and all the focus move to health related topics.

All government actions in the pandemic were executed based on gender binary. For example, everything regarding vaccinations was based on the two genders and all data published also. That was a strong confirmation that we as society have not come that far. There wasn't much thought about diversity. Now that it has become clear how bad the backlash is elsewhere, I feel ok about our government. The backlash is bad for trans people and non-binary in general and is also present here but in smaller size. Children and young people are those that are mainly affected by the backlash here in Iceland and also the most marginalized groups like queer/disabled immigrants and sex workers. The backlash isn't affecting the larger less vulnerable group (which is the group with most privileges, like cis queer people) as much and therefore people think that is not so bad. This doesn't affect me either or not as much as others around me. I can still go wherever I want whereas most trans kids have a hard time going to school and taking the bus. The government is aware of this issue and are now trying to act on this whereas when we were in the middle of the pandemic nothing was being done.

It is often trouble- and tiresome for trans people to go into the healthcare system knowing that the staff is often not aware or educated in these matters. This was especially evident during the pandemic. It's a lot of strain associated with walking into an organization where you know people are going to misunderstand you. There you can't e.g. use the appropriate bathrooms or get the appropriate service that you need. It has long been a problem that health professionals are not educated in the queerness of others but that problem grew a lot in covid. I understand that during these unprecedented times that health care staff do not have the time or recourse to educate themselves in these matters (e.g. using the right pronouns) but it still sucks.

The secondary effect from the pandemic are affecting queer and non-binary people the most. All waiting lists were put on hold and only necessary surgeries were performed meaning that no gender reassignment surgeries were done since they are categorized as optional. There was a huge surge of requests for the trans team at the hospital right after covid. People had been stuck at home for over a year, contemplating who they were and why they felt bad in their own skin. Also as soon as you are taken out of the gender system, which we all have to fit into, then you get a certain amount of freedom to ask yourself serious questions. Covid gave queer people a much needed break from a troublesome and heavy gender system. This was interesting to watch because the landscape changed a lot as a result of covid and people who would normally take longer to come out were doing that quicker. Also more and more young kids are coming out sooner than before. This is of course also due to more open discussion in the society but also from the fact that those children were often locked up at home watching videos and getting information online. The pandemic pushed those people to go examine their lives and made them realize that this life is short so it's better to live it in their truest form.

The world that these children and young people are coming out in is worse than before the pandemic. Prejudice has increased in our society and the waiting lists in the healthcare system have never been longer. The trans team at the hospital wasn't ready for this increased demand, even though there were signs early on that this would happen. The trans team is also very underfunded and no trans person is working there, only health care professionals. During covid they adopted some new ways of reaching out to the doctors which was supposed to make it easier to reach out and get answers but the opposite happened. Now it's so much more difficult and it feels a bit like they are using covid as an excuse for not being available.

We have also noticed this wave of people coming out at the organization. Before the pandemic we would have support meetings for trans people and no one would show up and now so many people want to join.

Even though it's good that life is getting back to normal I don't think that trans and non-binary people can just go about their lives like others do. We often hear that Iceland is the leading country for all human rights and that so much has been done already that enough is enough. This view is limited, dangerous and makes way for prejudice."

Specifically telling quotes: "The pandemic pushed people to go examine their lives

and made them realize that this life is short so it's better to live it in their truest form”.

“I can act as if there is a purpose in the adversity and harassment I experience if I spend my time educating and fighting for a better world vs. if I didn't.”

“Covid gave queer people a much needed break from a troublesome and heavy gender system”.

Keywords: Queer, non-binary, trans, the national queer organisation, activism, backlash, prejudice, health care, waiting lists, government's inactions

IS10

Title: 23 year old non-binary person that recently graduated university.

Narrative: “I'm 23 years old non-binary person and I go by they/them. I came out about five years ago. I finished my bachelors degree in physics last autumn. I live alone in my own apartment but throughout the pandemic I lived with my parents before moving to a student housing. I come from an educated household, both my parents have a higher education and both work in the health care sector. Therefore I grew up with a lot of security, both financially and socially but also with certain educational expectations.

For me personally getting through covid meant I didn't attend to my studies, I just put it on hold and that was a huge relief. I learned a lot about self-care and I got better at being alone. The situation pushed me and my parents to work on our relationship because we were forced to be together. There were a lot of unaddressed feelings and issues from when I came out as non-binary that we finally tackled. I had often felt hurt in their treatment of me but I had never had the guts to talk about. At first it was hard and challenging but as time went on it got better and we managed to solve a lot of issues. The main reason I moved out from my parents house was how hard it was to be locked up together, I had to get away. Now looking back I'm grateful for that time and how we managed to talk through difficult things and today our relationship is really good and solid. I also realized recently how much I depend upon them to help me understand things. I really wanted to understand what was going on with the whole pandemic and since my mom is a doctor I could just ask her because she knew what was going on. My father is a psychologist and it was interesting to see how psychology played a huge part in the epidemic. It gave me reassurance knowing that everyone was kind of struggling and not just me. Society is apparently always a bit on the edge and then it takes just a little something to rock the boat and then everything goes to hell.

I got to know the dark side of the pandemic through my father's work. He works a lot with perpetrators of violence and told me about the surge in increased incidence of domestic violence and all kinds of violence. So very early on I was aware of how broadly and largely this pandemic would affect us. I also noticed how everyone around me who

were in university or high school had difficulties keeping up with the school work and so many dropped out. I understand it so well as I did the same thing with my studies (postponed it). I'm happy that I was in university when the pandemic hit because I'm sure the effects would have been much more serious if I had been younger (and e.g. in high-school). I think one of the main reasons for the backlash that we are witnessing is the fact that so many teenagers were not able to attend school like before and so these kids spent so much more time on the internet (like on TikTok and YouTube) where they are exposed to all kinds of bad and hateful content. There they soak in all kinds of things that they are not equipped to deal with and have no one to guide them through as we that are older have no clue what's going on.

I have been going to therapy ever since I was young and I continued seeing my therapist online throughout the pandemic. That helped a lot. I attended online support meetings at the queer association and that became a regular thing in covid. I had gone to meetings before covid but started doing it more frequently in the last two years. It helps me so much and it's also so much better now than before because now there are a lot more non-binary people that I can relate to. In these meetings the atmosphere is often heavy and emotional, we tackle the big issues and share our feelings and it's so good connecting with others in that way. I recently started working as an educator for the association and I really like doing that. I can feel that it strengthens me as a person and gives me more self confidence. Working for the association has also paved my way into more activism and now I'm a member of the board."

Specifically telling quotes: "getting through covid meant I didn't attend to my studies, I just put it on hold and that was a huge relief. I learned a lot about self-care and I got better at being alone".

"The situation pushed me and my parents to work on our relationship because we were forced to be together. "

"Society is apparently always a bit on the edge and then it takes just a little something to rock the boat and then everything goes to hell".

Keywords: Queer, non-binary, trans, backlash, family, family struggles, well-being, self-care, university, drop-outs.

Italy

IT01

Title: I still believe in getting organised, but many no longer do

Narrative: "I am a woman and I will be 65 years old in a few days. At home with me lives a son with a severe disability (autism) and a husband who has also developed a disability with age.

Until the arrival of Covid 19, my life was supported by a series of routines (work, gym, dinners with friends) that allowed me to cope with my son's severe mental disability while also safeguarding my own well-being.

With the arrival of Covid-19, my routine completely collapsed. My life suddenly exploded and the management of my son fell solely on me.

Despite all these difficulties, I managed to cope. Firstly, thanks to my job, which I never gave up, unlike other women who chose to devote themselves completely to looking after the family. Secondly, I was sustained by the thought of what good things the future might hold for me. We all thought it was time to rebuild our world, to make it better, with a new awareness and a strong desire to start again.

However, little by little, I realised that there was not so much enthusiasm around me, even within the association that - together with other parents of disabled children - we have been running for 10 years. Before the pandemic we were expanding, we had many projects we were working on.

Whereas now... Something seems to have broken with the arrival of Covid-19.

I give an example. Disabled children who have finished public school (aged 18 and above) can go to a day centre and do activities with each other and with social workers. Generally, the day centre is open three times a week and on Saturday mornings. As an association, we have started to plan activities on the days not covered by the day care centre, in a structural way, by carrying out different types of workshops.

It is turning out to be a difficult undertaking, I realise that the other members do not follow me, they no longer have any interest or desire.

In my opinion, this can be attributed to several factors.

Firstly, during the Covid-19 crisis, individualism was exacerbated, familism intensified and women were called upon to take care of the house and children. Fortunately, I kept my job, albeit with all the difficulties. And this allowed me to 'stay out' of the house. And when you are outside, when you are in contact with other people, it is easier to get organised. Whereas from home it is much more difficult to do so.

Besides, I am old, but I see that I cannot count on young mothers to take over the

management of the association. They are not very interested.

As a matter of fact, I recognise that the system pushes you to stay at home. 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. And the funds will be less and less because new crises, new vulnerabilities arrive. With the limited budgets that governments make available today, one cannot hope to find truly satisfactory services outside the home, even in the most basic services (cleanliness of the toilets and quality of lunch at the day care centre).

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.

Among mothers, on the other hand, we at least try to be together and enjoy some free time. On Wednesdays sometimes we all go to lunch together. We chat, we support each other and sometimes we stay longer than we should.

So now I have to just make do with that. Although I would like to do much more."

Specifically telling quotes: "My job has kept me active, it allows me to get out of the house, to engage in something other than caring."

"During Covid-19, the women stayed at home, but this then also had repercussions on the association, for example: the desire to succeed in regrouping became all effort, extra effort."

"Whereas before I could also speak using a we. Now and I have to use an I" "

Keywords: Familism, disability, care gap, work, association, scarce public funds, fatigue, distrust.

IT02

Title: Story of a man who has faith in God, in himself and in others.

Narrative: "My name is Andy, I am a 37-year-old man, born in Nigeria. I am a Protestant

priest who fled my country. I left because I was running away from Boko Haram terrorists, who burnt down my church and threatened me with death. I left my wife and two children, who are now hiding in a village in the northeast of the country. After a long journey and several months in Libya, I finally arrived in Italy in 2017. I was transferred to a refugee centre, a former hotel adapted for this purpose. I lived there for almost four years.

The situation in that centre was very difficult, even before Covid-19. The living conditions were rough. Men, women and children lived crammed next to each other, with few facilities, and no privacy. In a small space, people of different cultures and religions were forced to live together. At least before the pandemic we could leave the camp and stay in the city during the day. But then came the Covid-19 danger, the lockdown and the impossibility of going out. A terrible time. For me, the daily survival strategy was to scrupulously follow all government guidelines because I was afraid, afraid of getting sick.

On the positive side, during those months, I finally received temporary permission from the Court to move freely in Italy. Therefore, when the Government lifted the restrictions, in May 2020, I immediately left the migrant centre.

I arrived in this village, where my sister lives. She took me in. She is a very wise woman. She 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.

Fortunately, the Italian government did a lot to help people, for the immigrants and for the country in general. For example, by giving assistance to tenants to recover unpaid rents, my sister did not have to pay for housing, at least for a while.

After the second lockdown, I started begging in front of the supermarket. For more than a year, every day.

Then one day, while there, an Italian man saw me, approached me and asked if I wanted to work with him. For a while I helped him with some tasks in his house. He enquired the accountant about issuing a regular contract for me but the cost and fees for him would have been high. So I continued working informally for a while.

However, I still needed a real contract not to be kicked off from Italy. So he turned to a friend of his, who has a bigger company with more business. This guy finally hired me, legally. For now, I am safe, I no longer risk expulsion from the country, and I am free from hunger. I was lucky, it was God who made it possible for me to find a job.

In Italy there is not much work compared to other countries, it is difficult to find a job. However, there are many migrants, twice as many as in other countries. Firstly because of its location, in the centre of Europe. Secondly, Italians are very hospitable, they welcome us, they have a Christian mentality, they are compassionate people. They offered me food and support during the pandemic and offered money while I was begging. While in other countries, for example, it is even forbidden to stay in front of the supermarket. Although sometimes this activity is the only way to get at least 4-5 euro a day, to put a meal together.

Do I have a community? Well, yes. I... I am a priest in a church near here, where most of migrant families live. Every Sunday I celebrate service, there are about 30-40 people attending, migrants mainly, from different countries. In the church we also have groups: women's group, men's group, youth group. We meet regularly, we discuss on different topics and support each other.

In the men's group I give advice and they follow me. I advise them to respect the people they meet in the city and to respect the law. We talk about our well-being and that of the people around us, about how-to live-in harmony with the local community. Our relatives, our children are not here and may never join us. However, we can treat the people we meet as if they were our relatives. And behave with respect because everyone wants respect."

Specifically telling quotes: "I was lucky, it was God who made it possible for me to find a job."

"We talk about our well-being and that of the people around us, about how-to live-in harmony with others."

"I sometimes find difficult to manage the man's group. Everyone there has their own intellectual independence and would like to express their ideas. But people's ideas are often in disagreement. But do you know what a good leader does? He listens to everyone's opinions, tolerates them and is humble."

Keywords: migration, hunger, faith, relationships, regular work, church

IT03

Title: Loneliness of an elderly woman during the pandemic

Narrative: "My name is Adele, I am an 80-year-old woman, a widow. At the beginning of 2020, the year of Covid-19, I was in the hospital to care for my husband, who was ill. Then the hospital had to release him because there was nothing more to be done. So when the government established the lockdown, the two of us were at home. My husband, in that situation, and I. Closed and isolated, with our two sons far away.

Luckily we had the hospice at home, a service activated during the pandemic for people suffering from terminal illnesses. Every day, nurses, doctors, and physiotherapists came, they brought what was needed, and they cared for him. They took care of him until he died. I just had to manage things around the house.

Then summer came and there was a breath of fresh air. In June, when my husband died, we were even able to hold a church funeral. In July and August, things were difficult, but at least I could be with relatives. Then, in September, everyone locked in the house. What worried me the least was Covid-19, I was never afraid, I always observed the recommendations, the masks, and the hand washing.

However, I was recovering from this blow, from the loss. I was experiencing loneliness, and sadness. I was always hoping that someone would come to keep me company. In particular, a sister I have in Florence, but she never came.

The neighbourhood was really good, the neighbours were very friendly to me. After my husband died, despite the fear of contagion, they often came knocking on my door to ask how I was.

In the building there are two staircases and about 60 doors. Not all of them are inhabited. Some families have lived there for a long time and raised their children together. There is a friendly atmosphere. In the beginning, we always wore masks in the lift. Then, after a while, we got carried away. I, for example, went to play burraco with a lady. After my husband died, every day. Now we've loosened up, but we still see each other regularly. She always wins.

With another lady, we have another habit, which started during the Covid. On Tuesdays, we go to a distant supermarket for discount day. We go together in her car.

Then there are three or four other friends, also of the same age, who knock on my door to give me the news about who is ill, about events in the building, etc.

We are all old, in our eighties. Even though we are old, we still manage to get by, we have a pension, we have children who have graduated, many are doctors, lawyers, etc. So we are comfortable. Money will not bring happiness, in short, but it solves many problems!

Today my goal in life is my family, my son and my grandson especially, who is 15 years old. Now we see each other every Sunday. Then by phone, every day a couple of times. And when I can, I help him with school."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: old age, family, mourning, neighbourhood, play cards, building

IT04

Title: Getting out of a problematic situation by seeking professional help, continuing her studies and pursuing her economic independence.

Narrative: "I am Giulia, I am 23 years old, I am Italian, I live with my family. At home we are 8 people. Since I was a child I have always enjoyed reading and writing. I am currently attending a Master's degree in Modern Languages and Literature. Before Covid, I had an intense life made up of courses at university, exams and a thousand other interests (journalism, volunteering), my friends, my boyfriend. Relationships with my family were and are quite problematic.

When the pandemic started, in February 2020, I was living from day to day, based on the news I read, hoping it would all end as soon as possible. Then the fear started, for me, for my family, for my boyfriend and my friends. And I found myself at home, unable to go out, together with the rest of my family, who did not want me to go out even to go shopping. In that first period, I had to study for exams and the completion of my bachelor's degree and this partly distracted me. The more time I spent inside the house - and a lot in my room - the more I saw myself with no way out, no energy; it was difficult to maintain concentration; I experienced great difficulty in studying and doing things; I had low self-esteem. I had set myself the goal of learning a second language and learning to sew, but this was impossible. I could see what I had built up to that point crumbling. My only entertainment from time to time was cooking and sharing what I had prepared and reading books. Then in June 2020, when it was starting to open up around me again, I took Covid with my whole family and some relatives. My mum ended up in hospital; an aunt in intensive care. At the same time, my grandfather died, with whom I had a special relationship. The relationship with some of my friends and with my boyfriend, to whom I tried to ask for help and who were close to me, was important. My family were no help to me. During the summer, I went out with a thousand precautions. Around September/October, I realised that I could not do it alone and that I needed expert help. I started looking for a psychotherapist, which I eventually found thanks to a friend. I started psychotherapy in November 2020 and am still continuing it at my own expense. My family does not know. In order to pay for psychotherapy, I looked for odd jobs and sources of income (tutoring, babysitting, etc.) When the academic year resumed, despite many difficulties, I started attending classes at the university again (even when there were very few students present). I needed to go and be in those places that had been important to me, to get out of the house, and that is why I always booked myself into the in-presence classes, with a mask and all the necessary precautions, even if there was a certain amount of guilt among us students. But I didn't care. Every time I went out my parents got alarmed. With the second wave I got the Covid again, in a less mild form than the first time, and I obviously had to stay locked in my room; I had my own bathroom. After that, slowly, thanks to psychotherapy, the support I received from some close friends, my boyfriend and some other persons, I am recovering. Now I am studying for my master's degree; I have resumed some of my interests and voluntary activities (journalism). I have a library grant, and one morning a week I work as a secretary in a doctor's office, I do tutoring. I am still continuing on my path, but now I feel stronger, because I am slowly seeing the results of the great work I have done. I know that it takes time, that changes take many small steps. I would like to be independent from my family,

to live alone, maybe in another city; I would like to work in the school.”

Specifically telling quotes: “At the beginning I lived it by the day, then a slightly darker outlook took over, I started to feel much more afraid. To such an extent that I found it much more difficult to do things that used to come naturally to me, such as studying. (...)”

“So I asked for help from the people around me, from those closest to me, from friends, from my boyfriend, and above all from professionals, and I started a psychotherapy course that I am still following today and which has been salvific in every sense.”

“The first thing that comes to mind, which was very important and which is the path I am still following now, was to ask for help.”

Keywords: fear, forced loneliness, asking for help, economic independence, 'place' strategy, friendship

IT05

Title: A lone migrant woman with two children managed to find a job that allowed her to reconcile work and family.

Narrative: “I am Rima, I am a mother of two children aged 9 and 7; I arrived in Italy in 2012 from Bangladesh together with my husband. In 2018 I ran away from my husband because he kept me locked in the house, I could not go out, I could not work and he did not want to send the children to kindergarten. I was living in a room, in a flat with other people I didn't like. My ex-husband was going with other women. I spent a year in an anti-violence centre and then ended up in a family home in early 2020. I tried to learn Italian and find a job. Thanks to a project of the family home, I did a three-month internship in a supermarket. I continued working at that supermarket, but because it was far away, I had difficulty reconciling shifts with childcare. So I went to work at another supermarket closer to home. In 2020, the family home helped me take care of the children while I was at work. At the end of 2020, since I was now working, I moved to a semi-care facility. I hired a baby sitter so that I could take care of the children. The family home also helped me from time to time. At this new supermarket I had a first fixed-term contract and then a one-month renewal. But the supermarket managers treated me badly when I asked to be absent to look after the children (preventive quarantines, medical examinations, Covid-19 tests). I showed them the law that allowed me to do so, but they told me that the supermarket could not close to attend to my needs. I went to work using masks and all precautions, unlike many of my work colleagues. Almost at the end of the contract extension, I took Covid-19, then my children. I was very sick; I was positive for 21 days. From the family home they brought me groceries; some friends asked me how it was going. My son was very sick, he wasn't breathing: I had to call the ambulance, but they wanted to take him to a distant hospital and I refused. The

pediatrician made a video call to me and explained how to handle the situation. The pediatrician was very helpful. I informed the employer. But he fired me. I spent a lot of money on Covid-19 tests; I had a lot of difficulty finding reachable places to take them. At the same time, while my eldest daughter was able to attend classes remotely, my son, who was in the first grade, had many difficulties.

As for me, I continued with my job search. I looked in the supermarket sector, but the shifts didn't fit in with childcare. After a month I found a family who, after a three-week trial period, gave me a contract for a 35-hour job from Monday to Friday. I even asked for a raise since at the beginning I only had to take care of one child and now there are three. But she has no intention of giving it to me.

In addition to studying Italian, I am looking for a house to live in (if possible in the area); getting a driving license and trying to work longer hours to get a car and to allow my children attend Karate and an English course. Then maybe in a year's time I'll go back to work in a supermarket when my children are older."

Specifically telling quotes: "Every day I went to work and I always looked at the warnings on the school chat, I was afraid that someone had taken Covid-19, that the child would have to be in isolation. What was I going to do with the job?"

" I tried with supermarkets, but I saw that they were always asking me to work shifts, Saturdays and Sundays. When I went for interviews they asked me if I had a husband, how I managed with the children alone at night, because of the problems with school and during the isolation, how you managed to organise yourself. After all these questions I decided that maybe this area of work was no longer suitable for me".

"I started looking for a baby-sitter job, trying to get hired by someone who had children and a family. Maybe a lady who has children can understand my situation, but a supermarket cannot."

Keywords: single mother, loneliness, anger, work, rights, respect, school, legality, responsibility, autonomy, determination, justice

IT06

Title:

Narrative: "I am a 57-year-old woman. I am a civil servant, I work as a concierge in the building that houses some municipal offices.

My life has been difficult, even before Covid-19. I had cancer 15 years ago, but I got over it. I went through treatment and recovered. At first, it was hard to accept my status as a sick person, I never even told my family. Fortunately, my friends gave me a hand,

accompanied me to treatment and supported me on the road to recovery.

Having gone through this illness changed me, I became more willing to help others and I became stronger.

In fact, when the pandemic came, I had no major problems, not even during the lockdown. I live alone, I am used to spending a lot of time with myself. Moreover, at work, office activities never stopped; therefore, I continued to work in attendance every day.

In the hospital or in public environments I was very careful, I wore masks, I respected the distance. In the office I felt quite protected.

My colleagues and I used masks all the time. Users came in by appointment, also with safety devices. In addition, my manager had arranged for us all to take Covid-19 tests when a case occurred within the facility.

Of course, I have to admit that I had many discussions, both with colleagues and users at that time. Some users, for example, demanded to enter without a mask, or did not want to show the papers required to enter the building (self-declarations). Some colleagues, on the other hand, said they were afraid of getting the vaccine injected, while I took all four recommended doses. I have never had any hesitation about vaccination. Maybe it's because I have been through so many treatments before.

What I noticed, during the pandemic, was the detachment of colleagues. After the arrival of Covid-19, people seem to avoid me. I used to consider some people to be my friends, but now I perceive mistrust from them. Sometimes, I approach coworkers to ask about work-related things and they get angry: 'Do you have to ask me?! Ask someone else!'

We no longer share things with each other, it seems as if we are quite distant. The other day a colleague of mine hurt me, I thought she was a friend of mine and instead she gave me a nasty reply, she said "Leave me alone, I'm in a bad mood today!" I went to a corner and started crying. I wouldn't have expected this from her.

Also, I heard today that there are two Covid cases in the offices. But no one came to tell me directly. I found out because as I walked into a room I heard some colleagues talking about it. I see them chatting, whispering among themselves. But they tell me nothing, they leave me in the dark, among my doubts and suppositions. Before Covid-19 there wasn't so much mistrust, now I feel people have changed. Even with regard to solidarity actions, I think people have become colder."

Specifically telling quotes: "I am one of the lucky ones who has always sought and obtained work. Even far from where I live, I have understood that work must always be accepted, honoured and respected. Even if it is a short contract, you never know if three months can turn into six or even more."

Keywords: Disability, colleagues, work, distrust, detachment.

IT07

Title: I have been stateless all my life but I keep waiting to find my (work) place

Narrative: “My name is Boris, I am 43 years old, I have lived in Italy since I was 5. I was born in Macedonia, but I have no nationality, I am stateless.

When Covid-19 came, initially I was confident, I saw that the government would manage things to get through that period. I tried to organise myself, to pass the time with little housework, I would go and collect wood for heating.

For me, the lockdown was partly positive, because I could spend more time with my partner. On the other hand, it was rather negative for work. Since I could not go out, I had no way of earning money with petty jobs or begging.

Because of the many restrictions and the lack of income, my partner and I turned to the social services of the municipality. I must say that we received a lot of help, like vouchers for groceries or direct money to pay for medicines, for example. Not only me, my brother and my brother's family also received a lot of help. There were people who supported us and understood our difficulties without slamming the door in our faces. I was really impressed by the attention with which the lady director of social services welcomed and helped us. She took care of us. She even got me an electronic identity card, without me paying anything.

Furthermore, in 2021, the same social services of the municipality called me back and offered me the opportunity to work in community service, as a gardener. At first, the contract was only for six months, but then there were extensions and so I worked for almost a year. At the time I was paid EUR 600 per month.

I worked until the middle of August when I felt sick in the workplace. I had a stomach problem, an ongoing hemorrhage, so I was transferred to another hospital and started transfusions and then an operation. The doctors and nurses always treated me well, helped me and respected me.

From then on, other problems started for me. I needed medicines, treatment and a GP. But without a regular residence permit I lost the right to have one. I applied for the renewal of my residence permit, but I have not received it yet, I have been waiting for it for a year and a half. They make me go from one office to another, but no one gives me an answer, a certainty. I have the receipt of the application with me. But it is not enough to request a general practitioner. Therefore, I have to pay for a private visit each time. To be honest, I usually go to a doctor at the hospital, who helps me and gives me prescriptions as if she was my doctor. But when I go to the pharmacy, I don't have money to pay for the medicines.

For me Covid-19 period has been quite positive. I feel that people in need in the community have received a lot of help, much more than before. Also, thanks to working in community service, I discovered a passion. I used to be a gardener and this is a job I would like to continue doing. I keep asking friends to involve me in working with them.

I don't want to beg or steal. I need to find a job, because as soon as I have a contract - as the public lawyer who is following my case is telling me - I will be able to start the paperwork to apply for Italian citizenship. At that point, I will have access to many more services, including health services that I might need in the future. For now I have contacted a building company, they told me that as soon as I will have my residence permit again they will give me a contract.

I therefore keep on waiting..."

Specifically telling quotes: "There are some people who have helped me a lot, I must say."

"Although late, I knew that help would come. Patience always helps."

"At the hospital, they treated me with velvet gloves."

"The woman in charge of social services always helped me. Once, however, I asked the mayor directly. He replied with scorn: "I am not a bank!"

Keywords: Roma, stateless, poverty, basic needs, community services, work, access to health

IT08

Title: How the support of an organisation (in this case a religious one) helped a young person in difficulty to find his way

Narrative: "I am a 27-year-old man from a city in southern Italy. I had problems with my family of origin. I was first hosted in a family-home in a small town and finally I moved to this bigger city. At first I lived alone because I wanted my autonomy. My plan was to look for a job. In the meantime, I was taking citizenship income plus 300 euro from a charity organisation. However, all the money went to pay rent and bills and I had nothing left to buy groceries or meet other basic needs.

In the first months of the pandemic, I felt very lonely. I spent my days watching television, calling friends and looking for work, either by leaving the house or on the Internet. However, I was afraid to go out and meet the police. Once I was stopped and treated badly, arrogantly, while I was with some friends. We were not wearing masks and they told us that we could not gather like that. They had a threatening attitude. The municipal

police gave me a fine which I tore up and did not pay: I felt it was unfair treatment. Moreover, I wouldn't have known how to pay for it. I really needed a job.

A friend introduced me to the pastor of the church. The parish organisation that helps people in need referred me to the solidarity emporium. Thanks to them I found work in two families as a domestic helper. They paid me very little, though. The parish organisation, in July 2021, offered and paid for me a course to become a Health Care Assistant. It is a field of work that I have always enjoyed. The course also gave me the opportunity to talk to and get to know other people and expand my personal and professional network.

Therefore, in 2021 I took this course during the day and worked as a domestic worker in a lady's house at night (she is independent, but I assist her if she needs anything). Now I still live with her (I am like one of the family) and I am employed as social worker in a facility. I like this job, although there are often discussions with colleagues and staff.

Regarding the psychological aspect, I am an anxious person and during the pandemic I felt I needed psychological support. In June 2020, thanks to the parish organisation, I started a psychology course which now has ended; I think I will take it again in the near future. In the future, I would also like to move out on my own and continue to work as a Health Care Assistant, I enjoy this role.

The help of some people was crucial for me during the pandemic crisis: my friends, the psychologist and people from the parish organisation."

Specifically telling quotes: "During the pandemic, it was really bad! I was locked in the house, having no social life. We all had to stay at home. You couldn't even go out for a walk, and for people who suffer a little bit from depression, it goes a little bit to accelerate".

"From the Municipal Police, I got a ticket, they made me feel inferior".

"I then started a course in 2021 as a Social Health Worker. I took the course because I always liked it. In fact, when I came to Rome and was already staying in the family home, I wanted to do something in this field". The course was paid for by a parish charitable organization".

Keywords: loneliness, fear, economic problems, work, training, psychological support, satisfaction

IT09

Title: Reinventing oneself in order not to collapse

Narrative: “I am Carla, I am 54 years old with two separations behind me. I raised my three children alone with many difficulties, even in the past. Today my daughter is married and has three children; my eldest son is a cook in Ireland; my youngest son still lives with me and is looking for a job as a barman.

Before Covid-19, I was recovering from my second separation from my ex-husband, who had left me penniless. We had run a pizzeria together for 17 years. After the separation, I moved with my son to my parents' house, who live on my father's pension (EUR 1,000 per month). My father has big health problems. Therefore, I live with them and in return I take care of him.

Before the pandemic, I worked in the catering industry, first with on-call contracts and then on a temporary basis. With the closure of the catering industry in 2020, my contract was terminated. I did not receive any benefits. My employer did not even give me severance pay. Because of this, I was very depressed: I couldn't stand having to start all over again! I thought about suicide, but then my sense of responsibility for my family and children pushed me to reinvent myself again and react. I looked for a job that would allow me to earn some money. I sold goods at flea markets and did other odd jobs, which enabled me to continue caring for my father for part of the day.

Finally, I was a caregiver - which was an informal job - for several people (a lady with Alzheimer's, then one with Parkinson's, then one with dementia). The first time I was called to this role was by chance: an acquaintance told me they were looking for someone to replace another caregiver and so I proposed myself, doubting that I was made for this. But then I did it: I am an empathetic person. After this first positive experience, I enrolled in a course for social workers, free of charge. By attending it I could get a diploma that would help me find a stable job.

I am now attending training, I like the course, but it involves an unpaid internship of a few hours at the end, which is not compatible with the other job I am doing now.

I currently have a fixed-term contract as a hotel maid (December 2022). However, I decided to ask not to renew it in order to do the social worker internship. The problem is that the internship is unpaid. Only in Italy can such a thing happen!

As for government help, I got an unemployment benefit for a few months in 2020. For fixed-term contracts, there were no subsidies, so I had little money. Asking your parents for money at the age of 54 is an affront to dignity. I went to protest to the municipality because I was not receiving any support whatsoever and asked for my Italian citizenship to be cancelled, but it is not possible. An usher informally advised me to register as 'homeless', but I told him no: it is shameful. The system is all wrong.

In these two years, I have relied mostly on myself and very few friends, including charity organisations. My wish, in a year's time, is to be able to go and live in Ireland to learn English well. If that is not possible, I would like to find a job in a health facility with the

diploma I am going to take.”

Specifically telling quotes: “To be financially supported at my age is not the most desirable thing for a person. So I went through a dark period.”

“The first thing that came into my mind was to kill myself. I couldn't take it any more. Then I thought about the people around me. Maybe I shouldn't give them this sorrow as well. So I started moving, spreading the word about my search for work.”

Keywords: fatigue and depression, responsibility, ability to reinvent oneself, job search, training, dignity, adaptation, work-family balance

IT10

Title: Covid-19 strikes the balance that the family with a severe disability had managed to build

Narrative: “I am Samuela, a 40-year-old woman; I live in a small town. I have a house that is not very big but with a garden and animals. I have two children, one a teenager and the other 100% disabled, suffering from autism.

I have a sole business in the cosmetics sector on behalf of a large company, which promotes female employment in this sector.

My husband was a fragile worker in a transport company. With Covid-19, he has not been able to work in smart working or return to work in presence. The occupational physician initially put him on sick leave in 2020 and then suspended him from work, with job retention, but without pay.

During the first month of lockdown (March 2020) my husband and I thought we would look for the positives in the situation: we were all at home, happy to be together. My husband and I tried to make it so that our autistic son could get out of the house, go to the countryside or go for a drive.

After the first month, problems emerged.

My autistic son was offered online therapy, but it was not feasible. I therefore stopped the external therapy and started my son's autonomy therapy myself. As for school, my autistic son followed distance learning with many difficulties in 2020, from home. The internet at home often had problems when the whole family was connected (me and the two boys).

In 2021, my autistic son could only attend school in the presence of some classmates for 2 hours a day. Together with the other mothers in the class, we asked the school the

reasons why he could only attend two hours a day, and got evasive answers. Bringing and picking up the autistic child was a heavy thing.

In 2021, declining sales and my husband's lack of salary caused financial problems for our family. We had to use the savings we had. We could not access the benefits put in place by the institutions for VAT holders because we did not have the criteria (they were based on the income figures of the previous two years).

In January 2021, my husband applied for and was granted an extraordinary paid leave for two years as the caregiver of a disabled person in the family. We were hoping for a change of transport company, thanks to an intervention by the municipality, which put it out to tender. It was complicated for me to work remotely and follow the children at home with school and therapy. My husband's extraordinary leave of absence helped me: he takes care of our autistic son a bit more.

After the pandemic, we are also experiencing the effects, not only emotional but also economic, of the war. We received an electricity bill three times more expensive.

The covid was a tornado for us: we were organised on a daily basis according to the progress of our autistic son. Now my autistic son goes to school regularly, I give him therapy and twice a week he plays sports.

In 2020 and partly in 2021, I organised free make-up and socialising events online open to my contacts and others. I realised that people needed moments of socialisation and recreation where they could clear their heads of thoughts.

We did not receive any special help, except partly from the school. A local association brought my autistic son a chocolate egg for Easter 2020. He was very happy. I hope that in a year's time the problems will have been solved and we can all live together more peacefully."

Specifically telling quotes: "I try to live in the here and now because we cannot make plans anyway. When it seemed that we were coming out of this pandemic, this war arrived, which is affecting us anyway, both humanly and in terms of economic effects."

Keywords: family, smart working, study support, distance learning, discrimination at work, rehabilitation therapies, work-family balance, network connection problems

Lithuania

LT01

Title: I wouldn't really want to experience it a second time

Narrative: "My name is Jolanta, I am 56 years old and I live in a small municipality, in a rural area. I work in a public institution, namely, vocational training centre. In my work, as is usually the case, I have a few functions - I work at a library, as a teacher, as project manager. I hate monotony, so this work keeps me busy, it's not boring. My two children - son and daughter - are already grown up, they left home and my husband's work keeps him away from home, he travels for it a lot. Thus, usually, I am by myself.

During the pandemic one of the biggest challenges was that life stopped. I am someone who likes to travel and at work we also have an Erasmus program through which I used to travel two times a year for student practice in Germany. These trips were always very interesting and we had them for almost 10 years. Yet, it all stopped, everything stopped, other projects and activities as well - concerts, exhibitions, sports, yoga, swimming pool. I could go out for walks since I don't live in the city, we also have a considerably sized land plot next to our house, so there was enough physical activity, but at the same time there was a kind of - "what's the point?" There was this kind of stop, not knowing what's next, not being able to plan ahead, postponement of all kind of work and everything else.

I am a very sociable person, so one of the most difficult things was that the number of meetings with people decreased severely. It was strange the first two-three weeks, but we connected through zoom very quickly. Still, it was very hard, because two years were basically cut out from life. Even now thinking back... usually you remember something that happened and in this case you remember what - the telephone, computer? You see a person but when you meet - he/she looks completely differently, because we all look terrible through those screens. At least for me - I don't use filters and I don't think they are needed.

In the beginning of the pandemic both of my parents were still alive, we agreed that they won't go to the shops, that I will take care of that, so I had that type of activity as well. We maintained our communication all the time, but the biggest shock came during the major holidays of the year - Christmas. You live just 5 km apart from each other and yet you are closed off with roadblocks and cannot not visit our parents because - pandemic. This was the most unpleasant thing. Still, we had our Christmas Eve dinner all together, all connected but through the phone. We have a family tradition and everyone knows that come Christmas Eve, the 24th of December, 6 pm we all gather together for dinner. For Easter we could meet but only on Friday, because travel was forbidden for the Easter weekend, after Friday midnight. So, we celebrated Easter on Friday instead of Sunday with my parents and one of my children, it was an interesting experience.

It's very sad that during these years of the pandemic a lot of close people left [died], old people, yes, it was time, but still, it's sad. In 2021 my parents' best friend has opened, like I say, the dying season, he died from Covid. He was already very old and sickly, 89

years old. His wife survived and is still alive, but he died. And then more people followed. When my mommy got Covid, hospitals still had Covid rules and I could not visit, that was difficult. She had a weak heart and she died there. Not being able to see her in those last moments, that was hard. And my father, he had other [health] issues and he just got tired being alone, he wasn't used to that and just after 5 months he also left [died]. These are the saddest experiences of corona.

I missed seeing my parents, but we did talk a lot on the phone. Actually, I learned to talk on the phone for long periods of time, I never liked that, but I learned that during the pandemic. Not only just simply on the phone, but with image. This practice has stayed even after the pandemic. For instance, we do something around the house with a friend - tidying, cooking, and both have our phones standing, sometimes you see something, sometimes not, but still it's nice. That's the positive impact of the pandemic, our [remote] communication skills have improved, because previously there was simply no need for that, you could just meet someone directly. And now, with the friends who live further away we communicate not only through texts or calls, but also through video, so that we could see each other. This is a good skill.

I am grateful to the pandemic for this one thing - never before have I done sports regularly three times a week for 1,5 hours. Before, there was a possibility to exercise twice a week, but I'd go in maybe once. During the pandemic our yoga trainer organized and bought a zoom subscription, there were about 20 of us, we have been going to the same trainer for many years, me, personally - for 12 years, and I am extremely happy with her. I've tried every other sport type before this and I like yoga the best. I learned it so my body wouldn't hurt. If you don't help yourself, no one will. Physical health has improved a lot because of that. This was the "strawberry" of the day, something I wanted the most. The biggest "plus" in the pandemic is doing sports on the phone. From a medical point of view, we did not know, what's happening, what will be, how this disease will develop, fear eyes were very big [Lithuanian saying]. We tried to limit contacts as much as possible. We cooperated with our neighbors, especially in the beginning of the pandemic - when I went to the grocery shop, I'd buy what they need, and leave the groceries at their gate. Next time - it's them that go shopping and I'd send in my list of groceries. When friends got sick - I'd prepare a broth, pack it, take it to their place, leave it at the door, call them and they would collect it. We found different ways to communicate, for instance, we even celebrated a birthday over the fence with our neighbors: we laid a long wooden board over the hedge and that became our makeshift table, it was an interesting experience, with good weather in the spring.

Since I worked at vocational school, we didn't have the full isolation. We came back to work with masks. We also developed a plan on how to protect ourselves and students as best as possible. We bought a disinfectant fogger, and even now if someone gets sick, we disinfect the place immediately. The second year we made a schedule, and our students went to certain rooms in groups of five, afterwards we disinfected the rooms, and then another group would come in. Only 4-5 of the employees remained unvaccinated. Management has devoted a lot of attention to explaining why we were doing what we were doing. Because in community of teachers you can achieve things only through persuasion, not coercion, otherwise, everyone will rise up. A person must accept through himself, only then change occurs, otherwise everything stands still. A lot

of work was done, I am part of the administration, I participated in all this mess. In the end, we didn't have a lot of transmission, we didn't have the pandemic like in some other places, actually, there were even less infections than during an ordinary autumn. The most important thing is - we survived. We were very careful, but my husband caught covid and spent 11 days at the hospital, on oxygen. It is as it is, after that you become a fatalist, you get used to it. At the same time, I used to say, this pandemic is nothing, imagine if infection was the type of typhoid. It's interesting, now that I'm analyzing it, but I wouldn't really want to experience it a second time."

Specifically telling quotes: "It's very sad that during these years of the pandemic a lot of close people left [died], old people, yes, it was time, but still, it's sad. <...> When my mommy got Covid, hospitals still had Covid rules and I could not visit, that was difficult. She had a weak heart and she died there. Not being able to see her in those last moments, that was hard. And my father, he had other [health] issues and he just got tired being alone, he wasn't used to that and just after 5 months he also left [died]. These are the saddest experiences of corona."

Keywords: neighbourhood/ community action, everyday strategies to deal with the pandemic, digital skills, physical activity, maintaining ties during the pandemic, loss of loved ones, Covid rules and regulations

LT02

Title: we experience quarantine every winter

Narrative: "My name is Inga, I am 28 years old, I recently became unemployed and enlisted at the Lithuanian Employment Service. I have severe disability, cerebral palsy, I can hardly control my legs, I can stand up only with someone's help, basically, that's nothing. My hands work but they are weaker. So, I can move only with the help of a wheelchair and I'm in need of full care. My family members, my partner and personal assistant take care of me. I did not have an assistant during the pandemic, but, currently, he/she helps me out during weekends and public holidays 8 hours a day. I receive all types of care services that are possible to obtain in Lithuania. My parents receive care allowance and I receive social assistance disability pension.

I lost my job just a few months ago, I used to work as a project coordinator in a project concerning children with disabilities. I got this job just after my studies and worked at it remotely for 4 years. Sadly, now as the crisis came, the fund went bankrupt, the project finished, everything is closing off. I hope to find a new job soon.

For me nothing changed during the pandemic. I worked remotely before the pandemic and continued to do so during it. No changes what-so-ever, I lived as always. I mean, we experience quarantine every winter, like now - snow everywhere and that's it, I'm in quarantine because I cannot leave the house, it's not easy to plow through the snow with

a wheelchair. We live in a private house, everything around it and inside is adapted to my needs, but you can't run away from snow. You can shovel the snow in your own yard, but the streets... it's another story.

I am a very active person, I'm not the type to sit at home. We travel, whenever possible, go to different events, concerts, etc., meet friends. I don't feel like my wheelchair limits me in any way. During the pandemic there were less meetings or almost no meetings with friends, no theater, concerts, other events, we didn't go anywhere as there was nothing happening.

I try to stay on top of activities related to people with disabilities, follow news of various CSOs that work in this area, participate in their events. Often other people with disabilities even ask me for information about ongoing activities in that area. A lot of conferences, seminars, discussions I was interested in went online during the pandemic. This was a huge plus for me, because it was much more convenient, I could just turn them on whenever I had time, I did not need to go anywhere. I feel like I participated/listened to much more online events than I would have if I needed to go see them physically. I'm sorry that the number of remote events decreased, there are still some, but not as many.

Another area where the pandemic had a positive effect for me is healthcare. It became possible to take care of everything remotely, which was not the case previously. I would need to physically go and see them almost every time, even if it was just for a prescription. I'd get a prescription sometimes for 3 months, sometimes for one month. Now it's a matter of a phone call, all prescriptions, all consultations are being done remotely. The practice, that started in response to the pandemic has remained till now. This helped a lot.

If there were any problems, we found solutions. For instance, even though I felt pressured to get vaccinated, I did my research and decided I did not want to. This meant that I could not go shopping in certain shops as I did not have an "opportunity passport". For groceries, I also could not buy them online, as we live in a small town, and "Barbora" [major groceries delivery service] does not deliver here. Our friends and acquaintances helped us out by shopping for us and leaving the package at our door. So, we got away with that.

Quarantine hastened things in my personal life. I live with my parents, but when the quarantine started, and it was forbidden to see people from another household my partner moved in with us. It would have happened anyways, but probably later, we had an excuse to hurry this step. I'm saying the pandemic only had advantages for me. In general, I feel fully integrated into the society, maybe that's why I didn't experience any negative consequences."

Specifically telling quotes: "For me nothing changed during the pandemic. <...> No changes what-so-ever, I lived as always. I mean, we experience quarantine every winter,

like now – snow everywhere and that's it, I'm in quarantine because I cannot leave the house, it's not easy to plow through the snow with a wheelchair. We live in a private house, everything around it and inside is adapted to my needs, but you can't run away from snow. You can shovel the snow in your own yard, but the streets... it's another story."

Keywords: disability, cerebral palsy, wheelchair, remote healthcare services, positive attitude

LT03

Title: I think the difficulties I experienced during the pandemic were similar to the ones experienced by other people, who have no disabilities.

Narrative: "I am 43 years old, I work as a speech therapist. I am married and live with my husband in a suburb of one of the cities in Lithuania.

I have been diagnosed with cerebral palsy, it was a consequence of birth trauma in my case. Even though we would find the code for cerebral palsy in the list of the International Classification of Diseases, I myself do not consider it a disease. I don't feel like I'm sick, cerebral palsy is such a natural condition [for me], together with the wheelchair I'm using because of it, that I cannot bring myself to say it's some kind of disease. I can't walk like those people who don't have any disability, but I can stand for a while and I can even take a few steps, it's just that the walk is not firm, the gait is unsteady, swaying to the sides, the legs are pulled differently, etc. That's why I chose a wheelchair, it's a means of independence to ensure that I really get from point A to point B without any falls, injuries, etc. and in the shortest possible time. It would be possible to walk by myself, maybe with someone's help or with a walker, but it would take a very long time, it would require a lot of effort, strength and it would just be very uncomfortable.

I think the difficulties I experienced during the pandemic were similar to the ones experienced by other people, who have no disabilities. It was difficult to adjust to lockdown, various restrictions and regulations. It was very hard to adjust to remote work – I had to remotely conduct speech exercises with kindergarten children. Work became more difficult, because it was necessary to convey all the tasks in such a way that they could be appropriate for remote work, contact work is different, there is more room for improvisation. I just felt that I spent a lot of time on the computer in a digital remote space. This tired me much more than direct, contact work I used to do. The boundaries between home and work disappeared, everything has moved into one space, and I wouldn't say that I liked it very much. Yes, the pace of life slows down, you don't have to go anywhere, it seems like it saves time, but you are confined to the space of your home, which was difficult for me to adapt to. But a person adapts, and when it was time to return to work, I had to readjust again to a more intense pace.

I just wished for a wider space for social participation than the walls of my house or yard; I felt squeezed and limited by the pandemic regulations, so as not to infect someone and become infected myself. We are responsible people, we followed all the

requirements and tried not to communicate with friends in a direct, contact way, I felt that strongly, there was a lack of direct contact, both in terms of working relationships and interpersonal relationships with friends, relatives, etc.

Both me and my husband use wheelchairs. We live in a private house, our physical space is adapted to our needs, there is no one single step that we need to climb, we have disabled access everywhere in our one-story house. I drive a car and have no difficulties loading or unloading my wheelchair in it. It is more difficult in winter, when, for example, you can't enter your yard not only with a wheelchair, but also with a car. It's a challenge, but you don't live in the jungle, you can find help, neighbors, for instance.

I myself am a passive user of health services, I don't like medical institutions because of queues, inaccessibility. My disability due to cerebral palsy is a non-progressive condition, living with a disability is my everyday life, I don't need any services because of it and I do not take any medication. But my husband's health during the pandemic deteriorated and as the availability of health services worsened, it was difficult to get appropriate care. We didn't know what was happening to him, he felt very bad, nauseated, he was so weak that he lost 10 kg in a couple of months. It came to the point that we even called for an ambulance. The ambulance would come, take him to the hospital, it would be determined that it was not a stroke, not a heart attack, due to the pandemic situation there was not enough room in the hospital to keep him longer, so he would be rushed home in a taxi. This kept on happening. Finally, when the situation repeated itself one more time, I was at a loss what to do, so I used my connections in the municipality - I called someone in authority asking for help hospitalizing my husband, that all appropriate tests would be performed. I'm not the kind of person who's constantly asking for help or who uses her connections in this way, but I felt the situation became so extreme, so abnormal that a person is taken away with an ambulance and comes back with a taxi, and it's already the fourth time, I was so scared of what was happening, that it was necessary to use the connections I gained when participating in the local government elections and to dare to call with a request for help. After that my husband was admitted to the hospital, all the tests were done, and the appropriate treatment was applied. The situation immediately improved, both his and mine, because our psychological health also worsened during this ordeal, not knowing what is wrong is difficult.

In addition to my work activities, I am involved in a local civil society organization that works to improve social integration of people with disabilities in our city. My husband is the leader of another civil society organization that seeks to increase social participation of people with disabilities. I always help him with paperwork, but when he got sick, it was a challenge, so many additional responsibilities fell on me that I could barely cope. Even now my major wish and dream on weekends is to get more sleep."

Specifically telling quotes: "My husband's health during the pandemic deteriorated and as the availability of health services worsened, it was difficult to get appropriate care. We didn't know what was happening to him, he felt very bad, nauseated, he was so weak that he lost 10 kg in a couple of months. It came to the point that we even called for an ambulance. The ambulance would come, take him to the hospital, it would be determined that it was not a stroke, not a heart attack, due to the pandemic situation

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Keywords: disability, cerebral palsy, remote work, inadequate health services, partner's illness, informal connections

LT04

Title: I felt wronged because I followed all the Covid regulations and instructions <...> but in the end basic rights were taken away from me.

Narrative: "I am 36 years old, freelance graphics designer. I don't have a husband or children.

The pandemic affected me in the way that I couldn't see friends. Previously, I had a fairly normal, lively social life. Since as a freelancer I work from home, I only saw the computer. I used to live alone, but during quarantine, to not feel lonely, I moved in with my parents. One of the positives of the pandemic is that while living with my parents I completely quit smoking.

The way I do my work was greatly impacted by the pandemic. In the past, I could meet with my clients, have a coffee, and discuss things face to face. During the pandemic that did not exist. But I can't say it affected me terribly psychologically, I saw it as a phase. I concentrated on work and figured out how to use this time period to my advantage. I started a project that I would not have undertaken previously, some projects require a lot of work before they bring you financial benefit. As a graphics designer, you can draw and be creative, but it takes time, especially when you do it for free, for yourself. First of all, you always think that you should have the finances to survive, but when there is no social life, you can devote the time that you might spend with friends, at the movies, dinners, parties, to other creative activities, that are not necessarily financially beneficial. There was a change of clients, some clients could no longer afford graphic design services, they were languishing, and didn't pay me, they remained in debt to me like several hundred euros. I didn't even demand the pay, I felt sorry for them, I worked with them for several years. Some agencies still have not recovered and do not use marketing

services. But then again others appeared, so the pandemic showed that some clients left but others came in, it gave me confidence that no matter how big a client leaves, I know I could have others. If I had worked in a company, I would have been fired, there was a move from in-house designers to freelancers, companies attempted to cut costs and pay for a few hours a week instead of paying someone full-time. It's good that I started freelancing earlier and had my own client base. In the company where I worked before freelancing, everyone was fired - marketers, graphic designers, the whole department. In terms of state aid, there was some help to freelancers, but I think it was mostly for people who worked in trade, fairs. There was also a list of professions that did not qualify to receive aid, I looked through it and saw that my vocation was on it. A lot of vocations that involved working at the computer did not qualify, as it was considered that the nature of work has not changed, one can work from home. Maybe it was adjusted later, but I didn't bother to apply and figure out the conditions just for 250 euros a month, it felt like phony aid, for which you must feel grateful. Plus, it was not clear, whether you could issue bills while receiving state support, and my work continued. I also thought, as my financial situation did not suffer much, it was immoral to take aid when others (musicians etc.), were starving.

Emotionally, the first quarantine was ok, but when the sorting of people to vaccinated and unvaccinated started, I began to have a bad attitude towards the government. During the first quarantine, everyone united, didn't go anywhere, didn't celebrate holidays for the greater good, this seemed adequate. I also did everything for my health and the health of others, I closed myself off. I didn't get vaccinated, I worked from home, didn't have to go anywhere, so decided to wait it out. But then those who haven't been vaccinated were forbidden to go to certain grocery stores. Not even clothing shops, bars, or places to have fun - grocery stores that were bigger than average. This meant that I could no longer buy food at the grocery shop close to my home, that I could reach by foot, I had to travel. So, this measure, that claimed to protect me, actually exposed me to more risk as I had to use public transport for grocery shopping, which I previously avoided. I felt wronged because I followed all the Covid regulations and instructions, did not go out at all, no contacts, but in the end basic rights were taken away from me. This "opportunities passport" provoked an anger in me towards the government and my country, that I've never felt before. I no longer understand the meaning of the word "patriot". It's just that I didn't express that anger anywhere, I didn't go to mass protests, etc., but I understood those who were angry out loud. I don't like to be the center of attention myself, but I like that there are people who can speak out loudly, adequately, and ask questions."

Specifically telling quotes: "Emotionally, the first quarantine was ok, but when the sorting of people to vaccinated and unvaccinated started, I began to have a bad attitude towards the government. During the first quarantine, everyone united, didn't go anywhere, didn't celebrate holidays for the greater good, this seemed adequate. I also did everything for my health and the health of others, I closed myself off. I didn't get vaccinated, I worked from home, didn't have to go anywhere, so decided to wait it out. But then those who haven't been vaccinated were forbidden to go to certain grocery stores. Not even clothing shops, bars, or places to have fun - grocery stores that were

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Keywords: freelancing, state aid, opportunity passport, vaccine hesitancy, silent resistance towards pandemic regulations

LT05

Title: The greater the difficulty, the more work for us, non-governmental organizations

Narrative: “I am 41 years old, I live in [Lithuanian city] and lead a civil society organization. I live with my partner. I have quite a severe disability - I am very short, have a joint disease. At home or at work, close distances, I walk with crutches, when I need to go further - I use a wheelchair. I have several wheelchairs - the active type, which is harder for me, when I’m in it I’m usually pushed by someone and an electric one which allows me to be independent, as it is easier. Still, all my life I’m used to living like everyone else.

The biggest challenges I experienced during the pandemic were in relation to my work, I worried about myself the least. Altruism comes from the family; the NGO I work at was founded by my mother 30 years ago. Six years ago, she was diagnosed with cancer, fourth stage, when she was on her deathbed, I had to take over these activities, I don't do it for money. Most of all, I was thinking about how to help people, how to gather and protect volunteers from the virus.

Our non-governmental organization has a wide range of activities, we have a women's crisis center, charity canteen, day care center for children, we provide specialized comprehensive help to victims of domestic violence and help other people in need. We continued to assist victims of violence at a distance, provided psychological, legal help remotely. The biggest challenge was with our charitable canteen, especially during the first quarantine, all catering activities had to stop, restaurants, everything was closed 100 percent, and we were forced to do the same. For a couple of weeks, we could not resume our activities and people called me every day, asking “when are you going to give us food?” I could just raise my hands in despair... I appealed to the municipality for help, I asked them to provide us with protective gear against the virus, so that we could resume

activities. The municipality's first response was that non-governmental organizations should purchase protective equipment themselves. But how could we? First of all, these were unexpected expenses, and we did not have the funds. Secondly, we did not know how or where to purchase them, because the market was empty. Little by little, with the help of benevolent people, we pushed through, people sewed cloth masks, brought them to us, hung on the fence. As soon as we collected the bare minimum of protective gear, just so that the volunteers would be safer, we resumed our activities. We gathered in a small team and decided, how to proceed. It felt like we were sitting at the barricades, strategizing how to help others while keeping the volunteers safe. We started distributing food as takeout. We used the backdoor, so that there was as little contact as possible. We'd put the bag with food on the table outside, step back two meters, a person would come, take it and step back as well. There was a lot of anxiety, the panic was real.

I heard that other people during quarantine stayed at home, rested, however, it was the height of work for me. I wrote many requests to various local companies for help, whether financially or otherwise, so that we could continue to provide assistance to people for whom it was the only source of survival. I sent hundreds of letters, but only a couple responded to the call for help, I got a lot of negative responses, it was disappointing. We made a lot of fuss about the lack of support from the municipality, after all, we provide assistance to the people of the city, it should be the function of the municipality to help. I called different politicians complaining about the attitude of the municipality, publicized the situation on Facebook, etc. In the end the municipality took upon itself to coordinate procurement of protective equipment to various organizations, they gave us disinfectant liquid, masks, but it took some time. Situations like this show what a powerful force civil society organizations are, they react here and now, not wait for yet another meeting to take action. For me a person is above the letter of the law, I care about how to help a person here and now, he/ she needs to eat/ get dressed here and now. The greater the difficulty, the more work for us, non-governmental organizations.

In the beginning of the pandemic, I worried a lot about my own health. Not only do I have a disability, but my lungs are very sensitive since childhood, the slightest draft is enough for me to start coughing and suffocating, and as we know, lungs are exactly what covid targets. I had great inner anxiety, if I got sick, it could end badly. I remember, once we went for a walk with my partner, we lived in an apartment, and wanted to get some fresh air. I was in my wheelchair, and he was pushing me on a narrow forest path when I saw a person coming our way. The recommendations were that you should stay at least 3 meters apart from other people, so I started panicking "God, where to go with the wheelchair, how to pass through, there's not enough room on the path".

Quarantines brought some positive developments. For instance, all kinds of grocery and food delivery services came to our city. For me as a person with a disability this is a miracle, if I go to the store alone, I will take a few products, it is difficult for me to carry a lot with crutches, asking someone for help is also bothersome, and now I only have to

open the app, choose what I need, and the products arrive. Remote work also has its advantages. Remote meetings are still taking place, previously if I had to go to the ministry in Vilnius for a meeting, I'd be travelling 2-3 hours, spend an hour in the meeting, and then travel 2-3 hours back, the day would be gone. Quarantine showed that you can connect and discuss problems through distance. On the one hand, it's good, on the other, life became even more intense, because now you might have 4-5 meetings a day. Still, it's convenient, food delivery services and remote meetings are convenient."

Specifically telling quotes: "I heard that other people during quarantine stayed at home, rested, however, it was the height of work for me. I wrote many requests to various local companies for help, whether financially or otherwise, so that we could continue to provide assistance to people for whom it was the only source of survival <...> I called different politicians complaining about the attitude of the municipality, publicized the situation on Facebook, etc. In the end the municipality took upon itself to coordinate procurement of protective equipment to various organizations, they gave us disinfectant liquid, masks, but it took some time. Situations like this show what a powerful force civil society organizations are, they react here and now, not wait for yet another meeting to take action. For me a person is above the letter of the law, I care about how to help a person here and now, he/ she needs to eat/ get dressed here and now. The greater the difficulty, the more work for us, non-governmental organizations."

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Keywords: disability, wheelchair, pushing forward, fundraising, CSO/ NGO, altruism, lack of support from local government

LT06

Title: the workload increased, the redistribution of work was not organized as it should have been, people were tired and overworked

Narrative: "My name is Janina, I am 57 years old, I work as a nurse at a children's hospital in the neonatal intensive care unit. I am married, I have three children, they are all grown up now. Two of them have their own families already, but no grandchildren yet. Newborn care is individual, which is not the case with babies, children, or adults. Even if the condition is stable, you have to attend every few hours - it is necessary to turn them over, feed, change diapers etc. If the condition is unstable, it is even more difficult, you must take care of them more often. Doctors also come in, but less often, nurses spend more time with patients, no matter whether they are adults, children, or newborns. It's demanding work."

During the pandemic the workload at the hospital increased. We had newborns who were infected or were suspected of having covid-19 come to us. They had to be separated from others until it was determined whether she/he is infected or not. This meant that one of the nurses had to go to a separate ward to take care of that newborn. Meanwhile, the work in the main facility had to be performed by those nurses who remained, which meant that the workload increased, the redistribution of work was not organized as it should have been, it definitely did not correspond to all the orders and laws that regulate our vocation. For instance, I remember the first time a covid suspected newborn arrived. There were already 8 newborns and three nurses, which meant I was looking after 3 newborns. According to the regulations, one nurse should be taking care of 1-2 newborn patients. It happened during the weekend, there was no administration, and we had to decide what to do ourselves. None of us wanted to go in with the covid newborn, as we already had too much work, we asked for help, but we were left to deal with the situation ourselves.

There were disagreements at work, we expressed our dissatisfaction and suggestions, but they were not considered. We suggested that substitute nurses could be arranged if needed. Perhaps, it is not easy to organize, because it's not like we come to work and know how many patients there will be. Some newborns might leave, and some new ones might arrive. And they come to us, no matter if it's the weekend or weekday, morning, or night. If there is a person in the ward, and there are more patients coming in, she/he is still working, the load can become overwhelming for her/ him. I suggested that we could have some nurses on call, that could be called in in cases like this. I heard that it was done like this in another hospital. Maybe it would make sense to pay extra (like 50% more) for the substitute when they come in, because they would have to be on standby for certain hours, but for me it would be acceptable just to be paid the normal wage for extra hours. Not all coworkers agreed with it and in the end nothing changed. The system remained such that one nurse is marked as in charge in the schedule a certain day, if there is no covid newborn, then you do your job nursing two or three newborns; but if a covid newborn arrives, the nurse in charge leaves to another ward to take care of him/ her and the whole workload remains with those who remain. If there are three nurses and one leaves, the remaining two have to bear the workload of three. People were tired and overworked, especially during night shifts, it is physically hard work.

It was also difficult to work with protective gear, we had to wear it while nursing newborns with covid or suspected infection. We wore coveralls, respirators, gloves, shields or glasses (we could choose between the two). When we had more information, coveralls no longer needed to be worn, but still respirators, shields, gloves, gown remained. Thankfully, a gown is easier and faster to get dressed than coveralls.

During the pandemic I saw my parents less often. I tested for covid at work every couple of weeks, but I still went to the store, used public transport, I deliberately did not visit my parents so as not to infect them. At the very beginning of the pandemic, I came up with the idea of putting a box by their door so it wouldn't be directly on the floor, I'd buy food, bring it, and put in the box. Then I'd call them, and they'd pick it up, there was no direct contact. When we got sick ourselves, we ordered groceries from Barbora [food delivery service] both for ourselves and my parents."

Specifically telling quotes: “During the pandemic the workload at the hospital increased. We had newborns who were infected or were suspected of having covid-19 come to us. They had to be separated from others until it was determined whether she/he is infected or not. This meant that one of the nurses had to go to a separate ward to take care of that newborn. Meanwhile, the work in the main facility had to be performed by those nurses who remained, which meant that the workload increased, the redistribution of work was not organized as it should have been, it definitely did not correspond to all the orders and laws that regulate our vocation. <...> we expressed our dissatisfaction and suggestions, but they were not considered.”

Keywords: Health care sector, newborn care, nurse, working in Covid protective gear, overwork, powerlessness

LT07

Title: I realized I needed a change

Narrative: “My name is Dovile, I am 28 years old, I live in Vilnius. I stayed here after my university studies. I work as a lawyer in a public sector institution. At the moment, I am single.

During the pandemic, I did not want to work from home, it was very difficult for me to change my workplace. I managed to resist remote work for half a year, but eventually my manager forced me to follow the rules and work from home. I couldn't concentrate at home, because for me home is a place where I rest: I sleep in the bedroom, spend free time in the living room, cook in the kitchen. I don't have a workroom. I also had all the necessary equipment at work - computer, two monitors, a printer. I didn't have a second monitor at home. After I started working from home, I got used to it, and when I had to go back to the workplace, it was again difficult. I realised, how convenient remote work is, there's more time for personal life. You can go to the store when you want, take breaks when you like, no one is standing behind you and hurrying you to „work faster“. You don't have to sit at work from morning till evening, you can cut a few hours in the morning, sleep longer, go for a walk. I used to finish my work early but I still had to sit in the office until 5 pm. Now when you finish work, you can close the computer and go about your business - to the swimming pool, gym, shopping, whatever. Because of that during the pandemic I started repairing my apartment, as most repairmen work until 5 pm., I could schedule them while working from home. Previously, I would have to take vacations or excuse myself from work for that, it was complicated. I also had the time to manage my diet, in contrast to the situation at the office, at home I could eat regularly and at times when I felt hungry (lunch break at 12-1pm was always too early for me). To summarize, remote work allowed me to organize my life the way it was convenient for me.

The pandemic and remote work are also at least partly responsible for my decision to change job. I was working so much that I didn't have time to think about what I want from life; I only saw a tree growing near my house during the quarantine, even though I

walked past it for two years; I didn't see it, I was always thinking about my troubles and things I have to do. During quarantine I got a little more free time and could contemplate about my life, consider, if it's worth spending so much energy on a job, especially, if the salary is not what I would like it to be. I realized that I needed a change. Not being at the office and not seeing my co-workers made it easier to decide to leave my job, because people are important to me and I could have hesitated. I am happy with my decision, working at another institution enriched me as a person. I admit, it was scary, changing jobs is a risk, that's why I chose public sector, I heard there were a lot of layoffs during the crisis in the private sector.

When I changed jobs, everyone in the new workplace were allowed to work remotely except me, because I was on a trial period. I had to sit completely alone in the office, it made me angry, I couldn't understand why I was being discriminated against, the whole team can work remotely, and I have to wait three months for the probationary period to pass. Now, finally, I am allowed to work remotely, and I think that it would be difficult to return to the previous rhythm of 8 to 5, everything has changed a lot.

I started ordering groceries and food deliveries, I stopped going to the store, except for the things that cannot be delivered, like cigarettes. I like meeting people, so decrease in communication was difficult and phone conversations don't do that much. So, I was drinking coffee with my friends via Zoom, it was just like when we'd go to cafes, only I was at home in my kitchen, and she sat in hers. I walked a lot, I walked maybe 20 kilometres a day, it helped a lot. I participated in church events via Zoom, we studied New Testament together. I also took part in various trainings, I signed up as much as possible, I got maybe 30 certificates during that period, I would not have travelled so much if the trainings took place in person.

The pandemic had some negative effects. It was difficult to maintain the distance relationship I had at the time. My boyfriend was from another city, we could meet only on the weekends, but it was not always possible during the course of the pandemic, the connection among us was broken. Another negative aspect - there were a lot of pointless discussions, as in my circle some people were very supportive of vaccination, and others were against it, I used up a lot of energy arguing."

Specifically telling quotes: "The pandemic and remote work are also at least partly responsible for my decision to change job. I was working so much that I didn't have time to think about what I want from life; I only saw a tree growing near my house during the quarantine, even though I walked past it for two years; I didn't see it, I was always thinking about my troubles and things I have to do. During quarantine I got a little more free time and could contemplate about my life, consider, if it's worth spending so much energy on a job, especially, if the salary is not what I would like it to be. I realized that I needed a change."

Keywords: Remote work, change of job, discrimination, making life convenient for oneself, distance relationship

Title: The pandemic messed up our wedding and honeymoon plans.

Narrative: “My name is Kamile, I am 42 years old, I am married (second time) and have a one year-old baby boy. I just came back to work from childcare leave.

We got married during the covid pandemic, in 2020. The pandemic messed up our wedding and honeymoon plans. We scheduled our wedding in March 2020, we had already arranged a place, paid an advance for the honeymoon trip but just a month before it restrictions were put in place prohibiting celebrations in cafes. So, we postponed the wedding to June, we chose the date based on when the prices for our honeymoon trip would be lower. In fact, we wanted to cancel the trip completely, but it was not clear whether we would get the advance back, it was chaos, in the end the travel agency offered us to reschedule the trip for a later date or take a coupon, we decided to reschedule. Two weeks before the wedding it was still not clear whether it would happen. Compared to my first wedding, there was uncertainty until the last moment. There were signs that the restrictions would be lifted, it was summer, it was supposed to be outside, so we decided not to cancel it, thankfully, everything worked out. Everything, except the honeymoon trip. The travel agency asked us to pay half the amount or the full price of the trip, I don't remember exactly, in advance, and it seemed risky, we were not sure the trip would happen with all the travel restrictions. So, we cancelled it and to this day we have not had our honeymoon, because not long after I got pregnant, had a baby, it was impossible to travel with all this happening.

I have diabetes, so I'm used to having a lot of contact with clinics, I often have to visit the family doctor, at least every three months. During the pandemic, I did continue to receive all the usual medical consultations and services, just remotely, insulin was also prescribed remotely. Because of my diabetes, pregnancy planning and care were more complicated than would be for women without this condition. For instance, I had to consult an endocrinologist on how adjust insulin intake during pregnancy, and be admitted to the hospital three times, once in the trimester, for additional observations. I had to take a Covid test every time before going in.

At first I was recommended not to vaccinate due to pregnancy, but I kept asking, no one had information on what's best. I heard that in the US they were recommending vaccination during the second trimester, but my gynaecologist did not know what to do, she said if I were to go through with it, it would be my responsibility, she was afraid that my body temperature would rise. I then turned to my family doctor, she also did not know what to do and advised me to call Santariskes [major university hospital in Vilnius], I got a 5-minute consultation, that I could vaccinate but it should be with the pfizer vaccine. So, I did get the vaccine, there were no side effects. Sometime after, when I was going to my check-ups all the doctors were saying how great that I got vaccinated as the recommendation for pregnant women to be vaccinated was put in place.

One of the problems I experienced during the pandemic was that I couldn't get

maternity courses for a very long time - on how to prepare for childbirth, how to raise a child. I remember seeing an announcement hanging in the maternity hospital that all maternity courses were cancelled due to covid. There are several public clinics that organize them free of charge to expectant mothers, but they were cancelled everywhere that summer. In the fall remote courses started to appear, but there were limited places, I was lucky that I saw an announcement in another clinic and managed to register for all the topics. However, the course took place when I was already quite late in my pregnancy. So, it still was useful, but some information, for instance, about women's health during pregnancy, I would have liked to receive earlier.

I tried to stay physically active during the pregnancy. In the beginning I did yoga (remotely), but I stopped in the middle of the pregnancy, because it became too difficult, and I didn't know what exercises were suitable so as not to harm the baby. I wanted to attend maternity exercise in the pool classes, I went only maybe three times, I was too afraid to catch covid. Were it not for the pandemic, I would have exercised more, attended more sport classes for pregnant women. In this case I worried more about protecting myself from the virus and in fact, I didn't get sick. I got sick later when the baby was already half a year old.

To protect ourselves from the virus, together with my husband we used respirators, not masks, even when that was not required. I completely gave up public transport and got into a car, I didn't ride buses at all for maybe a year and a half. My husband used to spray with disinfectant all the food products we'd get from the grocery shop or delivery service, thankfully, he has calmed down now and stopped. We washed and disinfected our hands, we used to carry around disinfectants in small containers. We also severely limited social contacts, we spent Christmas just the two of us with my husband and our baby, Easter twice only with my parents, we showed our one-month-old baby to grandparents outside, without inviting them in, thinking it would be safer this way.

When we returned home after the birth, I thought that the doctor would come the next day to check on the baby and teach us some basics on how to take care of him, we didn't really know how to look after the navel, for instance. The doctor didn't arrive for the next few days, I started looking for her myself, and it turned out that because of the pandemic doctors no longer visited new-borns at home, we were supposed to bring him to the clinic. That was confusing."

Specifically telling quotes: "One of the problems I experienced during the pandemic was that I couldn't get maternity courses for a very long time - on how to prepare for childbirth, how to raise a child. I remember seeing an announcement hanging in the maternity hospital that all maternity courses were cancelled due to covid. There are several public clinics that organize them free of charge to expectant mothers, but they were cancelled everywhere that summer. In the fall remote courses started to appear, but there were limited places, I was lucky that I saw an announcement in another clinic and managed to register for all the topics. However, the course took place when I was already quite late in my pregnancy. So, it still was useful, but some information, for

instance, about women's health during pregnancy, I would have liked to receive earlier.
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Keywords: wedding, honeymoon trip, pregnancy, childbirth, diabetes, maternity courses, new-born care

LT09

Title: The whole dating scene, clubs, bars, social, cultural context and atmosphere are brutally heteronormative <...> I was really looking forward to the municipalities and countries opening up.

Narrative: "My name is Pijus, I am 29 years old, I am a doctoral student. I have thoughts that maybe I don't want to be a man, I like the concepts of gender fluidity or non-binary sex. I'm inclined to think, that I like people, not genders. And if so, then I'm pansexual. I was waiting for quarantine. I wanted quarantine because I was exhausted from all the activities I was involved in, half of them had to do with the body - acrobatics, circus. And they became too much for me, I could no longer handle them all at once. I don't know, maybe I still don't know how to say no to things. Everything started to feel like work and duty to me, all hobbies, all jobs, all projects, all relationships, and friends. I wanted some kind of force majeure that would cut me off from all this and then I would have some peace for myself. So, at first, quarantine worked quite well. But, I guess, I still wanted the relationship with my girlfriend to be in the picture. There was a period when I had to isolate and my girlfriend was too afraid to be with me so as not to get infected, that was the worst, I didn't like quarantine after that. There is the feeling of being stuck alone, that you can't go anywhere, can't escape anywhere. Even if I went out for a walk, I was wearing a mask and others were wearing them, not being able to see other faces, feeling like I was dangerous to them and everyone else was dangerous to me, made me feel even more isolated. And then counting every contact, I really lost a lot of sociality just by worrying. I'd want to or have an idea of meeting someone, but then abandon it just because I kept worrying about the virus.

I isolated myself for almost 6 weeks straight. The first 2 weeks were so that I could celebrate Christmas with my grandparents. After Christmas it turned out that my grandfather had corona and all of us were exposed, so another 2 weeks of isolation. At the end of those 2 weeks, my grandfather died. Then I met the whole family again for the funeral, some of whom still had symptoms, so afterwards I isolated myself for another 2 weeks. I needed emotional support and closeness after the grandfather's death. I felt like I did not belong to my mother's family [informant's parents are divorced]. I could be with them, but I couldn't open up with them emotionally. I wanted to see my girlfriend so much, but when my isolation was finally finished and we met, there were problems. I did not get the support I needed, it became clear to me, that I could not accept this dysfunctional relationship, just because I liked the person. I got really angry and stopped communicating. Well, we agreed not to talk or see each other anymore.

The grandfather's death was a turning point. Quarantine was already bad, but

quarantine plus this, I realized 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 realize 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 realize that I might be going crazy, I needed therapy. Fortunately, I had the financial security from being a doctoral student, my income did not depend on the corona situation and thank God, I didn't have to work or function in any way during this period.

It was already some time that I wanted to leave [major city in Lithuania], I felt suffocated there. Especially, when thinking about the perspectives of searching and finding a partner (male or female) in Lithuania. How could I express myself not as a man in Lithuania? My Tinder experience added to my loneliness. The whole dating scene, clubs, bars, social, cultural context and atmosphere are brutally heteronormative and then expectations towards a person are corresponding. It really adds to the loneliness because then you feel that there are no people like you, and you are not like anyone else. You can pretend, as you probably did for many years, but the price of that becomes too high at some point, just doesn't make sense anymore. You want to be sincere and live your life somehow. This adds to the desire to emigrate, to change the environment. During the pandemic, I knew that if people wanted to leave, they left. But for me travel restrictions added anxiety and fear, with all the other problems, I didn't want to have even more problems and worry about some mobility/ travel regulations and dangers. I was really looking forward to the municipalities and countries opening up."

Specifically telling quotes: "The grandfather's death was a turning point. Quarantine was already bad, but quarantine plus this, I realized 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 realize 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 realize that I might be going crazy, I needed therapy."

Keywords: non-binary, gender fluidity, pansexuality, grief, death, romantic relationships, loneliness, therapy

LT10

Title: It's a pity that during the pandemic we regressed 20 years back

Narrative: "My name is Sandra, I am 33 years old, I am raising three children. Our last child was born and grew up during the pandemic. I am an architect, a doula, a lactation consultant.

I have been on maternity leave for about six years now, because I was having a baby every two and a half years. When I was pregnant with my first daughter, I thought I would

be back at work in six months, but it took me six years. After the birth of my first child, I realized that my birth was extremely traumatic, a lot of things happened not the way they were supposed to, so I became interested in maternity health, and this, started learning, volunteering and eventually providing paid consultations/ assistance in this area.

During the pandemic, I gave remote consultations. It was complicated, because I wanted to do a lot of things physically, for instance, correct the mother's position, lower her shoulders, because she would be saying that her back hurt; no shit - sitting in an abnormal posture with a four kilograms child in your hands, it's going to hurt. Although, I was happy - my husband was at home, my children were at home, it was cozy, there was a lack of social communication, I felt that I fused with the screen, I was at it from morning to evening. For our free time, we went to the forest with the children, since playgrounds in the city were closed, we bought swings and created our own portable playground.

My mother has cancer, she relapsed during the pandemic. My sister called and informed us that mother's tests were very bad, she said there were only days left, maybe a month. At that moment I was pregnant with our third child, and we were staying at a sanatorium in a resort, for early rehabilitation of children (one of my children has developmental issues). It was not allowed to travel between municipalities. I was determined to go anyways and thought of different scenarios on how to bypass these ridiculous travel restrictions. In the end, my mother's health improved, and we didn't go. However, the plans that we worked out we've put to good use later. My parents' have a homestead in another municipality, so I signed a contract with my father, leasing the homestead. Of course, in reality, I did not rent it, but it gave us the ability to drive to the homestead whenever we wanted, crossing multiple municipalities. This way the homestead became the underground meeting point for us all to get together.

We held a lot of similar underground meetings in the doulas' circle. One of the doulas had a homestead on the border of [major Lithuanian city] municipality, we use a semi-forested road that led to it, avoiding major roads, where we could encounter policeman and roadblocks. There were also other "underground" meeting places. We had to be creative, or we'd have gone mad. We had to get together, do breathing exercises, talk, share the birthing stories of women we accompanied and discuss how we could help women in maternity hospitals. We organized a survey of all maternity hospitals, trying to find out the maternal health situation during Covid-19 - are women forced to wear masks, who is allowed in together with the pregnant woman and under what conditions, etc. I think it's horrible, that women were forced to wear masks during childbirth, because physically giving birth is a lot of work and when you can't breathe during that it's... We tried to find contacts with midwives, we wrote our recommendations to midwives' unions, we approached heads of major (maternity) clinics. We tried to communicate the fact, not a single health organization prohibited the participation of an accompanying person in the childbirth. When participation of an accompanying person was allowed, we still had a lot of work to ensure that the accompanying person was admitted on time. Because in our practice, there were many cases, that upon arrival at

the hospital a woman would be taken to be examined, and the husband left outside the door for two hours. In two hours a women could already give birth! Or the woman would be taken to the operating room, and the husband would be informed much later that the baby was born, there was nothing for him to see, he would meet his child at home. Really disgusting situations, childbirth is a family matter, dad must be present, to get involved, to create connection with the child. So, we organized mutual support groups, bothered maternity hospitals, and collected the experiences of women who gave birth. We tried to change things, but there was a feeling of hopelessness, that it was not possible. We wrote letters to various public institutions and the ministry with requests and recommendations but received template answers like “we received your request; we will provide a statement within 30 working days”. It's a pity that during the pandemic we regressed 20 years back, all the work we did as a doula association, all the breastfeeding initiatives, it's as if they never existed. The mentality changed; the “medical gowns” decided they were the most important. Even the same people, medical staff who used to behave adequately, started behaving completely differently, rudely, the atmosphere turned for the worse.”

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Keywords: Reproductive rights, maternal health, childbirth, medicalization of childbirth, doula, collective action, hopelessness

Luxembourg

LU01

Title: Queer people facing isolation and a lot of self restriction with regards to gender identity when living in family house.

Narrative: I am 20 years old (17,5 at the start of the pandemic) intersex and identifying as non-binary and queer. I am a student. I have mixed feelings looking back at the time of the pandemic because first we're still very much in a pandemic and the last two years have been quite eventful and a lot has changed in my life. It's difficult to describe how the pandemic has affected my life because it has affected it in many aspects and my life has also changed a lot, independently from the fact that there has been a global pandemic happening. During the first lock-down, that lasted for two months, the hardest thing was being so much at home with my parents, because I've haven't been that much in my family home because I don't get along too well with my parents. It was hard to be living so closely with them, although I'm still very privileged, living in a quite big house with possibilities to get out of each other's ways. My network was crumbling away, and all the things I did to keep myself busy, occupied and healthy were not possible anymore. I've been a political activist for the past four years, and so suddenly these people with whom I could be more myself than at home, with whom I could do things that weren't centred around my identity, who addressed me properly, were not there. I was out as queer to my parents, but only, like, the sexuality part of it. I wasn't out as nonbinary to them. And so it was a lot of hiding during the months of lockdown, a lot of self-restriction of how I represent myself and how I act. During the lockdown, one of my partners was with me because they only wanted to visit me for a weekend at the beginning and then all the borders closed, and they couldn't get back to their country. So out of a better option, they stayed with me and my parents for a few months and that was something good to the entire story because I had someone on my side. But for them, it was not easy, they didn't see one of their other partners in over a year as it was not possible to visit them for a very long time. It was valuable to have someone on my side in my home, I could cuddle, someone who could show me they loved me, physical touch is something very important to me, the ability to be hugged, to feel physical love. So, I was very lucky to have it because I don't know what I would have done if I had been on myself. I was not doing well at that time mentally, so I was very glad that I didn't have to be on my own. I stayed in touch with my friends, but it was difficult because they were experiencing difficulties as well. It was difficult supporting each other only through the Internet. We tried organising some political stuff, but it was very hard and very demotivating and frustrating because there was no end in sight. The hardest thing about the lockdown was not knowing when it will end. For me and my queer friends it was hard supporting each other mentally, I was still privileged because I had my partner with me, but the rest of my friends, they really didn't have anyone who accepted their craziness and could hug, cuddle them and tell them they will be alright. Most of them were pretty much very alone. I wanted but couldn't help them because of restrictions that I accepted

because I saw a sense in them. However, I broke them once because my best friend had been raped by his roommate and I just drove over there. Despite the pandemic rules, it was important to go there. I would have loved to get him to come stay with me, but he couldn't because if someone had caught him, we would all have been in a lot of trouble. Queer people depend on solidarity from other queer people, we are each other safety net, but that just dropped, not entirely, but it changed a lot, and it didn't change for the better. On another note, 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. The pandemic has influenced my life because it did it to all of us. For me, I don't know if it was for the better or for the worse. I don't like to think about it too much because it's nothing I can change, and I like to direct my energy into the present.

Specifically telling quotes: “The hardest thing about the lockdown was not knowing when it will end. For me and my queer friends it was hard supporting each other mentally, I was still privileged because I had my partner with me, but the rest of my friends, they really didn't have anyone who accepted their craziness and could hug, cuddle them and tell them they will be alright.”

Keywords: friends, queer community, mental health, rape, breaking rules, physical relations.

LU02

Title: As a survivor of domestic violence and migrant, taking every opportunity to get a permanent residence permit

Narrative: “Summary of the main aspects of narrative cycle 2: You came in Luxembourg with your Canadian husband who was working for an IT company. For the first time in your life, you did not work. Your husband couldn't find a job because of the covid crisis and his mental and emotional behaviour and feelings turn into a nightmare for himself and for everybody. He became very aggressive even physically and one night the neighbours called the police. At first the support services couldn't because you came to the country under a private contract. When you got an humanitarian visa, you could get support. However, the search for a shelter was long as they had no places. Finally you got a place in a foyer. You were waiting at that time for progress on your divorce and possibilities of staying in Luxembourg.

Narrative cycle 3 : Last April, a friend of mine who is also Mexican-French nationality by now and married to a man with a disability offered me a job. The husband had an accident, he broke his neck, great damage in his spine, so he cannot move his body. So he needs constant help. They offered me a permanent contract for 16 hours a week. I

work 4 hours a day to help him. It's not enough 16 hours, it is not a big salary but thanks for that. With this permanent contract I could renew my residence permit even if it still as "vie privée" (based on family situation). Now I have the permit to work but only as a "family helper" so cleaning or helping adults, sick people, children. I am 58 so sometimes I feel it is really complicated physically, it is very demanding. Sometimes, he needs more time, so I stay as I am thankful to them. As soon as I became a wage earner here, I was cut off the help in the foyer (shelter). I was receiving almost 500 euros a month and now I receive 700 euros only and I have to pay a rent of 200 nearly 300 a month to the shelter. No more help, it has been hard, I couldn't save too much. It is hard and now in November I had to leave the foyer and I haven't received any help, they are not happy with me because I have not yet changed my address but I couldn't do that yet as my friends were away. They just gave me back the amount paid for the last month in the foyer, 200, nearly 300 back, and that's it. I said to them, they pamper you and then just kick you out. So now, I cannot afford a rent in Luxembourg so I have two friends who will help me stay in their houses for the coming two months, the rest of the year and hopefully for the winter in order to find a job. While I was living the foyer, I could not search for another job as I didn't know where I will be staying. It will be difficult anyway to work an additional 24 hours as the type of jobs I am allowed to accept is very demanding so perhaps 16 hours more (32 in total) so I can manage to get more money and pay something in Luxembourg. I have attended a course "vivre ensemble" to be ready to get the nationality. I have studied Luxembourgish language, level A1, and I started level A2 but I haven't finished that because of other constraints. I will try to take the exam in May because my permit expires end of July, and I turn 5 years in the country mid June.. So I will try if it is possible, I have the five years, I am working, I am learning the language, so I will try then and I will not have to depend on another man. I have a relation with a Belgian man and I will also live with him in this period, marrying him is complicated as Belgian law requires a two-year relationship, and I met him almost a year ago as a friend. He is very nice but I want to try to do it by myself. After the five years, I will also get some help from the government, people receive a lot of help here for the kids, etc, but I am not receiving any help. I get some food, though I have received it for a year, it is called "Buttek" (Buttek grocery shops are mainly supplied by collecting food products close to their use-by date from supermarkets). I am searching for a better job as an administrator but currently my resident permit only allows me to perform some jobs which are very physical and exhausting. So one step at a time. At least I have that job that permits me to perhaps ask for a longer residence permit. My son is also studying, he is living with his girlfriend he is completely independent, so that is a relieve for me. I have to try to stay here, going back is not an option yet for me, I have to try. My son is here and I am here and I will always be thankful for that. Being active and positive is the way I used to cope with my situation. I am a Latin, social, so I met a lot of people. I know quite a number of South American, the Luxembourgish teacher is now becoming a friend. That is easy for me, natural. I need to try, I am not going back just like that. My permit ends by the end of July, from May to June, I will try to pass as many exams and try to find another job. I think the worse part is over. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Still hope. I believe that when you are positive, positive is also coming to you."

Specifically telling quotes: “They offered me a permanent contract for 16 hours a week. I work 4 hours a day to help him. It’s not enough 16 hours, it is not a big salary but thanks for that. They know my situation, they helped me and my son before, during and now. I accepted because I know them, who else than me can do that as I am a bit part of the family and this helps me. I am practicing the language in coffee shops, in the foyer, it is easy to do so, I am doing a lot myself to learn the language. So I will try if it is possible, I have the five years, I am working, I am learning the language, so I will try then and I will not have to depend on another man. You have to move on, to keep swimming, keep floating.”

Keywords: migrant, residence permit, heavy work, shelters, low income.

LU03

Title: Escaping her nice house to be closer to her family for a new start

Narrative: “I would first like to come back to some thoughts I had about the decisions of the authorities, which hurt, because they worked in a hurry, in panic, they didn't know what was going to happen and they kept us all-in a cage. At that time, one can understand, but in hindsight, what I know about myself, my daughter and her husband with two little girls, had to start suddenly teleworking, it was bad for the children, their parents and I was dying of loneliness. But in reflecting back, if the authorities could have understood that without symptoms after a month, you are not contagious, they could have accepted that little children be kept by their grandparents. It was stressful for the parents, it was not good for the children, too much by themselves and for me, I would have felt useful and been comfortable. In August 2020, in order to drop off my granddaughters for a week’s stay, the parents used local routes to avoid being blocked at the border by the police. In our case, it was for a good cause,, I was helping the parents by keeping the children for a few days. In the autumn of 2021, I was very bad psychically. Unlike most people I did not feel that the crisis was over. So I continued to be isolated and anxious. It's only since the summer of 2022 that I'm better. I have been successfully occupying my brain to no longer think about this totally derivating world. Not to hear about Covid all the time is beneficial. It has become possible, because it has become less virulent. During the lockdown, there was a lot of goodwill. All that has evaporated and people are functioning as before. I am well aware that covid is still there. So for me, wearing a mask is a matter of course, even though some people look at me as an outsider. I understood what it meant to be depressed. Other people probably suffer more than I do. It is only since the summer of 2022, when I started to function more normally again and I regained completely forgotten feelings, that I realized that I had had a depression. Finding psychological support is difficult whitout someone to advise me. I do not want to have an unknown name in the directory. In the past I have been to several psychologists and it didn't really help me. It's getting better because I've realised that I only have to deal with the present moment. I don't think about everything else. I don't listen to television or radio, except for the programmes that interest me. Recently

I decided to move near my daughter and my granddaughters in Belgium. And that's a big thing for me to do because I have a big house and I'm a collector of small things. I love flea markets so it's a huge task to clear out this house. Such clutter is certainly not conducive to psychological balance. My new house is in an intergenerational complex. There is everything you need and a lot of activities to do. In Luxembourg, I had to travel a lot to find activities and I don't want to do that in the evening anymore. I'm running away, it's a flight to safety, I think I'm going to a better life. I will have more time to take care of myself and not to take care of the outside of my home, I would not need a car anymore, to be in traffic etc. Having decided to move near my daughter gives me a new purpose in life: to empty my house and move out. I would be available for the little ones if needed. I stayed in Luxembourg for so long, once I was retired, because everything is on the same level, and you can grow old there despite health problems and it is a very nice house. But this house will not respond to me, if I spoke to it. It is better to abandon the house and save myself by moving closer to my family, to have human contacts. I can understand that some people are fearful of the vaccine. I accept that people don't get vaccinated, but I don't accept that people say it's the end of the world to wear a mask. Teachers, for example, yes, it is very difficult for them to teach with a mask. But why refusing to wear a mask on the bus? Why coming to protest from neighbouring countries and create disorder? The negative reactions of the public, strongly impact me, because it shows that there is no solidarity."

Specifically telling quotes: "Recently I decided to move near my daughter and my granddaughters in Belgium. And that's a big thing for me to do because I have a big house and I'm a collector of small things. I love flea markets so it's a huge task to clear out this house. Such clutter is certainly not conducive to psychological balance."

Keywords: isolation, anxieties, new start, intergenerational, family, leisure

LU04

Title: Kick-out of his appartement in winter despite the rules and staying in a shelter.

Narrative: "In February 2022, something happened and I was kicked out of my flat by my landlord, well, my former landlord, who took the keys from me when it was the middle of February and I found myself in a reception centre for the night. And there to sleep, it's not easy with the noise they all make there, they arrive half-drunk, it's a bit of anarchy, but fortunately I had this place to sleep. I asked around afterwards, it's like in France, from the 15th of October to the 15th of March, you can't be evicted from your accommodation and yet my landlord, he didn't mind, in the middle of February, outside. He kept all my stuff, the last time I called him back, he told me "If you pay me, you'll get your stuff" but it's blackmail and how can I know what I owe him to the exact sum since everything is in my papers and all my documents are there, in my computer. Here there is something wrong with the prices here, the soaring housing prices are terrible but why does the government let it happen

I got the covid when I came here to U in February 2022. I was the first one to test positive and I was taken to another centre and quarantined for ten days as I was not vaccinated. So then I see two, three, the next day more, and the nurse says, "Well, all the people from U are going to come here soon. So the ones who got it, they all said I gave it to them. That's ridiculous. Now I'm up to date with the vaccinations.

I didn't have any problems during the lockdown, it didn't bother me. What does bother me is the pressure from businesses to reopen, it's all about business here and when we reopened the number of infections went through the roof. Also, when the mask was no longer compulsory on public transport, people said "ah it feels good", I continued to wear it, and people told me "you know it's no longer compulsory".

During the quarantine, it was also like that, there were many people in the reception centre and there were two of us per room. I didn't have any particular problem because I am someone who adapts to the situation.

Here, I didn't see much mutual aid, but fear, yes, as soon as you cough, and the reports every day in the newspapers, and misinformation even from journalists. The elderly, here in Luxembourg, they keep the mask, it's good, it's a good protection and in the hospitals they keep the rules, it's good. As far as wearing the mask is concerned, I've seen some overzealousness, "tell me sir, would you please put the mask back on, but you can see that I'm smoking, am I going to smoke through the mask? Ah, excuse me". I answer the shepherd to the shepherdess. There was no one near me, it's just to try to annoy someone.

Anything positive? The people who supported each other, it was rather in a limited context, family, between close friends, there, there was mutual aid. The others were more like, they look at you, you have the mask etc. Judgement and no solidarity."

Specifically telling quotes: "I asked around afterwards, it's like in France, from the 15th of October to the 15th of March, you can't be evicted from your accommodation he has no right to kick someone out, but then why did he do it, he didn't mind, in the middle of February, outside. He kept all my stuff."

Keywords: housing, contamination, quarantine, stigmatisation.

LU05

Title: Solidarity between carer in the hospitals and self-sorting of friends

Narrative: "I am 48 years old, I have a 23 year old son who lives with my parents and I have been here at home for a few months. I used to live with my boyfriend. I'm a care assistant, but it was a lot of work and a lot of irritation with people saying "it doesn't exist, it doesn't exist". I used to say "come and see the hospitals", and they used to tell me "you're just a little carer". Then I said to myself, I'll give up, too bad for them.

I wasn't on the front line, on the floors where there were Covid cases, even if sometimes we had to go and help, for example, to turn the patients. We stayed in a "normal" job. We had to work every day, and if we were free, if we were at home, we had the beeper

in case a colleague had Covid. It was not a normal life anymore. I was one of the most flexible because I don't have a small child because often it was 24 hours a day, we slept there on a bed and then we went back. Now it seems easier for us. There was solidarity between the people who work together but not with all the Luxembourgers, the rest are not.

At first I thought, oh, this is still a special story, and when we were told here in Luxembourg that we had to be vaccinated, I thought, oh, no, you have to wait a little longer. And then I saw that my parents, who are old (81 and 83), were vaccinated and I saw that we had less freedom if we didn't get vaccinated, and I said to myself, you're going to wait again, and then when they said no more restaurants, I said to myself, come on, I'll do it. The first vaccination I got sick as if I had the flu. The second one I had a reaction on my arm, and then for the third one I had nothing. I never got the covid, although in the centre there were already three who had had it. And the rest, the mask, it didn't bother me; as I don't have nice teeth, so I could laugh under my mask, nobody saw my teeth (laughs). Now you still see people on public transport wearing the mask, and I think everyone is free for themselves and that's it. The only thing I don't like is when people say "ah and why did you do it, and all that" and I say to myself, I do what I want with my life and with my body and that's all. That was my opinion, otherwise you can't get out, you have to stay in your bubble and even then you can have someone who gets in and has the covid.

My son and my parents had the Covid and at one point because my son works in a big office. Recently, my son wanted to come and see me, and I told him, wait because here there are cases of covid and I don't want you to catch it and pass it to your grandparents. Let's wait a month, because they are at an age where it is more complicated than for us. He agreed and now we're meeting tomorrow, so it's fine.

Not really any positive aspects, the sorting out was done by itself between friends.

Now I'm just waiting for it to stop because I'm waiting for a place in therapy and if it comes back, I might be stuck. But I live from day to day, otherwise I go crazy. It's something we've learned. If we are told tomorrow we have to put the mask back on, well, I'll do it."

Specifically telling quotes: "I got a lot of irritation with people saying "it doesn't exist, it doesn't exist". I used to say "come and see the hospitals", and they used to tell me "you're just a little carer". Then I said to myself, I'll give up, too bad for them."

Keywords: carer, hospital, stigmatisation, contamination, vaccination, solidarity

LU06

Title: Coping with only cash money and restrictive / curfew rules

Narrative: "I was born in Peru and I came to Luxembourg when I was two years old, I grew up here in Luxembourg.

When there was the corona, I was working and I had received my pay, I took everything

off and two days later there was the corona and I went to Delhaize and they refused my money. I was lucky, because there was a small restaurant, which even if it was illegal, still made meals. Otherwise, I wouldn't have had anything to eat. There was an Indian restaurant downstairs, and it was closed from the beginning. The laws were extreme, no right to take food out at first and they saved my life, an Italian restaurant too. The department stores', wouldn't even let me in, they said just with a bank card. I had no choice, I had to eat every day in the restaurant during that time, but they gave me a good price, they knew what my situation was.

There was nothing working, in the evening the city was like dead, there was nobody, like in the film "I am a legend" and we would venture out, we would go into the city, and the police would chase us. It was a 300 euro fine if we got caught. I had a girlfriend, and I used to go to her house until three o'clock in the morning when there was a curfew at 11pm. So I would run home and hide. Even during the day, we could only go out if we had errands to do.

I had the covid but as I had been vaccinated, I only had to do 6 days of quarantine. And then it was very strict. And as there were a lot of people coming in, at first it was two rooms, and then they took military style cots and they filled the rooms. It was chaos. We were locked in our room for 24 hours, it was difficult, there were some very aggressive people because they were deprived of alcohol, I got into trouble with the educators and security because I really needed to get out. But they put pressure on us by saying that if we went out we wouldn't be able to keep the room in the hostel here. That calmed us down. But it was really annoying, we had nothing to do, two people in the room and we didn't know this person. Nowadays, people in quarantine go to hotels.

This pandemic meant a lot of stress for me, with the pressure in the media, it's still a deadly disease, it made me a bit anxious, you can't stop the virus, and which one would be the next virus?

I was working in a DIY shop, they had to close down and I was also a temp, and I was waiting impatiently for it to stop, I had the social integration income but I had to pay my rent, pay for the tests myself, but it lasted 9 months. And then as I lost everything, I was thrown out of my accommodation overnight, because I wasn't protected, I was sub-tenanted and I came directly to the Centre U.

Last year, there were demonstrations, with people who usually didn't take part. I didn't participate, because it's not the right way to ask by destroying. It's not the right way to be heard, but it had to change: the controls, we couldn't go out, the police... and the police took advantage of the situation to let off steam. A guard was fired because he had been at the demonstration, and that's not normal, we can't say what we think anymore. There are also people who have died of old age and who have been added to the list, to increase the number of deaths, the crisis and to have more power. I hope that one day this will stop. Today the police are much more present, they have taken advantage of the pandemic to increase the surveillance of people."

Specifically telling quotes: I got into trouble with the educators and security because I really needed to get out. But they put pressure on us by saying that if we went out we wouldn't be able to keep the room in the hostel here. That calmed us down. But it was really annoying, we had nothing to do, two people in the room and we didn't know this

person.

Keywords: quarantine, housing, cash money, fundamental human rights, police

LU07

Title: Video calls and animals as a way to cope with the isolation

Narrative: "My name is Raymonde, I came here and at first it was quiet and then I went to another place, which was still good too. I protected myself, everything was fine. Then I was brought back here, and suddenly I had covid, that was two years ago. And I got it again two months ago, I always get it here. I get sick, I get bronchitis very easily and it's not good. They say you had it outside but there was someone here who had it and hid it. The weird thing is that on Friday I was negative and on Saturday I did a PCR test and I was really positive. And my boyfriend, he's always passed. He really has a better immune system than I do. There's a lot of stuff but I don't want to talk about it too much.

Here, if you have covid, they now put you in a hotel room. I felt locked in and I had a bit of panic. I'm not used to being alone, not going out, I'm used to walking around. For 6 or 7 days without being able to go out, it's really hard. Fortunately I had the phone and the tablet with the camera because otherwise it wouldn't have been possible. I saw my friend, my birds, I phoned every night and talked to the birds. It's a pity that it's thanks to the animals that we can get by. I couldn't have stood it without the video calls. The first time I was in a quarantine centre, there were six of us. Here I don't know what happened, but there was no test that worked, many people were infected; I'm not saying it's the association's fault but there were many things that didn't work. When I got the results of my test at 21.30, I phoned here to tell them, and I said you have to test everybody but they didn't do anything.

My boyfriend, who I was with all the time, he never got it and neither did my daughter even though she was in contact with someone who had it. I took daffalgan, slept for two days and then the test was still positive, and the next day I was negative. I know I had it here, they tried to convince me I had it somewhere else, but it's not true. My boyfriend never got the covid and that affects me.

I came here to the U centre because of the housing. There was a month gap in the law before the scheme was extended, and they took the opportunity to kick me out. The judge kicked me out, I had one month to leave. And I just phoned in time to get a room at the centre here. I would never forgive the judge for that, I don't know what I'll do if I see her again. Normally I'm not aggressive but you never know. We all know each other here.

For my part, what helped me was to wear the mask, not to go out. I phoned the commune and said I'm not going out any more, I need food, and they said, what do you want? We'll send you something. The commune really helped. They went to a big shop and they brought us some ready-made meals, some fruits, in a state of crisis, it's not easy, I understood that.

The crisis still hurt me. Nothing positive came out of it."

Specifically telling quotes: For my part, what helped me was to wear the mask, not to go out. I phoned the commune and said I'm not going out any more, I need food, and they said, what do you want? We'll send you something. The commune really helped. They went to a big shop and they brought us some ready-made meals, some fruits, in a state of crisis, it's not easy, I understood that.

Keywords: isolation, contamination, anger, video call, food aid.



Latvia

LV01

Title: The Pandemic gave me the opportunity to experiment with my self-expression.

Narrative: It was all very strange. It is clear that nothing was clear. In general, I liked that you could just sit at home and completely control who you communicate with, what you do, and so on. It was difficult to imagine how life would develop further and what would come of it. During the next waves of Pandemic I felt calm, I knew what to expect. However, it was difficult sometimes to keep in touch with one of my friends, because there was no way to meet. with some of my friends we called directly on Zoom, for a large amount of time, played online games. But in general, the main thing is just correspondence and messages, if there was an energy in me, sometimes I called up and did homework with friends from the class. I wasn't able to get vaccinated right away because it wasn't open for my age group yet. As soon as the registration was opened, I immediately signed up as soon as the opportunity arose. It became a little calmer that this possibility of vaccination appeared. I was a little angry that people completely ignored this [vaccination], given that in our country, in principle, this [vaccination] relatively quickly became an opportunity for everyone. Well, in general, I got the feeling that I can afford to meet someone, go somewhere. But with the vaccine, I got an inner feeling that there is some level of protection for me and for those who are at home, and so on. My struggle was depression, I went to a psychiatrist even before the first complete lockdown, so I had pills for some time. But in general, it's not that it's something out of the ordinary, but like, in general, depression, a depressed state, which, it seems to me, a lot of people had at that time. The first psychotherapist, whom I didn't really like, didn't help me. Because, well, I went there only 2 times, he didn't even have time to advise me something to really help me somehow. And the psychiatrist also did not work very well - these pills were poorly selected, and after some time I got off of them because they did not work. And then it was no longer possible to come for a consultation because the lockdown began again. My biggest gain during the Pandemic is self-realization. I thought more about my gender identity and so on. In the comfort of my room, I began to experiment more actively with makeup, some artistic types of clothing, and so on. It gave me the opportunity to reflect on how I can relate to cis-female gender identity. During the pandemic, I thought more about gender identity, but also without any extreme realizations, because I knew for a very long time that I was definitely not heterosexual. During the pandemic, with makeup experiments and so on, I thought about how I express my identity and how it generally affects my identity, and so on. In principle, as a result, I did not come to any new conclusions. I kept thinking and thinking, and I didn't come up with anything new. But yes, really, it seems to me that it helped me that I could experiment so much with my self expression, there with clothes and make-up, and so on, went through that awkward moment when you still don't fully know what you are doing outside people. And when I started going out like this, I already understood what I was doing, I already understood what looked good, what looked bad.

And it helped me that I could do it [experiments with looks] in my comfort zone [at home and unintruded] completely. And plus, in general, navigating some kind of depression, some kind of mental problems - I began to understand myself more in some aspects, just how my psychology works. It seems to me that it would be very good if there would be an opportunity to talk a little with a professional and not be afraid to say that I have a girlfriend or something like that. Because I myself know, when I went to a psychotherapist, I was always a little nervous - either you don't tell some things that worry you, but if you do, suddenly something is wrong. Therefore, it seems to me that it would be good if there was such a line of support specifically designed for the LGBT community.

Specifically telling quotes: It seems to me that it would be very good if there would be an opportunity to talk a little with a professional and not be afraid to say that I have a girlfriend or something like that.

Keywords: seclusion, loneliness, mental health, the search for identity, time for self-growth

LV02

Title: Anxiety and fear drove me to burnout

Narrative: When there was the first lockdown for 2 weeks, there was a complete feeling that these 2 weeks would pass and everything would end. I just went to my parents in Lithuania, because at that time I worked as a teacher in acting studios and they stopped their activities and I thought: "I'll go to my parents for 2 weeks, they will be happy." As a result, I got stuck for 3 months, because the borders were closed, I could hardly come back. And in fact, now it seems that this is how we lived all their lives. But then it was all strange and it seemed that 2 weeks would be enough for it to end. I was able to escape back to Riga. Somehow by this time everything had already become calmer and already in the first wave we understood how and what works. It was as if everyone was ready for the second wave, with all sorts of zoom activities, other zoom things. It also seemed that just a little more, and everything would be fine, everything would be as before. I was working, our studio switched to online mode, and during the lockdown, I was sitting with my parents and thought, why not give individual lessons in speech, in the Russian language. I wrote an ad on Facebook, in all sorts of groups for moms of schoolchildren and all that. I had students and I still study with some of them. During the second lockdown, there were already classes in the studios, in Zoom, we had already adapted, my individual classes were conducted. On the spot, the students also came to me, I came to them, which at some point was forbidden to do, but we did it anyway. And it was a little scary and unstable that, at any moment, everything could close, you could lose your job, and I'm here alone, my relatives are in Lithuania. And this made me very anxious that there would be nothing to pay for the apartment. I immediately went to get vaccinated as soon as it became possible. And I strongly condemn those who do not want to do

this, because in this case it is not the personal choice of each person, it is the responsibility for everyone. Because, for example, I, vaccinated, can still catch the virus, not notice it and go somewhere to infect another person who is not vaccinated and he will die because he talked to me. I don't want to take responsibility for the fact that I killed someone, and it's like it's not my responsibility if they didn't. But in general, yes, I strongly condemn and do not understand. Before vaccines were generally invented, my mother got sick with covid and it was very bad, she was in intensive care, she was barely pulled out. And that's why I'm afraid of people who deny vaccination, who deny science. Fear that there will be nothing to pay for the apartment, and to live, and so on. It was scary to get sick, because before my eyes was an example of my mother. And I didn't want to repeat it. And probably there was not enough social life, I became very tired of Zoom. I continued to recruit students and grabbed any part-time job that was offered to me. And at some point, this fear grew into the fact that I overloaded myself with work, I had a lot of work. For a very long time I could not get rid of this feeling. As far as I was not tired, I led as many classes as there were. Therefore, this is it. Not that that would be the best solution to the problem. The solution to the problem that led me to burnout. And this resulted in the fact that I felt bad every day, and every day I drank wine. And it's getting bigger and it's bad. I made an appointment with a psychiatrist. I still work with the same therapist online, it helped me a lot. At first I started having anxiety attacks, so I started having panic attacks, but in general I was constantly depressed. I stopped drinking alcohol at some point, because I decided that this was not an option. And I turned to specialists and it fixed a lot of things in my life. Therefore, I strongly advise everyone to go to psychotherapy, even if it seems that there are no problems ... I had sessions when I thought, well, why did I pay for this session, I have nothing to talk about, I sit for 10 minutes and don't know what to say, and then we start to say something and the session ends in tears and in deep conversations. This is a much better way. And of course, friends helped a lot, we all supported each other, understood and accepted. It's great to have people in life to turn to. I downloaded Tik Tok (laughs). More than two years ago, as it always happens on Tik Tok - you like a video with cats, you like a video about how cabbage pies are made, and Tik Tok is like: "I'm gay!". I'm like, "Tik Tok, why are you showing me queer videos?". Well, yes, it all helped to understand myself. Because in my childhood and youth there was always a homophobic environment, and secondly, there was just a minimal amount of information, and of course, it was difficult for me to associate myself. And then when you download Tik Tok and it's like, "Did you also think that at school you would look at another girl and think that if you were a guy, you would kiss her? Did you also think that all straight girls think like that?". And I'm like - yes! Well, there were a lot of those things. All this helped me a lot to understand myself, finally some kind of representation appeared, finally I saw who also belong to the LGBT community and these were ordinary people, because before that, when I thought about it - at school or already at the university, it seemed that it was from some other world. Now I have a stable job at a company that doesn't lay off employees during a pandemic. I am sure about it. Since September, I started working at an ordinary office job, with a normal contract, with sick leave, vacation, and so on, and for the first time I felt more free. And yes, if I feel bad and I'm tired, then I can cancel the class. Before, I couldn't afford it. I have my own psychiatrist. I have me. I now have cats, it's very cool, you take care of

them, they always come to support you when you feel bad.

Specifically telling quotes: And this resulted in the fact that I felt bad every day, and every day I drank wine. And it's getting bigger and it's bad.

Keywords: Burnout, employment, mental health, vaccination, identity

LV03

Title: I didn't go anywhere

Narrative: "At that time [begining of the Pandemic] I was still studying. It was very interesting because you couldn't understand what would happen next. It feels like one day you sleep, the next day you wake up and you have a million questions that have no answers at all. Sometimes it seems that it is really very crazy, and how you really have to buy all the buckwheat and so on. Namely, a lot of shock and stress began regarding the future of life, both about studies and myself... I had to go to an endocrinologist about prescriptions and hormones... and there were a lot of questions... also about the lockdown..."

I remember that I was under a lot of stress about my studies because at that time I was in my 2nd year of studies and I had a lot of questions about how the studies would go, how we would finish, how the defense of coursework would go, and the like. And then they announced that that's it, now you learn remotely and it hurt me a lot because I... I'm a social person, and lectures from home... well, yes, it was difficult. And the stress continued all the time: what about the doctor's visits, or... I don't know, about the travel, because I had to travel for a longer time to the nearest doctor. And yes, it was a really big shock. After the summer, I realized that I had no motivation to study at all. I am an extrovert by nature and I need communication and people and events and do not like being alone. When it was summer, everything was OK, and then September came and it all started, the curfew and I managed to get sick with covid, quite badly. And then they introduced those certificates and the like, and it was even more complicated because I hadn't changed my documents yet, that is, I had the girl's documents and I had to face problems with making the vaccine, with showing the certificate and so on, which was very unpleasant . A mundane thing like going to the store caused stress. And of course I had, I don't know, not shame, but such a very, very unpleasant feeling inside every time: I wonder what will be thought of me, what will be said... because by nature I don't look at all the way I was supposed to look in the documents. And people don't know things like that yet... And that also led to me taking an academic year at school. And it was really very emotional and difficult for me to deal with this situation. That stress continued throughout. The first vaccine was generally good for me because I know people who work at the private clinic and everything was fine. The only thing is, I had a funny case... when I came to the office and the doctor asked me to fill out a questionnaire, and he said: "It says 'girl'..." . And I smiled and he's like, "Oh, okay, it's fine." It wasn't unpleasant. And yes, the second time was perfect. Made by a very cool girl, no questions and no

problems at all, everything was very cool. But I didn't go anywhere, only because I didn't want to show the certificate because I was always worried that I would be asked some questions. Well, yes, during the entire pandemic, when I had to show the certificates, I avoided it, because I had internal stress. Often, when I had to go to the shops, I drove with my mother. And yes, when the mom is standing in the back saying, "That's my kid, leave him alone," the store security guard doesn't say anything. And yes, I don't even remember those unpleasant experiences, but I think that's my personality, I try not to think about anything bad.

All my friends are cis-people, and I couldn't think of a way to communicate about my problem. How I go to the store and I worry about it. I was in a depressed mood because I had to read the same news. Even without wanting to, you want to, you are interested, and you try to calm yourself down and it doesn't work. And also that it was difficult for me as an extrovert because I had to work remotely without talking to colleagues, which is an important part of my life. I definitely missed socializing. And yes, there was also the eternal worry about certificates, worry about loved ones and getting sick, and there were many unpleasant things related to what you cannot influence at all, I feel powerless because I could not influence anything. Well, yes, that eternal confusion. And more thoughts about what can happen to the world in general. I started playing a lot of computer games, such online computer games, I also talked to foreigners and such, and it was so, I would even say, relaxing. And yes, it turns out that in general with unknown people... well, I was not used to playing computer games and communicating with people, and there was not really enough time for that [before the pandemic] and that was the moment that it was the only thing I could do, being home. And it was a very interesting and cool experience, and now I have new contacts and have visited these people. It was a very positive solution to this problem. I have not specifically sought support during the pandemic. I've seen a psychotherapist [before], but I think I've managed pretty well on my own during this pandemic. I just have a couple of good people around me. The process of changing documents would help me survive the next pandemic: if I had changed documents, there would be no problems with certificates. The more times you have to show documents, the more anxiety you get. You can choose to buy or not buy alcohol, but you can't choose not to show your documents when you go to the store. In general, the process of changing documents. And that's probably the only thing I can think of."

Specifically telling quotes: "But I didn't go anywhere, only because I didn't want to show the certificate because I was always worried that I would be asked some questions. Well, yes, during the entire pandemic, when I had to show the certificates, I avoided it, because I had internal stress." "Often, when I had to go to the shops, I took my mother with me. And yes, when mom stands behind me and says, "That's my kid, leave him alone," the store security guard doesn't say anything."

Keywords: transition process, vaccination certificate, anxiety, avoidance, gender identity

LV04

Title: The whole world got to know what it's like to be on parental leave.

Narrative: "I had just returned from childcare leave when the pandemic started. I started working as a self-employed person with a small workload, I organized parenting courses for a parenting portal. There was no knowledge of tools to do everything remotely, so I started looking for information, tools, and how to do it. Without knowing anything about it, I am asked to provide courses remotely. I had heard about zoom, but nothing more. Everyone is sitting in their homes, they have to think about how to connect together, the digital literacy of the participants was very different. Parents applied, and we all studied together, both course listeners and lecturers. I already had a small workload, the youngest child was 1.5 years old, and the parental leave was just over. I was offered to become self-employed so employed didn't pay social contributions. I felt that I was being cheated, no social contributions. Even the State Revenue Service could not explain to me what should be done better to have social contributions. I left in August because I couldn't bear not being paid what we had agreed with all the taxes. As a self-employed person, I didn't get any benefit [downtime benefit from the state] because I had too little work experience, income, so I couldn't claim the benefit because I had just come from parental leave.

I was still self-employed for a while, I call the State Revenue Service, I cry on the phone, I don't know what to do, how to deal with taxes, costs. All part-time regimes are disadvantageous for the worker. You are nothing to the state, you do the work yourself, you manage on your own. Even the accountant didn't know how to write off my expenses to be ok. You are a specialist with a master's degree, ten years of experience, but you cannot support yourself. I felt like a 'socially correctable' [a term used by the Finance Minister to describe the self-employed]. Got pennies. 400 euros maximum, but I could combine such work with studies. I was afraid to take the children somewhere. I drew a line, we won't do anything, we won't go anywhere. We also spent the entire pandemic at home. The oldest child had already had a turn to go to the municipal kindergarten [free of charge, parents only pay for meals, in order to be admitted, you have to wait in line]. We decided not to let him go. I was at home with two children, I started working in that situation. I worked from home. Sitting at home and its abnormal narrowness, all on top of each other. The husband continued to go to work because the office there was empty. He needed a special program, computer equipment. I earn much less, so I stayed at home in autumn and winter. It was hard, draining. If the main earner is the husband, then he must continue working as before. At first there was no question that I should stay at home. It seemed that it would be short and that you could mobilize in the short term. But not in the long run. I started working full-time in 2021, I was no longer self-employed. Then there was the craziest time, when everything went into a strict lockdown. Yes, we could take the children to the kindergarten, but since there was a Covid death in the family, the grandmother died, we did not take them to the kindergarten. Then I told my husband that I can't be alone, he stayed at home for a month (when there was a lockdown). I started to give up, put cartoons for children to watch. There were situations when the only nanny was the TV, I subscribed to Netflix. We started taking children to

kindergarten only in the spring of 2022. The oldest child received the vaccine. I thought - I'm not doing so bad, I can handle it. I was aware that the country had limited resources. I would also be ashamed to ask for help. There is a certain stigma there - you ask for help. I can't be ready for that. The pandemic made it clear that you are alone against the world. I have never relied on others. I only rely on myself. The fact that the main attitude of the country was to save the economy was very palpable. Everything was on people's shoulders. There wasn't much support from my employer either, work only gave me a computer much later, I had to work with my own. We spent our money, our resources. The employer saved [resources]. Everything is up to the individual. It's good that you had your own resources, that you had help from the whole family. 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. I was afraid that we would get sick and die, that the children and parents [would get sick]. It was a big fear, now it seems funny how I was afraid. Now there is no fear at all.

Dark time. At the same time you are united with everyone, but at the same time you are alone. The whole world got to know what it's like to be on parental leave. It's good that the husband also experienced everyday life [at home], was more with the children, it was a good experience. I am all for paternity leave for fathers.

Even now, everything continues. Kindergarten does not take place for my daughter, because the teacher has Covid, the group is closed. All this is still very relevant. It is not difficult for me to isolate myself, I am law-abiding, I would sit at home [in case of the next pandemic]. Now I would understand how to better organize my life. Still, there is such a thought in my head: just in case. We built a summer house, we can live there: 'just in case'. Now thinking about everything is like 'just in case'.

I would be calmer. I now better understand the stages and waves of the crisis, and I now know better where to look for information. It is important that I have the correct taxpayer status so that I am not in the gray area. Many women were in the gray area. It is not comfortable for me, the classic job, but I am aware that the issue of taxes is essential. We are not ready for war, I don't want to think about it."

Specifically telling quotes: "A dark time, you are united with everyone, but at the same time you are alone." "It is important that I have the correct taxpayer status so that I am not in the gray area. Many women were in the gray area." "The fact that the main attitude of the country was to save the economy was very palpable. Everything was on people's shoulders."

Keywords: social contributions, self-employed, lockdown, staying at home, children

LV05

Title: Homophobes are the ones who don't want to wear masks or get vaccinated

Narrative: "I remember that the day the state of emergency was declared, I was with my ex-girlfriend, we went to buy some kind of pizza. And I remember that she read a message on the Internet - there is an emergency. And I was like, "Wow, what does that really mean?". Because there were those jokes before, yes, there is some kind of corona, some kind of covid. I remember people being stressed and buying a lot of toilet paper and stuff. I remember, I also had a moment of panic, because everyone was buying a lot of something, and I tried too. I bought some pancake mixes there, or all kinds of flour like that, you just add water and eggs to them and you just make something. I bought flour, I bought oats, toilet paper, disinfectants. And, I remember that the prices were going up and they bought everything... And you couldn't get the masks normally... Our company is a Norwegian company and there [Norway] people already started working remotely, but we only started working from home in December 2020. Because until December we worked from the office. At one point, my supervisor tried to drive me and my colleague to work in his car so that we would not have contact with other people. That spring, I remember our job paid for scooters, so commuting to work on a scooter. Then we also had testing at work, I think there was voluntary testing at work in the summer... and of course all that wearing masks in the office and all that... And I noticed that before the pandemic I was using cosmetics, and then during the pandemic i don't wear makeup at all because all those masks and everything, what's the point? Vaccination began in early spring. At first, people in risk groups could get vaccines. I wasn't really in that group, but then I remember I got the first jab in May, I signed up and stood in line for hours and it gave me hope, "Oh yeah, we'll all get vaccinated and get on with our lives". It was very naive to think about now. At that point it was hope. The main thing that was missing was physical contact with people. Especially during the pandemic, I realized that I really missed everyday things - going out for coffee with my girlfriend. And I realized that I needed that physical contact, and it was sorely lacking at that moment. It feels like you just live in four walls and that's why I was glad that I continued to work, because many people were laid off. And secondly, that I have to go to the office, even though I can catch covid, I had a reason to leave the house, somehow socialize and meet my colleagues. Still feeling lonely, especially because you can't meet your community... Mental health definitely took a turn for the worse. All that isolation, and especially at the beginning of 2021, I worked from home for about three months and my mental health really deteriorated. I couldn't bring myself to make some sort of routine, to dress normally, because what's the point - I work from home, I can work in my pajamas. You get out of bed, sit down, sit at the computer and then again, you just get up after work and go to bed. And I couldn't get up and leave the house, go for a walk... Certainly my depression worsened at that moment. In the summer I applied to a psychologist and I went through Zoom and talked to the psychologist. It helped, it's not like she was saying anything brand new. But she helped put everything in perspective, listened to me, assigned all kinds of homework, gave suggestions... At that time, we were paid about 8 times for the work, and then we could still get 8 times for free. Well, at the

moment there are not enough funds to go to a psychologist. But I don't really feel the need at the moment either, somehow I manage. Also, I remembered, there were those 3 months when I worked from home, and my other girlfriend also worked from home. We ended up living together very quickly, since when we started dating. We started going on dates and then it was announced that there was going to be a lockdown and we tried to actually go on a date every day while we could still go out. And then the three months we worked from home.. you just annoy each other. Well, yes, it was difficult for the relationship. During the pandemic, I have realized what values are important to me in people. Both in friends and romantically. And I have understood my needs more. Both the pandemic and a psychologist helped to understand all this. I realized that people are very selfish, starting with the fact that they had to wear their masks... To me, it was like respect - you put on a mask for others to protect all those people. And for many it was a problem that "it limits freedom". It's actually a good thing that many feel so oppressed and restricted. I am LGBT, I have no rights at all. People were finally starting to understand what it was like to be oppressed, what it was like to be a minority. And then there were people who have to sit in self-isolation, but they just walk around, or just don't wear a mask, stand on a trolleybus and cough. If you don't respect other people so much and risk other people's lives... It seemed funny that the same people who are homophobic are the ones who don't want to wear masks or get vaccinated (laughs). I became active in the LGBT community during the pandemic. I was at the Active Rainbow event, because at that moment all the restrictions were not in effect. And I volunteered and went to those events, met new people, specifically people from the LGBT community, because I didn't really have any LGBT friends. I wanted to be in the community. I wanted people around to see that LGBT people exist, they are normal, they are human. And by getting involved, I, first of all, help myself and others, because we are in the same community. And I made friends, and it feels like you're not alone, and that gave me a lot of joy. Anytime we got together, I felt so energized and so positive afterwards and it all helped me so much. It was like: "wow, there are gays in Riga! We have gays!". And it also helped to accept myself more: "Okay, I am gay". And yes, after that I just tried to inspire other people. Unlike me, when I was growing up, no one could set an example for me. And I also started to put more gay stuff, lgbt stuff in my profiles on social networks.

During the pandemic, there were also protests, "Partners" [civil union initiative] protests, and we went to them. We stood in masks, we observed two meters. The main thing is that we can meet and spend time together [if something similar happens again]. And just an emphasis on feeling good physically. There should also be some kind of help with mental health, especially for the LGBT community, because we have more mental health problems in the community than straight people, and that's why I really hope... We had a project during the pandemic called "Hear me. See me. Include me." and there we had group therapies and also individual therapies with therapists. First of all, it was for the LGBT community, it was such a safe space. In principle, we understood and listened to each other so well. This should happen more often and be available. Plus there is another problem that it is difficult to find therapists in Latvia who understand LGBT people at all."

Specifically telling quotes: “Plus there is another problem that it is difficult to find therapists in Latvia who understand LGBT people at all.” “It seemed funny that the same people who are homophobic are the ones who don't want to wear masks or get vaccinated.” “I worked from home for about three months and my mental health really deteriorated. I couldn't bring myself to make some sort of routine, to dress normally, because what's the point - I work from home, I can work in my pajamas.”

Keywords: LGBT, socialization, mental health, community, participation

LV06

Title: Both the high point and the low point

Narrative: “I'm used to talking about others, I'm not used to talking about myself. I was with a lecture in Ventspils [when the state of emergency was introduced], the child was with me. People were in the dark, there was anxiety about the operation of the port [Ventspils]. We were supposed to stay longer, so we decided to go home to be safe. We were traveling by bus, we were afraid to breathe (laughs). If you don't have health literacy, you can't be critical, we don't have much health literacy, the lack of knowledge also made it worse. What is a virus, what is a bacterium? We encountered misinformation. Everyone stayed at home, my job is to manage the organization, [The Latvian Platform for Development Cooperation (LAPAS)]. Our specialty is online, some projects are in real life. There was no concern about that online. International activities all stopped, but I got information about what others were doing. Because in other countries, the situation was already more serious, the restrictions were stricter and the experience was already there. Projects stopped, income also stopped. There was a struggle to involve NGOs in the compensation mechanism. It failed. Because [the state] was looking at stable income, but not at projects. It was clear that I would have no money. I am alone with a child. I have loans to pay. I have the competence and confidence that I can find a way out. I am civically active, I also have contacts. I am aware of that. Maybe I wasn't so helpless. Pretty soon I was watching what was happening. There was already an idea in the air that we could improve during this time, develop something new. I also wanted to implement something new and improve myself. I saw info that a hackathon is being held. I was ashamed of what I, already forty years old, was going to do there, but it happened online, so I decided to apply. We created #stayathome. My idea was to help women mothers. My pain is cooking, eating 3 times a day at home all the time. I'm going crazy (laughs)! I even brought in a chef to make the recipe for ready-to-order packages. There is also a drop in income - a package for 3 days, everything is weighed in grams so that there are no losses. This one did not take off [the idea was not developed]. But someone had started talking about supplies, about volunteers, and that's how I joined that group. The idea behind a hackathon is to build a team. I was the only NGO person who knew volunteer work. There were more IT people. That's how we got the prize money and 4th place, there was no retreat, we were serious. I had already obtained information from the ministries, what is needed, what are the current events, because I

have connections. This project turned out to be relevant. It was successful. I worked 18 hours a day for the first 2 weeks to launch the project. It was difficult for the family, the relationship with the child suffered the most. [daughter] was at home 24/7, having changed schools. The hardest part was combining work with family. 3 people remained from the first team. The initial team did not stay, IT people are profit-oriented, interest was lost.

The initiative also filled the gaps in my budget, because we also got funding and supporters.

I look at it all systemically. The goal was to empower the local community, not for system's sake, but to create sustainable relationships. Project evaluation surveys show that the relationship was established. Many [volunteers] no longer went through the system [helped individually, built a relationship with the person in question]. That's good. People need to be employed in this crisis system, so that there is a steam release system, an opportunity, also informing people. Low demand [lots of volunteers but few requests for help], I live in a small town myself, social services didn't want to spread the word. There were no encouraging channels of information dissemination. We were seen as competitors. We [society/state] do not see volunteering as a long-term activity for all age groups. I am not disappointed that the project did not remain a long-term collaboration. It showed mobilization and strength, I saw it further in the Belarusian aid team. Also in the case of Ukrainians. It always has an effect. If we see volunteering as an extra, then it's a woman [who is volunteering]. But this is the wrong attitude. I'm just doing my job, but as a bonus I'm helping someone else.

It [the initiative] was a good forge for various people, which is useful further. Many [volunteers] saw how people live, how old people live. Saw a world that you don't see yourself. I think it's a long-term impression. The point applied itself. It was the moment when the restriction was lifted. I understood that the setting from the state, the message is - forget about covid and start spending. Our posters [information about the initiative in the Rimi supermarket chain, which was a supporter of the initiative] were removed in one day. People need to start walking around the shops, start spending. Publicity is important, certainly in this area. All supporters said enough is enough. There was a decision whether we go further as an organization or remain only as crisis volunteers. I am development oriented. Then Belarus [political crisis in Belarus] happened, I started working in this direction, a new team was formed. Back in the summer, we organized a reading campaign for lonely seniors, but nothing went well. We could not get any volunteers. The end. All were in the summer. It's a pity, the system is created and nothing. Then there was a project and a pilot study on how to adapt this system [volunteer support] in municipalities, nothing worked. And then we made peace. Because the system was there, the database is there, but nothing happens. Not everything has to be continuous. I am not focused on disappointment. I can rationally explain to myself. It was difficult for the volunteers. Now I see mistakes that should have been done differently. We don't have a crisis volunteer movement like the Red Cross, we don't have them working as they should. Poor management [of the Latvian Red Cross]. Of course, it's all because I have such competences. I understand that myself. A normal person cannot do this. For me, to a large extent, solving many questions is a matter of one call. Because the system knows me and trusts me. Of course, I am not the

only professional, I also want it.

Of course, there were also micro initiatives, micro self-organization. All Facebook groups that formed. My nerves don't hold it, I don't see it as a safe tool. But on a micro level there are people helping each other. But it is not visible. Small initiatives can be seen in Covid. I as an individual can be resilient, but being resilient in the context of an organization is more difficult. Privately, emotionally, Covid was a time when I developed faster professionally, fell personally. Both the high point and the low point. Burn-out. A child's rage, I save people, but I do not act as a mother. The child will have something to cry about at the psychologist (laughs). I gained a lot of professional confidence in myself, in my abilities. I got into the government's Covid strategy group, I wrote the strategy. The highest achievement. But a very sour experience. With five men who pushed me out. The group included social partners, scientific organizations, ministers, and I, who represented the NGO. The big organizations [social partners] are run by men. The first meeting, I had a great presentation, worked a lot on it. Then the men [from the large social partner organizations] realized that I, with social topics, was threatening access to resources, to the distribution of EU money. The great 5 [Great Five - EMPLOYERS' CONFEDERATION OF LATVIA, Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, The Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments, Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia, The Latvian Council of Science] concluded their agreement, they all marched in a united front. But thanks to Kariņš [Prime Minister], who gave me the word, but could not have. The Magnificent 5 agree among themselves who will get their million. The Latvian Council of Science, which validates everything, also gets money. Brutally. Brutally. I have already exhausted my limit in two years.

I have started to transform myself in my professional field. To focus on what NGOs can do in a crisis, we met with the Ministry of the Interior, we will form a group on the role of NGOs in civil protection. My next step is civil protection, involving people in this area. I want to push forward the role of NGOs, why it is important, what addition is important. This is my covid benefit. This is my benefit."

Specifically telling quotes: "Then the men realized that I, with social topics, threaten the access to resources, to the distribution of EU money." "Privately, emotionally, Covid was a time when I developed faster professionally, fell personally. Both the high point and the low point. Burn-out. A child's rage, I save people, but I do not act as a mother. The child will have something to cry about at the psychologist (laughs)." "Of course, it's all because I have such competences. I understand that myself. A normal person cannot do this. For me, to a large extent, solving many questions is a matter of one call. Because the system knows me and trusts me."

Keywords: NGO, volunteers, hackathon, community, sexism

LV07

Title: Suffocating monotonous everyday life

Narrative: "Now it's hard to understand who was who [covid pandemic year].

I have five children. The little ones [twins] were 2 years old. The older ones had a primary school. In the beginning, we were very mobilized, there was a feeling - it will last a month and everything will be ok. We had a great sense of responsibility in the beginning. We really stuck to the structure, to the rhythm. The kindergarten gave a lot of work for the children to do and also sent materials, at first I was happy [that the children had something to do], but I realized that I could not manage everything. Two children at zoom, kindergarten, plus the little ones. If I didn't have those jobs from kindergarten, maybe I would regret it, but I stopped doing those jobs at one point. I was constantly cooking. It felt like I was just doing it as I was cooking. I still have a lot of trauma from that time because it took me a long time to recover from the trauma of constant cooking to realize that I love to cook. There were a lot of semi-finished products, even after the end of the pandemic, because I was fed up. My big trauma. It was difficult with my son's zoom. It was well organized, my son goes to a private school, everything was well organized, and a lot could be done. The problem was that the son had not experienced a normal learning process at all as a first grader. He doesn't understand that he has to sit in front of the screen, that he has to participate in the class, he didn't understand the learning process. Signs of depression appeared - he didn't want to get out of bed, and he didn't want anything. He is very social and needs friends. Then at some point, individual counseling was allowed, and we somehow arranged that he went to individual counseling every day. Together with one family, we made a bubble for socialization. We slowly got back [out of the depression]. I also allowed screen time. He was on the whatsapp with his friends all the time. By talking to other children, we got out of that [depressed] state. I ended up on antidepressants myself. I took antidepressants for almost two years and went to a psychiatrist. It was a tragedy for me that I couldn't cope, that I needed help. Not anymore now.

The confusion about when those children will be able to return to educational institutions and when they will be able to be away from home.

Suffocating monotonous everyday life. Everything is the same all the time.

The husband went to the office as usual. We have our own office. He did not feel every day [monotonous everyday hardships]. For me, everyday life was different. My business did well, I have educational support services. People no longer had a problem applying for distance learning. It gave a boost to my business. We have not returned to the business face-to-face, everyone has liked the opportunity to study remotely. That's a plus. The covid situation worked for us.

What we did was we swapped duties with my husband. Every day there was a time when I went outside, when we went outside for walks on shifts, just being outside. The little ones missed contact with their peers. We lived like in a barrel. The child was afraid of the hairdresser because he had never been anywhere, not to a store, nowhere, only at home. Now a strange aunt comes up with a pair of scissors. I learned to cut hair myself, from the youtube academy. Now I don't do it anymore.

There was also the classic covid-time decision, we have a dog. One reason was my son's depression. We decided to get a dog. We are happy about this decision. The dog dragged us out, dragged us out of the house. It was good. The twins went to the kindergarten, they see the teachers with masks, and then they took off the masks, they

had to get to know each other again. It is wrong that children who need to learn how to speak have to interact with teachers wearing masks. Because they don't see the movement of the lips, the mouth.

I believe that I did not experience any major difficulties, everything could be solved. We learned to shop remotely, and to plan 2 weeks ahead. The biggest difficulty was buying shoes for the children without measuring them. Every shoe is different, a child's foot has its own specifics. Somehow we solved the problem. I called the store and booked a visit by calling and arranging an individual visit.

I had two operations, but we managed everything. There were no particular difficulties. At the doctor's, I even liked that we had a well-planned time as a family. There were no queues. Now it seems that this good practice is much more flexible than before with the family doctor. No need to waste time on many things that can now be done remotely. This was definitely a time of growth for the company. We no longer waste time on things like delivery, many documents can be completed electronically and on the Internet. Everything can be done remotely.

We had Maxima [grocery supermarket chain] gift cards, which we could spend on food, but not on a shopping bag. The school food packs were very good. Gave once a month, but a very good package. We were asked what we prefer so that we can get exactly what we want and need. The packages were at a very good level. The child benefit [a one-off payment of 500 euros per child] was very helpful. It was better to have it in one big payment rather than the small one. Because we felt a kind of mistrust on the part of the state - that we would drink the money. But the little [distributed benefit payments] just disappeared, wasn't so well spent. The school gave Covid tests for free, it was also much safer, we also did a lot of tests.

Our whole family also got sick. The mild variant of the disease. Without any consequences, without long covid. We got sick.

We vaccinated when we could. It was unpleasant that we sat at home, then the teachers got sick [when they returned to school] and then we had to sit at home again. The endless circle of contacts [contact with covid patients] and sitting at home. I have Ltd., I didn't feel bad [financially]. I paid all taxes, I only had one sick leave during that time. [system works] Prompt and good. Can't say a single bad word. My business went really well, and people started buying electronic learning materials much better. As an entrepreneur, I only have a plus from covid.

We tried to limit contact. My children lost contact with my father because they managed to become estranged. The husband's parents broke the rules, as doctors they did not stick [to the rules] that much. The children have maintained contact with them. I look at the children and see that it will be a new generation. That covid has marked them. I see in children that for them the communication, the border between face-to-face and remote communication has disappeared. Everything is one for them. Everything is freer for them, they don't think about how they look in zoom. I have a feeling that I have some other children at home because there are constant conversations on zoom. People have started to behave better, keeping their distance in public places, and masks are more accepted, in case of illness, runny nose, and cough. Disinfectants in public places. We all have a greater sense of hygiene.

If there was confusion the first time, now there is a plan, and there is knowledge. The first

is about eating, that there are supplies, that there are preparations. Such things are now quite clear on what to do. What has weakened is fatigue, and disbelief that this is serious. I lost my girlfriend to covid, but I can't even take the disease so seriously anymore. I don't see people taking it so seriously again, the fear is gone. I am not angry with the country for not doing something."

Specifically telling quotes: "Suffocating monotonous everyday life. Everything is the same all the time.

The husband went to the office as usual. We have our own office. He did not feel mundane everyday. For me, everyday life was different.

The problem was that the son had not experienced a normal learning process at all as a first grader. He doesn't understand that he has to sit in front of the screen, that he has to participate in the class, he didn't understand the learning process. Signs of depression appeared - he didn't want to get out of bed, and he didn't want anything.

The little ones missed contact with their peers. We lived like in a barrel. The child was afraid of the hairdresser because he had never been anywhere, not to a store, nowhere, only at home. Now a strange aunt comes up with a pair of scissors. I learned to cut hair myself, from the youtube academy. Now I don't do it anymore."

Keywords: children, isolation, mental health, household chores, business

LV08

Title:

Narrative: "I have been a widow for 28 years, I live alone in a small village near the town of Dobele. I have had a disability in the second group since 1994. I work without remuneration, I am the chairman of the board of the Dobele District Association for the Disabled. I got the Astra Zeneca vaccines I needed but got sick.

On March 31, my daughter came to my home with a nurse and did a test, and found that I was infected with Covid-19. And then I was at home for two weeks for quarantine. Then everything was fine after that, I started living, and working since everything has already passed. But in April I got very sick. Then I went to the doctor, to one, to the other... no one said anything, everything is fine. Somewhere from April 15, I started to feel sick, I started to break bones [referring to pain in the muscles], I already told Natasha [daughter] that I feel like a drug addict. Everything hurt - hands, feet, the temperature was absolutely non-existent. I felt very bad for half of April and the whole month of May. At the end of May, I have become very sick and felt that I am losing weight very quickly. And by June 8, I have lost 18 kilograms in two weeks. On the morning of June 8, I was so broken [pain] that I called my son and said that I can't do this anymore, I will commit suicide. Please do something with me, the doctors don't pay any attention to it, they only say that everything is fine, if you walk, and move, then everything is fine, there is no

temperature, then everything is fine. My son took me to Stradiņa hospital in Riga. I was immediately accepted, tested [covid-19], and the test was negative. But I was so sick, I was almost unconscious, then they put me under the system and I was under the system there 24 hours a day. After that, the doctor told me to contact the Dobeles hospital, where I will be accepted for surgery, where all internal organs will be examined because they are not working properly. Namely, the stomach, pancreas, liver, kidneys, the kidneys hurt very badly and the duodenum, everything is not functioning properly. In the Stradiņa hospital, two packets of blood were injected into me. Said the tests were very, very bad. And then I was brought to Dobeles hospital by ambulance. The surgeon was already waiting for me and she prescribed complete treatment according to the instructions of the Riga hospital. Because I didn't want to stay in Riga, it looked like a barracks, 20-30 people in one room, separated from each other only by curtains.

In Dobeles hospital, I was in a double ward and was put under the system, rinsed with antibiotics. And then, they prescribed me treatment - cobra [gastroscopy], I don't know what it was called now... and then colonoscopy. I said that I had never had one in my life. But the doctor said that you don't have iron in your body at all, all analysis indicators are close to 0. And you absolutely need to check the entire stomach, both from the bottom and from the top. Of course, I was scared and shocked, but considering that my daughter Natasha works there in the hospital, the doctor and the nurse did everything carefully so that I didn't even feel anything. And then I see that the doctor and the nurse looked at each other and I asked - what? They replied that we will explain everything to your daughter afterward. They didn't tell me anything, but in the end, it turned out that I had internal bleeding in my stomach and some kind of terrible ulcer that I'd never had in my life. And then that ulcer appeared, within two months. I was told by the doctors that it was a consequence of Covid-19. Well, that's not all, when they did a colonoscopy under anesthesia (should have been under anesthesia, because I feel unimaginable pain) and then they found that I have a tear in the duodenum, and also bleeding and very strong diverticulosis, such as pockets and that too, doctors said there are effects of Covid-19. Then for another 10 days, I lay there under it all and then prescribed treatment with iron and all vitamins, etc. in double doses. I'm still taking 70 pills a day because I'm just missing everything in my body, magnesium, iodine, and iron, everything just went away after Covid-19.

Then I was weighed and told that the weight loss should be stopped, I already weigh 54 kilograms, which is considered close to the limit, because my normal weight is 72-74 kilograms. Then I was prescribed some other medicine, very expensive, the children bought it for me and told me to have food 7 times a day in order to gain weight. Well, for those two weeks, my weight increased by only 1.5 kg. Well, the surgeon also said that it is a consequence of Covid-19 100% because before that my body was healthy, I was running around like crazy, but then my arms, legs, and back stopped working. I have carried all kinds of heavy things in my life, I do very intense physical activities and I always feel good. But now I still can't, my knees are shaking, my hands are shaking, and I can't recover. The next difficulty was after the hospital. Everything just remained indifferent to me. I was simply already overcome by the pain, I am generally very patient by nature, very... After the previous operation [disability], all the doctors were surprised that I was so strong and learned to walk again. But this time I was so fed up with everything, I

thought to hell with everything, if I die, I die. If not, then no... I will live on. So I slept at home for a week, the children didn't know anything, and I simply hadn't answered anyone. Then the children simply broke into my home by force and took me to their place and said that if I don't need myself, then they need me... I have been sleeping for a week, 8 days, and have not gotten out of bed, I have not answered anyone's calls, nothing... No one told me, I only found out later from my workplace that it is possible to receive some kind of extra in the form of a sanatorium or some other rehabilitation. Some disabled men went to sanatoriums after contracting Covid-19. After I got sick, no one in our group got sick, I didn't come across a single case of illness this year. I just managed to get protective equipment, we are processing all the rooms, tables, all masks, everything was brought to us and we will have enough for another five years.

I have told my deputies, and the entire board, if you feel even a minimal sign, then please everyone sit at home, call a doctor and immediately pay attention to your condition. I warned everyone! And now they are very protective of me, they don't allow me to lift anything heavy

yes, they don't let me do anything at work, but we also meet every Thursday, we work and they pamper me, they don't let me do anything. Very cared for now. There is absolutely no attention to us, especially to seniors, and people of retirement age, no one was interested in us, our condition, etc. Even though I work, as they say, without pay, without anything, for years, I have been the chairman for 15 years, if only once something from the management would have taken care of it, no... I write projects, I achieve everything with my own strength for the association. But if someone was interested in me, no, never..."

Specifically telling quotes: "The doctors don't pay any attention to it, they only say that everything is fine, if you walk, and move, then everything is fine, there is no temperature, then everything is fine.

Everything just remained indifferent to me. I was simply already overcome by the pain, I am generally very patient by nature, very... After the previous operation [disability], all the doctors were surprised that I was so strong and learned to walk again. But this time I was so fed up with everything, I thought to hell with everything, if I die, I die. If not, then no... I will live on.

No one told me, I only found out later from my workplace that it is possible to receive some kind of extra in the form of a sanatorium or some other rehabilitation. Some disabled men went to sanatoriums after contracting Covid-19."

Keywords: healthcare, illness, seniors, long Covid-19, mistrust

LV09

Title: I became more stronger

Narrative: "Well, first of all, I think that pandemic has impacted everyone in this world. If not being affected by Covid-19 mentally or psychologically or financially. So, I

personally could say, thanks to God I at the very beginning even lost my job for a couple of months. Actually, I have two jobs. Fortunately in the main job, I've been working remotely as a teacher. But I also was working at the company customer service and at that period of time, I actually lost my job because of Covid-19. Fortunately, a couple of months later we get back to job remotely, and then step by step we had a full-time job again. Probably, financially of course I have been affected but for the most part in all of this psychologically I didn't know how to deal with Covid-19 it was quite frustrating because you're all the time worried about being infected, about people around you, your family members if you have ones. I mean I was worried about my daughter because I had to contact her very often, so it was a little bit challenging. So, you don't feel more than the comfort you had before Covid-19. So, psychologically it has affected us and I personally could see that I'm a bit lucky because I have got support from my educational institution because they take care of their employees in a very good way, they provide very effective mental support, which is very, very important. I probably could say if I would stay home alone without being in touch with the people in such level, would make me to feel worse.

People in state agencies have been working hard actually. I don't remember exactly the name of the agency which is providing such information on the National website, it is in Latvian, Russian, and English information available. And I could say here in Latvia, to be honest, they did quite a great job. Because there are all the time information available, numbers to call in case you need any help. And I remember they did an amazing job when it comes to calling the people to get the Covid-19 injection [vaccination] which is very good because they reach out to the people.

And, at school, as I said they provided us the whole support (medical support or mental support) as I said. So, it makes things easier for me I guess, so I know how to survive with that, and I know how to help people if they need it. So, all this had a positive effect on me as a person, but, of course, still we have a lot of challenges when it comes to being in lockdown at home, not being able to meet up the people, to meet family members and it was a time when I worked remotely and it was bit challenging because we don't use to the fact that we have seen people remotely, we are not with them, we are worried about it if we are doing our job in the best way. Because we are working with the kids it is also very important to deliver what you are going to deliver as a teacher. So, still, I can say it's better as nothing of course. So, so far, my experience professionally wasn't as bad as it could be. But use to the fact that of course, I have been impacted.

I try to appreciate more my health as a person. Personally, how is important to care for my health and, I realized the importance of society because you yourself being home. You cannot do that much! Just sitting at home, you cannot do that much. So, I was trained as a society that probably would be better when we are together.

I also have a friend who had Covid and he has to be isolated until he has some other family members of course but he has to stand his lock dawn, so I used to make sure that he has everything that he needs like food and stuff. I learned a lot about how to be more attentive to others, how to care about others more and how to take care of myself also. And there are a lot of lessons I have learned but two main things I realized how important our health is because we're not sure what's going to happen the next day. So, you have to be ready and keep us safe. And the second thing is without society we cannot beat

such a pandemic which means that everybody is involved.

I have never been, if we are talking about inequality, I have never felt that I have been excluded or I have been treated differently way. I was going to the hospitals, went to take the vaccine, and have seen how the people were working there and, to be honest, they deliver an extraordinary job. So, we must be grateful to such people because they did what they could. They have been reaching people, you don't have to wait for that much. I really appreciate also here in Latvia personally I do appreciate at that period the communication channels that they used to reach out the people. How they invite people to be vaccinated I believe that was probably the best experience I have experienced.

It wasn't actually an amazing time, especially, when it comes to stress because have learned personally how to manage my stress the biggest part of that is being stressed all the time, not actually sure what's going to happen tomorrow. So, you are all the time worried and this, of course, impacts you, but, I have learned how to take things easier, more organized, and more careful. As I said, of course, there is a lesson out for me which makes me more organized and I could say I know how to use my time in a better way, to appreciate every single moment I am spending with my colleagues or people around me. And, of course, I also wanted to say something that actually impacted me during the Covid which is the fact that I can not go to pay the visit to some family members when it is needed actually. From my personal experience because it's quite difficult for me as my mum was a little bit ill, and she was actually hospitalized at that time and I couldn't fly to [Marocco] to see her. So, of course, it impacted me emotionally and mentally also. But, after the Covid as I said, I have started to learn more about myself. How to become calmer, how to become more flexible also to the things which are beyond my power. So, we could probably link this to the aspect You have mentioned. Of course, I'm not trying to prove anything but the fact You stay tight to God helps You a lot, because prayers also played a major [part] in my situation. Because, praying, reading the Quran, and reflecting on the things around us. This helped me a lot emotionally. That relationship that You start to renew every single day, probably God gives You hope, gives You strength, makes to reduces that stress that You have inside of You. So, it helped me a lot. Before Covid it was very easy to go to the mosque to pray, to meet the people out there, and to reach out the society. But during the pandemic time, everything was closed, of course, it was a little bit difficult, because, sometimes you need also to meet the people in that religious site which is actually the mosque. But we couldn't.

There was a group on Whatsapp where the people actually are trying to reach out to each other if there is anybody who needs help. There is communication about what is going on, to make sure that everything is all right. I can't say I have participated in any religious virtual activities, but I see there is a people who are trying to organize.

I understand that experiences can be cheeky and can be different from one person to another. You know the way how you see things and how to deal with this. As I said there is a negative aspects but there are also positive aspects, and we have to be objective, and we have to be grateful because we focus mainly on the negative. Of course, we have experienced things that are very difficult in life in general. But when it comes to that topic, we really do have to be objective we have to see things as they are and as I said mentally, and psychologically I have been impacted but there are people around who helped me a lot. I could say I overcome those difficulties and I became stronger. I don't

know what the future will hide but we have to be positive we have to wish that things that happened will help what we have experienced before.

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Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: muslim, restrictions, lack of socialization, appreciation, teaching

LV10

Title: After the shock the positive aspects emerge

Narrative: “I have a son who was born in 2001 and has group 1 disability - movement disorders. Out of all our family of 3 (three) people, the only sick [covid] is our son, in August of this year. in August 2022 and got infected from visiting relatives.. since we have also been vaccinated as soon as it was possible in Latvia. Well, our families were very conscientious about the need to vaccinate, and since he [son] is in the risk group, with all the possibilities of complications, we got vaccinated. Yes, we got vaccinated.. Well, there was a time in Latvia when you either had to be vaccinated or got sick, or one or the other. The onset of Covid coincided with the time when my son was in high school. He studied in high school and at that moment in Latvia those restrictions were set, then it was suddenly necessary to find some solutions, because the school was not really ready for remote learning. Well, not all teachers had the knowledge, the kind of digital competences, so that they could have ZOOMs and some, well, do all that. Because at the beginning, the teacher, at such a very old age, has never worked with it, she was under a lot of stress, and with it the students were also under stress, because they were approaching exams. Since he already had high school, which means such a serious learning load and serious subjects, yes, at the beginning, while he was adapting to the school, he also understood and worked in it, there were also times when he simply did not get up from the table! That he sat in those ZOOMs non-stop. While everyone understood how it all worked, it was quite complicated. Even after that, attendance didn't really start again, either with such small breaks, even for graduation, high school graduation, it didn't happen for them in the traditional way, they were outside. It turned out that he had a great distance from each other and from the teachers. There was no joint photo shoot, some kind of party or token night [something like prom party], there was nothing like that.. there was nothing that should be at the end of school .. And when he started studying in the first year [of university], he was also there at the beginning, I think , how it started was like ok [in person], there in September, October and then again there was something like November, December, I think, there were also those remote ones. But they were already used to [the situation] at the university. It seems to me that the initial period was the most difficult for everyone, while, for example, we were contacted by social workers from the Riga social service. They kept in touch to see how we were doing if we were okay if we weren't neglected if we could attend school if we had computer equipment to connect. Then we also, our non-governmental

organizations, both parasports and the association there, especially for children with mobility impairments, also cooperated, looked for all kinds of used computers, and equipment, and helped everyone put them together so that everyone can connect, so that everyone can learn.

My son was afraid [of getting sick] at first. If I remember that first moment when nobody understood how [the virus] spread. In general, there was a time when they disinfected all its surfaces and thought about everything there. My son made all kinds of comments that I was still so young, I still wanted to live, and so on, and now it's over. He did well - he communicated with the grandmothers, because they also had such a great ignorance there, and then he talked with them and helped them with technology. For example, we taught how to make all kinds of WhatsApp calls, before which many did not use such a thing. Just to communicate and then we also sent all kinds of packages, gifts of some kind, to make them happier if you can't go there in person. Because we behaved very responsibly.

The panic subsided at the moment when information about vaccines began to appear, that they even existed. The more I learned when there was more information about what this Covid is, the aura that it is something incomprehensible and terrible was removed. But otherwise, there was also a positive side. Before that, you had to get up early for school and so on, then you could sleep normally because you didn't have to go anywhere. We also lost all that terrible management of transportation, of going to school, yes. We also had some classes, with the same parasports, they transfer what they could online.

The son trained regularly online. There is still general physical [lessons] once a week [online]. Let's say he's sitting there with some kind of rubber bands or dumbbells. And then there were all kinds of support seminars - psychologists, groups, and some other classes. Such non-governmental activities. But it turned out very well that you could, for example, take first aid training there, or something else that was cool for everyone, without any driving. They continued to train, but they had to train outside because they were not the national team athletes [training restrictions did not apply], so they trained a lot outside, also in the winter, also in the snow. We train on the roof of DOMINA [shopping center], in some parking lots, we shoveled the place free of snow, we all dressed very warmly and spent time there. I think it was probably good even from a health point of view because we got a lot of exercises, we were in the fresh air, yes. Because we didn't stop communicating and working for a single moment. That first moment is such a shock for everyone, yes. After that, our people are creative, so they will come up with a solution.

The negative was also the fact that many people lost their work-life balance, the fact that those working hours appeared, that you can be disturbed even very late, either on Saturdays or Sundays. I think the biggest damage has been that rehabilitation, physiotherapy, procedures, and doctors [were not available]. A lot has been done online, for example, we had physiotherapy. The physiotherapist led the classes online while watching carefully and from the school also led the therapeutic exercise online. There were some doctors whom you had to connect with, but you know how it's not that serious... there was some kind of service provision in person... it was... well, I don't know, I'm laughing, of course, trivially about hairdressers and such, but also... sometimes there,

that a person is all ungroomed... I once tried to cut something [hair].. well.. it also belongs to well-being, that you have a manicure. I think that the [restrictions] probably worsened their health because they didn't get [counseling] in time, they didn't go to specialists, and probably didn't reveal a lot. I have been vaccinated 4 times in total.... I haven't been officially sick at all because I've had a lot of tests because every time we came to work we had to do a test every time and well the quick test and then when my son was sick I took care of him, I had to do it an everyday test, laboratory tests had to be done as well, but I didn't get sick.

My son got sick on August 1 [2022] and he had to isolate himself at home, I was with him since my husband was on vacation, he had gone abroad, he did not come back to us immediately, he had to live outside and I sat at home, it was very hot [due to the heatwave] and I've just had the hell out of it because it was my first day of vacation.

It was terribly hot, we were sitting at home. He did not have a severe form, he had a rather high temperature for about two days and some kind of cough. But nothing serious at all. My son had a bit of a laugh about the fact that for so long we avoided it and went to visit someone and got Covid. The family doctor called us every day, the nurse called us every day, and we had an attached nurse who checked every day what the situation was, how we felt, and what the symptoms were, every day, even on Saturday, and Sunday, and informed us if we had any symptoms, the feeling that something is getting worse, then there is a number in the family doctor's practice where we have to call, then she will think about what to do next. After being sick, he had weakness for quite a long time, such as increased sweating and fatigue. Because he had to start studying in September and I felt that he couldn't really train. He was allowed to resume his wheelchair training after about 15 days, but he didn't feel like it, he was completely sweaty after training. And then, of course, we gave him some nutritional supplements. They did tests as if everything is fine with vitamin D, nothing like that. Currently, he also continues to drink those vitamin complexes. The family doctor also looked at this and recommended increasing [vitamins] and letting him rest, which is not so easy for a student who has a heavy workload. In general, I do not have such a negative experience. Everyone overcame the digital gap quite well... The teacher then said to my son, thank you for helping me, because at first, I couldn't do it, I didn't understand at all what to do, what to turn on, what to do and how to conduct lessons in ZOOM. That she has succeeded in all this, that she now knows how to use these tools as well. We watched so much, different shows, different concerts, and theaters [online]. We also had some fun on ZOOM, we connected on ZOOM at Christmas... well, that's how it went."

Specifically telling quotes: "That first moment is such a shock for everyone, yes. After that, our people are creative, so they will come up with a solution.

The negative was also the fact that for many, that work-life balance disappeared, the fact that those working hours appeared, that you can be disturbed even very late, either on Saturdays or Sundays.

As a result of [covid restrictions], the state of health probably worsened, because they did not receive [counseling] in time, did not go to specialists, and probably did not

detect many things [diseases].

It seems to me that the initial period was the most difficult for everyone, while, for example, we were contacted by social workers from the Riga social service. They kept in touch to see how we were doing if we were okay if we weren't neglected if we could attend school if we had computer equipment to connect. Then we also, our non-governmental organizations, both parasports, and the association, and especially for children with mobility impairments, also cooperated, looked for all kinds of used computers, and equipment, and helped everyone put them together so that everyone can connect, so that everyone can learn."

Keywords: disability, parasport, online, support, non-governmental



Netherlands

NL01

Title: I think in possibilities

Narrative: “My name is Flo. I am 66 years old and live alone in a medium-sized city in the middle of the country. I have been retired since a few months and fill my days with enjoying beautiful things. I go to dance improvisation weekly and enjoy spending my time with friends and family.

The effect of the Corona period on me, was that I was really in shock for the first week. After a week, I was able to control my thoughts again. For me, a helpful thought was: “this is a whole new space. How am I going to deal with this?”

My life stilled itself. I had a hectic job and was coming back from burnout. It was convenient for me that things had calmed down. I started thinking about my life and work in that open space which was created by the lockdown. Since I no longer had to travel and could work from home, I could focus more on my surroundings. For instance, I arranged a pizza-van for the neighbourhood. That way, the pizza maker had work and profit in a time of scar and we as a neighbourhood had something to look forward to. That was a lot of fun. People had to register with me for a pizza and I was busy with that every week. I looked for opportunities within the constraints. Unfortunately, I couldn't go to dance improvisation but did Jane Fonda-like work-outs at home. I recorded these work-outs and sent videos of them to friends and family and they would send back videos. That was pretty hilarious and we kept up the courage together. Because we could hardly go outside, I explored the space of my house more. I could also dance in the garden and started to enjoy the place where I live more. I also did things I might not have done before. During a big snowstorm, I went for a walk in the forest with my daughter. We were eager to get outside and cared less about the weather conditions. I did a lot via Whatsapp. In terms of work, I was mainly concerned with the quality of the training and recruited many students for the training. I worked an average of three days. During that time, I did start thinking more about retiring earlier. I got a bit more detached from my work and wondered whether I still wanted this and whether I still wanted to work with these people. It occurred to me that I could also do more things in my life. My final farewell to my work could, fortunately, be in a live setting.

I did educate myself through news in the newspaper and on TV about what the virus meant and what the vaccination also meant for me and for everyone else. I also did keep in touch with friends to spar about vaccination. I felt it was my social duty to get vaccinated and didn't bother. This could also be different because at my sister's place, no one got vaccinated. She was the only one who did vaccinate. I was sometimes angry with my sister though. She is chronically ill and she cared very little about restrictions. She saw a lot of people and also went to parties. But I still let her come to me for Christmas, for instance. This caused some tension but in the end I chose to celebrate Christmas with my family.

I actually didn't mind the restrictions of this period at all for myself. Life is always hectic

and I did love that peace and quiet time. What really helped me is thinking what is possible. Thinking in possibilities. And I can take good care of myself.

What I really took away from that period is that I started doing much more what I want to do. That does combine with my age I think. But the Corona period accelerated and deepened it. I started drawing and painting. That may also be related to the new phase of life after retirement.

Despite having adapted well, I now notice that I did miss a lot. Especially the freedom to be able to go anywhere. To people and also to beautiful cultural institutions.

What I did keep doing is that I no longer shake hands with people and that feels nice. I love in crowded shops, for example. I haven't had it so far. But I don't want to get it either. I remain vigilant."

Specifically telling quotes: I think in possibilities and opportunities. I thought of what is possible within the field of restrictions. I explored the opportunities of my living space

Keywords: Powerful, network, education, reflection

NL02

Title: I balance my work and life better than before

Narrative: "My name is Lina. I live with my 12-year-old son and a flat in one of the neighbourhoods around the city. I work as an experience teacher at a university. I have had this job for 4 years now. I also like to do sports and walk a lot with our dog Tara. I also like to do something together with my son. We are very close.

What the Corona period meant to me is that it was very isolating. I also found it frightening because it was all so unfamiliar.

I work in education and everything suddenly had to be online. Even my son could no longer go to school. Every day we had to wait and see what the news from class 7 would be. Going to school or not. And I had to get used to doing everything online.

Besides, there were new rules every time. It got worse and worse. In terms of work, I also suffered because I was thrown back on myself. I really had to get my self-regulation and motivation from deep down inside myself. You have to do all sorts of things but there was no one to help. There were no more informal moments and a lot often happened there. Those moments together also fell away. Having a drink together or a walk. It was all gone. Nobody reminds you of anything. I hadn't been working there long and I needed those in-between moments.

I had to shorten my classes because it wasn't easy to sustain online for the students. I noticed that the longer it went on, the contact with students became less and we no longer knew how they were doing. The well-being of the students deteriorated but so did my own well-being. Later, we started developing all kinds of teaching methods because we had to. That was not a voluntary choice. It caused me a lot of stress, I had also applied for a master's degree at that time. Unfortunately, that went wrong. I got Corona myself, and I was already in behind the computer seven days a week. I had

to give up that study and did experience that as a loss. I also wanted to have time and energy for myself and my son. He also had to do every-thing online. We made the best of that. Sometimes we would sit next to each oth-er and sometimes one of us would go upstairs.

I did have a lot of help and gave help from and to the people in my flat. We did a lot together. Eating together and shopping for each other and also playing sports. My downstairs neighbour got his fitness instructor diploma during the Corona period and started a fitness school in his downstairs garage, and I still work out there. That also pulled us through. Sometimes we exercised outside when there was no other way.

I did have a lot of awkward social situations around vaccination. My boyfriend did not get vaccinated. I myself did but I do have shot regret. The public Healthcare Institute had set up a clinic in our school. It was almost an obligation and I did from the illusion of freedom. But I ended up not going on holiday at all. Because my friend had not been vaccinated, we were not welcome in some places. I found that then and still find that a worrying development.

I wondered why we made such a fuss then and whether it was actually necessary. I do watch less news now. I realise how toxic the news - and reporting - actually is. But I didn't like the opinions of others either. I also know someone who be-lieves in conspiracy theories. That also made me uncomfortable. It was a big mindfuck.

What helped me was talking about the situation. Often with my friend. Talking always helps me. In addition, it helps me to exercise. I walked the dog a lot and I exercised. Talking and moving are important to me. And preferably move out-doors. I think that is also good for the brain. Furthermore, I did a lot of little pro-jects. Crafting, cleaning up, minimising, staying busy distracted. And using my common sense.

I still wouldn't be able to make a clear choice now. I just try to assume that the government does not want to deliberately poison me. But I must say that there are many people who have no faith in public health. That is actually quite bad that there is no collective confidence in public health. I think that has everything to do with the abolition of the health insurance fund and the poverty issue. Healthcare is not accessible to everyone. People with big wallets always have more access to good care anyway.

What I ended up doing differently is balancing work and life more.

In the beginning before Corona, I worked myself so over the head to be able to work. I took my child to after-school care or school, the dog had to go to some-one during the day. I was trying tremendously hard. I was just surviving. The constraints of being able to work had a huge impact on my well-being and ener-gy balance. It was really detrimental to my work and life. I was also earning much less than other teachers. Those things together made me come to my senses. I was performing to prove that I am not crazy, that I can do it, that I have some-thing to offer, that I have a message and that I am worth it.

In that, I made a different choice. I put important things first. Those are, being happy, going to bed on time, self-care, staying healthy, eating healthy, love and time with my son and no more stress. I also now plan my days so that I can work. For that change, I am grateful."

Specifically telling quotes: I realized that I was proving myself. No I choose for what is

important for me in life. I use my common sense. Moving and talking help me out.

Keywords: Self-awareness, social network, independent, perseverance, work-life balance

NL03

Title: I don't have to prove myself to anyone anymore

Narrative: "My name is Shirin. I am 43 years old and live in together with my daughter Parri (3) and my mother Leyla (72). I dropped out of my medical studies in 2015 due to my neurological disease. Since then, I have been unable to work. I fill my days with my daughter and physiotherapy for my health.

I can best explain what the Covid period has meant to me when I recount the period before. It determines what choices I made during the Covid period.

I came to the Netherlands as a refugee when I was 10 years old. After a fairly good childhood, I went to study medicine. I always had physical complaints but they couldn't really find what was wrong with me. We had a busy household with seven children, one of whom was a boy with a disability. It was difficult for my parents to build a life in the Netherlands but they always did everything they could to give us as many opportunities as possible. We all made up for those as far as we could. I am the oldest girl in the family. I always felt I had to prove the most. My older brother lived in Switzerland and the brother after him has a disability. While I was severely ill as a young girl and, as it turned out later, have a neurological disease that does limit me, I did everything I could to be the best at everything. Fortunately, I can learn well but after years of studying medicine and still experiencing limitations every time, I quit prematurely. I actually had to do 3 more internships to complete my overall studies but I couldn't physically do any more. In that period before I took the decision to quit my studies, my eldest brother passed away. He could no longer cope with life. I don't consider myself a war victim but he certainly was. We were very close in the last period of his life. Then my father fell ill which was also a big shock and burden for all of us. Meanwhile, I was more concerned with others than myself. Years went by. In all those years, I had some major attacks of my condition and was also in a medical circuit to find out what I had and what I could recover from.

In my culture, it is strange when you don't have a partner as a young woman and I entered a sort of arranged marriage in 2018. The man seemed nice and considerate and was initially very respectful to me and my family. I thought things could work out between us. My aunt in Germany knew him and I was confident. He is from the same culture as I am and also spoke the language of my father's ethnic group. That felt very familiar to me.

Once we got married, his attitude towards me changed. I was not allowed to laugh outside on the street and later I was not allowed to do so at home either. Otherwise, people would think I was a 'dirty' woman. In the beginning, I hoped it would pass but it only got worse. Whenever I didn't do exactly what he wanted, he belittled me. Later, he also start-

ed hitting me. I got pregnant quite soon after we got married and felt really trapped. I al-so didn't know anyone in the town where we lived in Germany. I didn't speak the language enough either, which made me less independent than I actually was. We also hard-ly ever visited my family in the Netherlands anymore. When we did visit my family, I had to be careful that he didn't argue with my brother. He did do that several times. Nobody in my family realised how difficult it was for me and I didn't want to burden them with my misery.

When we went into lockdown in 2020, my baby daughter had just been born. From one day to the next, we were locked in his small flat. The tensions and abuses increased. I started thinking more and more about a life without him. I was unable to see my sick father during those months of lockdown because he didn't want to go there. I think I became stronger internally because he started treating me worse. How I dealt with the situation was to focus myself on my daughter and to take care about her the best way I could. I didn't fight against what was happening to me. Culturally, I couldnt go against my husband. In order to protect myself and still have a future, I had to accept what he did. When my father died in October 2020, we went to the Netherlands. Once I was there I felt the space to choose for myself and my daughter. this was the blessing of having experienced the dark time during the lockdown. I felt the huge difference in being connected to my family back home instead of being isolated. I never went back to Germany. Even though I was in bad shape, I felt so strong inside that I had to stand up against all cultural expectations and stay with my mom in the Netherlands. It has been very difficult because he could not accept it. But after spending my whole life doing what others wanted of me, I stood up for myself for the first time. What has helped me the most is my faith. I learnt to pray from my mother when I was a young girl. Even though we were not raised strictly religious, I experience a lot of support from my faith. It makes me feel that I am not alone in life.

I finally have time to look back at how my life has turned out. That is what this Covid period has brought me. Time for reflection and focus on myself and my daughter. I don't have to prove myself to anyone anymore. I almost finalized my graduation as a general Practitioner. I really want to find myself a job with my knowledge, background and experience. I only have to finalize two internships. I want to make a plan fot the future and build a network around me. I cannot expect too much help from my family because they are fighting their own struggle. that means that I have to focus on the world around me and on new people who will be able to help me finding a new path for the future.

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Specifically telling quotes: “I want y daughter to grow up without all those limitations in belief I had from my cultural background.

The worse it became in the first period of the lockdown, the stronger I grew from inside.”

Keywords: Influence of cultural background, domestic violence, personal development, fragile, strengthened by faith.

NL04

Title: my professional excitement about this virus was like the excitement for a new rollercoaster in an amusement park.

Narrative: “My name is Eduard. I am a GP and work at the university as a researcher and lecturer.

The Corona period was an extraordinary experience. From one day to the next, everything was different at the practice. The consulting hours were closed. In our well-organized practice suddenly virtually all routines had to change. We had never had such a situation before. Very quickly the Dutch Colleges of GPs issued directives and guidelines that we adapted. Moreover, we were involved at regional level in a crisis team that coordinated regional and local care. That meant that in no time we had a system in which we could refer people with Corona-related complaints to a centrally staffed GP clinic. Internally, we had also set up a crisis committee with a protocol for all employees of our practice. Approximately half of the personal attended and half worked at home and a telephone doctor did triage to assess whether someone needed to get a physical consultation by a doctor. As an emergency measure, patients no longer had to give consent for exchange of information.

To some extent, the feeling this gave was similar to the new rollercoaster at an amusement park. It was exciting and it was professional excitement. A new disease that demanded something different from us again, this was a challenge. Because I did always feel that we could actually contribute to managing this crisis, I never felt powerless.

At that time, for the first time I would ask myself the question whether I was actually healthy myself. I didn't do any sports and didn't necessarily live a very healthy life. Consequently, I did fear getting Covid in the beginning. Of course, I had to visit patients from time to time. I was glad that our GP trainee doctor who was fit and healthy did a lot of those home visits.

What I experienced as very special was the togetherness, goodwill and support in the community. Especially in the beginning, we didn't always have enough materials. Once we send out an email asking patients for mouth-nose masks, we received an amazing amount of mouth masks from clients within just a few hours!

When the vaccine came, I also found the role as an advisor to patients to be valuable. There had obviously been a lot of questions and views from patients and I immersed myself in the vaccine. The scientific resources were so interesting. One of the databases was filled so quickly showing that intensive research was being done worldwide. I learned a lot about this virus during that period. I found that fascinating. Because I work at the university, I had access to a lot of research. This really allowed me to do something useful in terms of education.

Even in the post Covid period, I could continue to be of value as a GP for people with long Covid symptoms. As a GP, I always received people with fatigue complaints, headaches, psychological complaints and other 'vague' complaints. The people with long Covid complaints have increased the group of people with fatigue complaints. That does include people who are quite desperate. For us as doctors, we need to search for ways of treating people with Long Covid. There are probably many factors that contribute to the development of long Covid that might be biological, psychological

and/or social in nature. The bottom line is the question how to increase resilience. In that sense, we now treat it the same as other chronic conditions, regardless whether the cause is exactly known or treatable

Besides the long Covid symptoms, I see also many young people who are struggling. This is probably an after-effect of the lockdowns and measures. Stress with children and adolescents has increased. After a year, I saw that child psychologists were getting busier. Waiting lists emerged and sometimes we had to improvise to help these patients and their parents.

One of the lessons learned from this period, and I am proud of that, is regional cooperation in disasters. Don't hang on to your autonomy and work together quickly and internally. As a GP, don't become a soloist and allow yourself to excel in your speciality. Make sure you keep yourself fit, though. I would not have asked myself that question had it not been for this Covid period.

I do think we need to look at measures in a more differentiated way in the future. I do not advocate that all measures should always apply to everyone. We consist in society of different groups with different health. That may be looked at differently. Especially also because of the effects of the measures on young people, for example. They are relatively healthy and can best cope with getting sick. Then the socially restrictive measure of not being allowed to go to school is probably contra-productive. I sometimes wished during the period with measures that people would allow themselves to be a little civil disobedient.

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Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: Contribution to patients and healthcare system, professional excitement, support from the community, professional cooperation.

NL05

Title: The Covid 19 period didn't make a real difference for me in my life.

Narrative: “My name is Anna. I'm 79 years old and I live on my own in a small village. I'm divorced 20 years ago and that is maybe the best decision I have made. I like to live alone. I have a female best friend with whom I do a lot of things together. I live from a small amount of money but I do manage with that. I don't need much. I have two children and a sister who lives in Switzerland. During the Covid 19 period, I lived my own life from the beginning. I am almost 80 years old now and I live a very active life. I get up every day at 7.00 A.m. and then I go for a walk or do yoga first. After that, I get on my bike or go to my voluntary work. I like to cycle alone or with my best friend. I cycle in all weathers around 60 kilometres a day. I then take food with me for the road. I prefer to be outside all day. I don't mind being alone on the road. I like to be alone and enjoy the silence and freedom. On Wednesdays, I always go to folk dancing. That did stop and was not possible for a very long period. I did regret that but it didn't bother me much.

I also volunteer with demented and lonely elderly people. That is a form of day care. I continued working almost throughout the Covid period. We were closed for a fortnight. Then I did go around to those people with soup. After that, the day care reopened. It was also important for those people. Otherwise they have nothing and would get lonely. Nobody was infected either so we dared to open and do as much as possible outside. I have been angry at the way in nursing homes they shut people off from any contact. I find that really inhumane. We have to invite each other when you can't solve it yourself others have to do it for you in a good way. In my view, isolating people does not work. I also just went to see my family. In the beginning a bit less but we just kept seeing each other. at Christmas 2021, I went to my sister in Switzerland. that was then possible again. There were some restrictions but I could handle them quite easy. Not for a moment have I been afraid of getting sick. I live a healthy life and I was confident that I would survive. Even if I would get Covid. Right now I'm vaccinated but I think I will not take the Booster injections anymore. All in all, my lifestyle has been my salvation. I got through both the lockdown and the Covid period very well."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: healthy lifestyle, autonomous, no fears of getting ill, mobility, activities during het day.

NL06

Title: My creative ability has received a huge boost and I am happy with that to this day.

Narrative: "My name is Nigel. I am 50 years old and live in a detached house with my family in a village. I am a sound engineer and work as an independent contractor. The Covid period brought peace first. I had an empty schedule pretty soon. All the theatre performances I work for were cancelled overnight. The first few months were a treat. I did a lot to maintain the house. My wife had a steady job so in terms of income there was no immediate problem. The weather was nice and I also enjoyed the more internal family life. We walked together, ate together more often during the day and our contact with my wife's daughter (not my daughter) improved enormously through this period. We got to know each other better.

The peace also brought space for questions about what we could best do next in my work area. My companion started doing other work temporarily. It occurred to me that with all the digital work, there would be more need for streaming performances, presentations and lectures. I had thought of this before but my companion was not interested in it then and we didn't take it up. I didn't want that to happen now. I invested in a special camera and started studying how to work with it.

Through this, I discovered that my companion had held back ideas before. I had never noticed that so keenly but now I saw it more clearly. It was an eye-opener in that respect. We have a partnership but because of his inhibition, I started working alone. Even if that

meant we could no longer work together.

It gave me the opportunity to think in new possibilities. I started streaming for big companies and there soon turned out to be a nice market for it.

I also took my new skills and camera to the owner of all the shows me and my mate were soaking for. I also submitted what we could do together. I got creative and got all sorts of ideas. Part in a theatre and part streaming. I also suddenly saw who would be good at that in terms of presenter. That was done later.

They came up with the idea of building their own studio and, with some bluff, I said I could do that too, At that time, my partner also became enthusiastic again and got involved in the new ideas. That studio was a huge challenge. I then also started working as a floor technician which was a huge opportunity for me. I had wanted that for some time but it was not what I was asked for,

In that sense, the Covid period greatly enriched my work and personal life I thrive more in my work. My colleague and I still work well together. But the new jobs go to me. My creative ability has received a huge boost and I am happy with that to this day.

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Specifically telling quotes: I got creative and got all sorts of ideas. The peace brought also space for questions about what to do next in my professional field.

Keywords: new perspectives, courage, dreams, opportunities, space, family

NL07

Title: When movement is given freedom, emptiness turns into space”.

Narrative: “My name is Ronnie. I am 63 and live alone in a village in the North-East polder. I live in the village's protected townscape. I worked as a trainer and consultant in the social domain until the second lockdown. In addition, I am a photographer.

Motto: “When movement is given freedom, emptiness turns into space”. I realised through the pressure of the Covid time and measures that the movement we could and were all allowed to make was getting smaller and smaller. The space was no longer there. What took its place was more to associate with emptiness.

From the beginning of the period with measures, I found it difficult to adapt and give up my freedom too much. I find it difficult to deal with authority. This became more apparent in the Covid period because so much was not allowed. I am very inclined to always do something and focus on others. When the first lockdown left me at home with my then partner, it became painfully clear that we were not a good match. The relationship foundered fairly soon after the first lockdown and I continued to live alone in our home

Before I could really process that, tension also arose at work due to the loss of all assignments. What work I had left I had to do at home while I thrive best in direct

contacts. The business got tougher. And eventually the entire education branch was divested. I lost my job.

So within a year, I was without a partner and without a job and had a father who was severely demented. I had to make sure he ended up in a place close to my mother. Eventually he ended up in a ward where 5 people got Covid and he didn't and they then isolated him. That was a huge drama because he was locked in his room and we were not allowed to go there either. He didn't understand anything and it was really a punishment for him, my mother and me. When we were allowed back in, we had to go in there like lunatics in protective clothing when he wasn't even sick.

I did as much as I could to get him into another home where, fortunately, things were much better. It had a lot of impact on my father and the deterioration accelerated. He passed away in 2021. During the cremation, we were again rocked by the fact that a limited number of people are allowed to attend. I had to make choices that were really impossible. I had to tell a friend of his from the vegetable garden, whom he had known for 25 years, that he could not come. Because the funeral home was so crowded, he had to stand above ground for 10 days before he could be cremated.

That had such an impact on me. Whenever I drove from Amsterdam to my hometown, I was often affected. What my coping has been is to cut myself away. Taking on informal care tasks and being there for others. I hated it but I thought it was much worse for my mother.

What helped me during that period was a quote from my mother. She said : 'people shouldn't whine so much about , "I lived through World War II". 'Back then we could still visit each other. What we are going through now is much worse.'" The strength my mother showed in dealing with it also gave me the inspiration and courage to carry on. My mother also suffered isolation and lost several loved ones during the Covid period. With that strength I threw myself into photography and literature. I started reading a lot of poetry and also wrote all sorts of things myself. I noticed I also found it an important phase and felt the need to record it. For myself but also for my children. I didn't have much contact with them during that period. Fortunately, they are fine which gives me peace of mind now. I published a photo and poetry book which might never have come about without the Covid and the lockdowns. I think my personal development did get a boost from the uncomfortable situation.

I learned to focus on what was important to me and focus on that. Within that, I tried and tried to be as autonomous as possible. Sometimes I also did things that were not quite allowed to be done to ensure my quality of life. For example, hugging my father in the last stage of life. I made sure I had an exemption in my car to go to my parents. I did use that to do something for myself outside curfew from time to time. It also helped me to live here in this community. That also gave security and safety. Despite all the shit that happens to you, you can always decide to keep going. For myself and also for my children. I do believe that people can handle a lot more than they think they can handle. That ability to adapt is enormous. That is also reassuring.

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Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: Loss of relatives, disobedience, creativity, artist, hope, network.

NL08

Title: Move, trust and action

Narrative: "My name is Daira, I am 48 years old and live with my husband and two children in a nice house in a small village. I have taken care of other people all my life. I focused only on others and was very good at putting myself away. That cost me my first marriage and I also never had a paid job until recently. I did a lot of voluntary work and took care of my children.

During the first lockdown, I had just started a new job as a language trainer. Before I could properly start, all language courses were all cancelled and from one day to the next we were sitting at home working and doing everything online. My children and husband also ended up at home looking for perspectives.

In the beginning, I could enjoy that too. There was more quality time with the family. We were outside a lot and took time to work on the house. I was flexible in terms of work because everything took place online. In the beginning, there was little to do because all the live courses were cancelled. While I enjoyed that quality time, I also missed the dynamism of participants in my groups. I was really eager to get started myself in March 2020 but suddenly found myself working at home behind a laptop. Fortunately, we started online training and webinars pretty quickly. I did find a challenge in that. We really developed new training courses and gave wonderful webinars.

Besides my work and family, I am a leader of a children's theatre group. It is a theatre group where the children do and develop everything themselves. I only direct it. Right after the first lockdown, a performance was planned. Of course it was cancelled and at first I thought it would go on a week or two later. That turned out to be very different. We couldn't even meet each other and practice. The realisation that things would not change for the time being and that things might not become 'normal' became more and more apparent. I did find that realisation confronting. After a while, the sparkle of being together was gone. The children became tired and irritable, my husband had to find new work and was often busy with it, and I found myself alone with my worries more often.

After a year of ups and downs, I was laid off. Well, my annual contract was not renewed. That felt so unfair. I felt like I had become a victim of a situation I couldn't do anything about. I hadn't even been able to show my qualities. For the first few months, I didn't let it sink in that I no longer had a job. I was still getting unemployment benefits. But when that stopped, I suddenly looked around me. I asked myself what I had 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.

I started moving literally and figuratively. 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.

After a few months, I stepped into a new job as a training coordinator at a large company. I would never have dared to do that otherwise. The crisis of this Covid period ended up making me move more and closer to myself. It took this process to achieve this.”

Specifically telling quotes: I took control over my life and my development by moving and trusting.

Keywords: networking, challenges, personal development, change, moving, trust

NL09

Title: I think that when you focus on something you find very important, you can achieve much more than you think beforehand.

Narrative: “My name is Kylian. I am 16 years old and live with my mother and brother and sister in a village close to a big city where I also attend school.

At the beginning of the Covid period, I actually found it chill. I didn't have school then and there weren't that many measures in the beginning. You could go outside a lot to play football and apart from that I gamed a bit. It seemed like a kind of holiday I thought in the beginning. I did play football regularly with some boys from the neighbourhood and because we had a lot of time, we suddenly saw each other a lot more often and the contact got better and it eventually became a friendship. We would play football around the same time every day and then go to one of the boys for something to eat. Other than that, I didn't do that much. I also didn't want to be at home too much because everyone was at home and sometimes I found it really too busy at home. I myself have the smallest room in the house and I don't really enjoy sitting there. My mother was working downstairs and often had to teach online courses. Then we couldn't go to the kitchen which was really awkward. That's why I preferred to be away.

At one point, school started online again. Then I did have to sit in that small room behind my laptop. It was terribly boring and I could really hardly follow the lessons. I just sat and waited for it to end. In the meantime, I would app with friends or play games on my phone. I was also often planning for the weekend and what we could do then.

The measures were getting stricter and you were no longer allowed on the streets with more than two people. There were four of us playing football. The luck was that all four of us had brown skin and curls. That way we seemed like brothers and still often managed to play football together. The boys I played football with were all at a professional club. Because of them, I learned so much and became much better at playing football than I already was. I started seeing it more and more as a challenge to get better. All my free hours were spent playing football and working on my fitness. I really had a goal in a period when almost nothing else was allowed.

We often climbed over the football pitch fence to be together anyway. Then people from

the neighbourhood called the police to separate us. But we knew all kinds of ways to get away as quickly as possible and we never got caught and were not fined like others.

School was a drama. But since you knew no one would get stuck, I didn't think it was a big deal. Only when I got bad marks during test week, I was hugely frustrated. I knew I could really do better but because of the teaching style and sitting in your room all day, I just couldn't do it.

I think at school they had no idea how we were doing as children. In any case, I was never in touch with my mentor or teachers. Everyone was just doing things for themselves I noticed.

I gained a lot of self-confidence through the Covid time. I made new friendships that I wouldn't have gotten otherwise. I became very good at my favourite sport and I dare more things now than before.

I signed up for a new football club in the summer of 2020 and had to come and play first to show what I could do. I arranged that myself and went there with a lot of confidence and excitement. I was immediately accepted at this club. That has been a confirmation for me that I have developed very well in my game but also as a person.

I could immediately make it clear what I wanted and didn't want. I have much less fear of saying what I think. I think that when you focus on something you find very important, you can achieve much more than you think beforehand."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: support group, challenges, focus, passion, time/ space

NL10

Title: explore boundaries

Narrative: "My name is Lean, I am 21 years old and I am quite opposed to everything the government determines. I don't want to fit into a pigeonhole. I don't really want to fit into a gender box. I am a man but I don't want to live by the book and get a boyfriend or girlfriend and live together and have children. Back in the days when you could only date one or two people at home, I wondered who I most wanted to be with besides my mother with whom I live. I chose a best friend and a best friend. I feel very comfortable with both of them. But this was possible only after the first year. Before that, I was in isolation at home because I have an inherited disease that prevents me from making antibodies against any disease. I get injected with antibodies from donors' blood every week at the hospital. If I don't get that, I wouldn't be alive now. But there were no antibodies against Covid in the beginning and so I had to stay at home. That was a difficult period. I really value my freedom and I like to travel and I love graffiti immensely. When I travel, I put graffiti everywhere when I am allowed to. That gives me a lot of satisfaction. It is my signature. The Covid time was hugely limiting for me. I was really at risk and I couldn't do anything I loved so much.

It was really nasty and boring in the beginning and also quite frightening. My mother too

was afraid she might infect me and as a result we were both always in and around the house. While we are very flamboyant types and like to go out and be among people and party. None of that was possible. We came to a standstill and that doesn't suit us. But the fear of getting sick made us stick to staying home with the two of us. We had a lot of support from each other.

I also started experimenting with all kinds of drugs during that time. I could order quite a lot online and wanted to try some. My mother didn't know everything but when she saw that I ordered something she didn't agree with, she wouldn't let me use it. I liked having a distraction like that and it also made me creative. I had been thinking about going to art school for some time and that was reinforced during that period.

I did have a lot of time to design and make things that I get excited about. I do the same in my hairstyle and in my clothes. I prefer to wear clothes that others wouldn't easily wear. Lots of bright colours and preferably oversized. I often dye my hair in different colours. I could also experiment with that during the lockdown time.

Eventually, I decided to get vaccinated to be able to go outside again. The walls were coming down on me after that year and I wanted to be able to get out again. That vaccination was a huge mistake. I was terribly ill. But it did give me the freedom to go out again. I did. During that period, I built a yurt to have a place outside too. That is now in a forest belonging to friends of ours. I also have a small hemp garden there. I like having that. I unwind in the forest and then often paint.

Being in compulsory isolation for so long, I now want to take every opportunity to explore my limits and the boundaries of my abilities. I often disagree with the rules at my new school, for example, and I always let them know that. I know I am good at my creative designs and design. I want to approach big companies with that and not just show and discuss it at school. I want to have the freedom to decide for myself what I do with my creativity. I would love to travel and work together with other graffiti artists all over the world.

I would like to become an applied artist who gets to decide what an artwork or design will look like. Similarly, I would like to choose my final gender and the relationships I want. There are already so many boxes and compartments in society, and my illness also limits me sometimes. Therefore, I want to make the most of my options."

Specifically telling quotes: My vaccination was a huge mistake. I don't really want to fit in a gender box. Graffiti is my signature.

Keywords: Artistic, experimenting, gender neutral, courage, fear, chronic disease, isolation

Poland

PL01

Title: Katarzyna, a student who immerse herself in activism to deal with her grandmother's death

Narrative: "My name is Katarzyna and I am 22 years old. I am a student. I am an asexual and aromantic person. I define myself as queer. I live in B. (name of the city), in northern Poland. I live in a house with my parents, two sisters, my grandmother and two dogs. As I mentioned before, lockdown took away my chances of professional development. I was locked in my own house, I couldn't see my friends, and I had no one to talk to. Due to this situation, my mental health has worsened. During the pandemic, I decided to act and dedicate myself to activism. I joined the Association that works for people in the asexuality spectrum and participated in the social campaign for the asexuality spectrum visibility week. I also joined a project run by other associations, which acts for LGBT+ people. Through workshops, the people involved in the project deepen their knowledge of the rights and needs of the LGBT+ community. During the pandemic, the entire project was carried out online. Moreover, together with my friend, we founded a student organization for LGBTQI+ people at the university where I study. I have become a member of the boards of the associations in which I act. I evolved a lot during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, I was developing professionally a lot, but due to the pandemic and my emotional needs, I decided to develop activistically. Most of the events we organized were carried out online, except the social campaign (however, we followed the Covid rules there). We have various support and self-development groups within these associations. And they were active during the pandemic. Everything was done through online communication. But it was not a completely new reality, because some of them already before the pandemic were organized in this way to make them more available/accessible to a wider group of people. Paradoxically, people needed social contacts, so we had a higher turnout than before the pandemic or at its beginning. Furthermore, since I live 65 kilometers from Z. [name of the city], it was sometimes difficult for me to go there and attend board meetings in person. Therefore, the pandemic and the organization of these meetings through online communication make it easier for me to attend and develop activism. Instead of studying, I focused on activism. The pandemic also allowed my diagnosis. I searched for professional help and it turned out that my concentration problems and rejection sensitivity were caused by ADHD. I had Covid, but I did not receive medical help. My friends and parents were the only people who supported me during the time of my illness. And that was it. 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. At the begging, my parents were a bit confused, but over time they became proud of me, they supported me. I was educating them on asexuality. And when they became aware of asexuality and understood what it

is and that my activism makes me happy, they started to support me. Now, meetings of support groups are organized in a hybrid format: people who are vaccinated can attend them on site, others can attend online. We follow hygienic restrictions to avoid infection. But it does not mean that people who are not vaccinated are excluded from these support groups. They can attend meetings online. The organization of those meetings in hybrid format was also dictated by the need of people with disabilities, as our main office where those meetings take place is unfortunately not adapted to the needs of those people.

On a daily basis, I tried to get by using my garden to have some rest, talk to my sisters, meet my friends, and go for walks.”

Specifically telling quotes: “I was so active during the pandemic that I even became a member of the board of the association. Later, with a friend, I also put the foundations for a student organization that represents LGBTQI+ people at the university where I study. At the end of the pandemic, we completed it and founded this organization. I also became a board member of the other association in which I am involved. I can say that I self-developed a lot during the pandemic.’

‘Before the pandemic, I was focusing more on professional development. I graduated from X [name of the school] where I was trained as a city guide. I combined it with the tourist-resident course. And then, when the pandemic made it harder to follow this direction, I turned to activism. It was my emotional need.’

‘Paradoxically, the pandemic has not resulted in fewer people participating in support or self-development group meetings. In contrast, due to the fact that people needed social contact, the turnout increased.’

‘Thanks to the pandemic and the transition of everything to an online format, I was able to be more involved in activism because I had easier access to meetings and events. I did not have to travel 65 kilometers to board meetings or meetings organized by the associations.’

‘When it comes to my studies, to deal with the lack of contact with other students, I was meeting my university friend. But I also set other priorities than studying and chose activism.’

‘Due to the fact that I felt bad emotionally, I decided to diagnose myself. During the pandemic, in particular, I discovered that I have problems with concentration and I have rejection sensitivity. Due to this, it was difficult for me to communicate only by email, it caused many misunderstandings. So the pandemic helped me diagnose ADHD.’

‘For me, the most traumatic experience in the pandemic was the death of my grandmother. I couldn't handle it. But it was just going towards activism, doing something for others that made it possible for me to survive. It has become an escape from mourning and regret.’

‘When I started to be an asexual activist and my parents also found out that I was asexual, they were confused at first. Over time, they were proud of me and began to support me. I tried to educate them. I appeared in a radio broadcast and on TV. Then I showed them these materials to educate them. They themselves also began to search for information on this subject. And when they realized what was happening, they started to support me, because they also saw that my activism gives me happiness.’

'On a daily basis, I tried to cope with the pandemic by going for walks with friends and dogs, talking to my sisters, and relaxing in the backyard. It was all important to me.'

Keywords: grandmother's death, asexuality, LGBT+ activism, ADHD diagnosis, self-development

PL02

Title: Lucyna, a nurse who finds her own ways to counteract the negative effects of the pandemic

Narrative: "My name is Lucyna. I am a 46-year-old woman. I live in M. [name of the city], in southern Poland. Now I live with my 13-year-old daughter in a 2-room apartment that I bought a few months ago. For this purpose I took a loan. I am a nurse and I work with people with mental disorders.

As I am also a naturotherapist, during the pandemic, I used and still use natural methods to prevent Covid infection. We use cupping therapy, we drink a lot of herbs, honey, and for disinfection we use apple vinegar. I am not vaccinated and I did not have Covid. I believe this is because I did not become paranoid about disinfection, excessive lack of human contact, and due to lack of vaccination and consequent lack of subsequent vaccination complications. Due to my rejection of being vaccinated, I had problems at work. I received threats of dismissal, threats that I would not be allowed to work. But they did not have any legal basis for it. I tried to keep myself informed on various medical forums about what it looks like in other health facilities. I informed my superiors about this. If this was not successful, I was just saying: so, fire me, I do not have to work here. But they were also intimidated to force vaccinations on the employees. I was also not wearing any protective clothing. I received only one protective clothing throughout the pandemic. We were not properly protected and secured. My patients died not because of Covid but due to Covid and the failure of the health care system. People did not understand that vaccination should be voluntary, not an obligation. I have heard many times from my friends and relatives that I should be ashamed that as a nurse I am not vaccinated and that due to people like me others die. I felt bad but I decided not to react. My friend who works in the operating room did not want to meet me because I am not vaccinated. She and her family are vaccinated, but after vaccination they all have terrible health problems, especially with thyroid hormones. Sometimes I tried to talk to all those people who were hostile, but it seemed useless. This is a word against a word. Therefore, it is better not to react. I have friends psychiatrists who told me that after the pandemic there are many patients with depression and other mental problems. And we know that this is some kind of massive test on people. People were manipulated by the media and politicians. I could observe it in my patients. Last year I lost 17 patients who died after vaccination. I was in a huge mental crisis back then. Especially when I heard that it was because I was not vaccinated. I get by talking to a colleague, a psychiatrist. He supported me more than once in moments of doubt when I wanted to quit my job. The other thing is that we do not receive any psychological support, we do not have any supervision

programmes. And this is not good for us, because we see people dying everyday and we need someone to talk to, to ease our pain and let go of emotions. That is why I go to scout camps, otherwise I would go crazy. Organizing with other nurses was difficult because nobody wanted to meet. Rather, we distanced ourselves from each other due to the pandemic. But I belong to the Internet support groups of medical personnel where we exchange advice on what to do so that we do not get fired. As I work with people with mental disorders, I did not wear a protective mask because they did not want me to. But I also do not believe that a piece of cloth can prevent me from infection. I was reminded several times that I should wear it. I was even kicked out of the bus several times, so then I started to cover my mouth with a scarf to avoid this type of situation. I also decided not to react to the hostility of people. I found it pointless.

When it comes to scout camps, we managed, after loosening some restrictions, to organize a camp this summer. The children were very happy about this. But I was unable to rebuild my scout team. We have not seen each other for two years. We have contact with each other, but it is not the same anymore. Meeting online in our case was pointless. I am also very active in organizing summer or winter activities for young people. So, in order to get back to this activity, I started cooperating with a company that organizes trips to the most beautiful Polish castles and there we organize wizarding schools, which are now very popular. It is October, we are leaving in January and we no longer have any vacancies. This is due to the great need for these young people to have contact with their peers and disconnect from virtual reality.

As a nurse I was also harassed at the beginning of the pandemic. One of my neighbours split on my door, wrote insults, and hang them on the corridor; she also insulted me personally. However, other neighbours have reacted, they have defended me. We responded by writing back that we only infect people with our smiles. But the reaction of our neighbour was very kind, they responded to her insults and defended me.

In general, I would say that the pandemic has worsened my situation with respect to social contacts. People became hostile to each other, more aggressive and very demanding. However, I was helping other people in need. I was shopping for the elderly. As scouts we have also organized and helped people who needed some groceries.”

Specifically telling quotes: “I believe that I did not get sick because I did not fall into the paranoia of excessive disinfection, excessive lack of contact with people, and in my opinion, because I was not vaccinated. I observe many complications after being vaccinated. We (as Poles) did everything contrary to what it should have been: no contact with people, no exercise, no nutritional support for the immune system. In our country, people prefer to get a pill that should help them cure everything.’

‘What happened in my work due to my lack of vaccination was a massacre. There were threats of firing me. However, of my work colleagues, only me and the other two were not vaccinated. And we are still working. My other colleagues at work began to fall ill a lot. This led to a situation where my boss once asked us if we would not vaccinate. Thus, she noticed that something was wrong with these vaccinations. I observe my patients and see that after vaccinations, many thyroid tumors, gliomas, joint problems, blockages, and venous thrombosis appear. This happened, for example, to my mother, who had a serious stroke after vaccination. At present, she is a disabled person and there

is always someone to be with her. If someone wanted to be vaccinated because of their health condition, I understand it, but if people got vaccinated so that they could go on vacation, it is sick.'

'As I mentioned earlier, I was threatened with dismissal from my job. They threatened me that they would not let me go to work. However, these were only threats as there was no legal basis for them. I found in various forms for medics that there were places where it happened and people went to court with it. And they won these trials. It was not nice, but I don't regret not getting vaccinated. I come to the conclusion that if I get sick I will get sick anyway. My way of dealing with this was to inform my superiors that I was aware of the legal status. And if that didn't work, I just said: Fire me, I don't have to work here. Another issue is that my superiors have also been intimidated to force employees to vaccinate themselves.'

'When someone told me that I should be ashamed that as a nurse I wasn't vaccinated and people were dying because of me, I was sorry, but I did not react. I could shout at them, but I figured it doesn't make sense, because these people have such a mess in their heads with what they are told in the media. My friend who works in the operating room did not want to see me at all. She vaccinated herself and her family, but since then, everyone has had health problems.'

'I have friends - psychiatrists who told me that they have had more and more patients with depression and other mental health problems since the pandemic. We know this is a human test. They are manipulated by the media and politicians who told them that if they got vaccinated, it would be better, and it is not. These people were going to get vaccinated because they had been ordered to vaccinate and, in fact, no one had tested them prior to these vaccinations. No one examined them before vaccinating them. And that is sick. I saw that these people died like flies after being vaccinated. Last year, I lost 17 patients in one month who died after vaccination. I had a great mental crisis that day. Then I would come home and just cry. I saw the scale of these deaths. And also the accusations that it was due to me because I was not vaccinated. It caused a great mental crisis for me. I dealt with myself by talking to my fellow psychiatrist, who often supports me in such situations when I have a crisis and I want to quit my job. We, as people who work with people and see the deaths of these people on a daily basis, should be provided with some form of psychological support, but unfortunately, there is no such thing for us. That is why I go to scout camps to alleviate bad emotions. Otherwise, I would go crazy.'

'We did not organize with other nurses because nobody really wanted to meet. I talked to my friends who were not vaccinated, but the whole pandemic separated us rather than brought us closer. But there are online groups to which I belong, they are for independent medics, where we give each other support on what to do to avoid being fired.'

'As I work with people with mental disorders, at their request, I did not wear a protective mask. In addition, I don't think a piece of rag is going to prevent me from getting infected. In public spaces and buses, I did not wear a mask. They kicked me out of different places several times. But sometimes I got support from other people, such as the bus driver. However, to avoid such situations, I started putting the scarf over my mouth so that people would leave me alone.'

'However, in order to rebuild my activity with young people, I started working with a company that organizes trips to the most beautiful Polish castles and there we organize wizarding schools, and they are now very popular. It is October, we are leaving in January and we don't have any vacancies anymore. This is due to the great need for these young people to have contact with their peers and to break away from life mediated by Internet communication.'

'In my previous place of residence, I had a neighbor who knew that I was a nurse. And she would spit on my door, call me names, hang papers in the hallway where she insulted me. We wrote back [with my daughter] that we only infected others with a smile, but she destroyed it. The neighbors who were defending me responded to it, and it was very nice of them because I felt that I had support in them.'

'Looking at the pandemic as a whole and its impact on my life, it is worse when it comes to relationships with people. People became introverted, thus sitting at home and not having contact with others became furious with one another, demanding. However, we need contacts with others to function normally. After all, there were such people, and I know and saw them myself, who stayed home for two years. Others brought them groceries, they went out to balconies wearing masks. They wore masks in their own apartment and on the balcony. It only showed how much they were manipulated by the media, politicians, and the government.'

'As part of my scouting activity, we helped other people, e.g. in making purchases, bringing dinners. I also helped privately. I even posted an ad on the Internet that I would be happy to help. I was shopping, mainly for elderly people.'

'However, the worst thing was that I had two contacts with people who were diagnosed with Covid. While there, when one of these people hit her head and lost consciousness and the other fell into a diabetic coma, I was sent twice to a 3-week quarantine. Then nobody was interested in me, whether I had someone to do my shopping or if I had something to live on, because I have private patients, thanks to whom I earn a living. And so I was left with no income and no outside help.'"

Keywords: natural methods of preventing infection, resistance to Covid restrictions, neighbour and work colleagues support, mental crisis, harassment, threats of dismissal, loss of income due to compulsory quarantine

PL03

Title: Adam, a student who gets his groove back after lifting the restrictions

Narrative: "My name is Adam. I am a 22-year-old man and I am a student. I live with 4 other students in the dormitory in Z. [name of the city], in southern Poland. I earn a living from part-time work.

When it comes to my education and the problems that I had to face during the last year of high school, I must admit that I was very scared of not being properly prepared for the final exams. Due to remote learning and the low quality of knowledge provided to us by teachers (who were giving us tasks to solve without any possibility to consult it with

them) I got out of this situation by buying new handbooks (repetitories) which allowed me to repeat the material for the final exams. I also met with my peers and studied together the subjects that were the most problematic for us. Although it was against Covid restrictions and lockdown measures, meeting and studying together was the only way we could prepare for those exams. I also organized a private math tutoring. And I think this way I learned more than I would learn at school. Another problematic issue was the postponement of terms for final exams, because it caused me to have a lack of motivation to study and to put studying off for later. Moreover, I lacked expert knowledge on what to focus on and what to let go of.

Regarding my studies at the university, since the first two semesters were organized online, I missed integration with other students and direct contact with lecturers. Lockdown closed us in our houses. So, on a daily basis I was switching on the computer, logging into online lecture and I either fell asleep again or was doing something else, for instance sometimes I was working simultaneously. However, when comparing online and stationary studies, I prefer to study on site, as I have contact with other students and lecturers. Stationary study is also better for collaborative work. However, I was meeting other students in the dormitory, in the so-called recreation room, where we met to talk, to exchange experiences regarding studying at the university. During the pandemic, I joined two student organizations, one of them was the student council. Our first meetings were held online, but it did not discourage me from acting. During the second semester of my studies, when the restrictions were lifted, it was possible to meet other people acting in those organizations in the office, on site. This allowed me to meet new people and finally feel like I am alive. The students who lived with me in the dormitory played an important role in this process, as they encouraged me to apply for student council as a place where I can gain new experiences and develop. However, during the first year of my presence in the student council, as part of our activities, we did not receive permission to organize various events on site, so everything was transferred to the Internet. During my second year of study, when restrictions were lifted and we were allowed to organize our events on site, we had to motivate students to leave their houses and still have to do this. Some students still prefer online events as this does not require them to leave their comfort zone. Now, we focus on promotional actions, in collaboration with other commissions within the students council, and on direct contact with other students to encourage them to join our activities and events. During the pandemic, of course, we promoted our activities through social media channels; however, it was not very successful, so we decided to promote them stationary, through face-to-face contact and conversations.

Regarding my work on the helpline during the pandemic, I was abused several times, people were aggressive toward me. However, we had a common space where we could have exchanged our experiences with people who work for the same employer. Without this support that I received from my co-workers I would have felt left to myself. We, as employees, also had the support of our supervisors, who were also willing to help us and answer our questions in case of doubts.

I had Covid and was self-diagnosed with a test. I self-isolated. I bought myself a lot of groceries and medicines to self-heel. I had no one to help me, except my girlfriend and my relatives who called me and asked how I felt. Then I was living alone. After one week

and negative test results, I returned to normal life. I was not looking for medical help because Covid was not very severe in my case, it was during Christmas, so I did not need sick leave for my studies either.

On a daily basis, together with my parents, I was going to a cabin outside of the city to relax. After some time I started to take longer walks on the country side. It was a place where I did not have to wear a protective mask. That was good because I could breathe fresh air compared to the city. In the country side, the only place where everybody was wearing a mask is a chapel where the Sunday Mass was held. Except that it was okay not to wear it. It was some kind of escape for us from all those Covid restrictions. However, thanks to vaccination, I gained freedom of action and a sense of protection. When the restrictions were lifted and I could meet with people in the public, I was sure that I was safe because I was vaccinated. Thanks to the loosening of restrictions, it was also possible to rebuild our religious community. Together with older members of this community, we informed people that it is okay to meet in person and they started joining this community again.

In general, I would say that the pandemic had improved my situation. Had it not been for the pandemic, I would not have met my girlfriend, gained professional experience, won the podcast contest, and would not have written my high school exams so well."

Specifically telling quotes: "In retrospect, I have to say that the math tutoring that my friend gave me taught me more than I would learn in math lessons at school with a teacher. So, there is nothing bad that would not turn out to be good. (...) Self-planning of the material I need to learn and focusing on a subject that was not my forte, namely mathematics, allowed me to prepare for the final exams on an equal level in all subjects. However, the constant postponement of final exams caused me stress and disrupted my concept / study schedule, because this postponement made me feel lazy and delayed my studies until later. (...) Of course, I lacked expert knowledge from a teacher who would tell me what to focus on in preparing for these exams and what to let go."

"Regarding my studies at the university, since the first two semesters were organized online, I missed integration with other students and direct contact with lecturers. However, what I missed most was this integration, meeting new people and the city I moved to study. The lockdown got us locked in the house. It was like turning on the computer at 8am, starting the lecture and going to sleep or doing something else with the lecture in the background. There were also situations where I listened to the lecture on one set of headphones and worked on the other, to avoid waste of time and combine work with my studies. And it was a big advantage of these remote studies and remote work, because I could combine these two things."

"During the pandemic, recruitment to the student council was announced. At that time, I joined two student organizations. One of them was the student council. At the beginning, we met online, but already during the second semester of my studies, when the restrictions were lifted, we met in the office, on site. Then I met new people, started working more intensively and finally felt alive. Direct contact, not through a laptop, had a completely different effect on me and motivated me to do even more."

"Other students I met in the dormitory and who motivated me to join these organizations played an important role here. They mentioned that the student council is the place

where I can exchange experiences, act for other students, and develop myself.”

“Although a lot of time has passed since the loosening of the restrictions, we still have to fight for these students to leave the house, change their lifestyle, and start to integrate with other students and start acting.”

“During the pandemic, of course, we promoted our activities through social media channels; however, it was not very successful, so we decided to promote them stationary, through face-to-face contact, which proved to be more successful in motivating them. This is something different from another post in social media among many, many others.”

“Regarding my work on the helpline during the pandemic, I was abused several times, people were aggressive toward me. However, we had a common space where we could have exchanged our experiences with people who work for the same employer. Without this support that I received from my co-workers I would have felt left to myself. We, as employees, also had the support of our supervisors, who were also willing to help us and answer our questions in case of doubts.”

“Vaccines were a kind of relief for people and gave them mental peace. After the vaccination, I felt safer and more at ease. My vaccination took place when the restrictions began to loosen and I was able to go out to public space, to people. If I had not been vaccinated, I probably would not have dare have had so many meetings, with so many people. Vaccination gave me inner peace that I am safe, because herd immunity will work. Although I did not choose the friends I met in terms of whether they were vaccinated or not. If someone was not vaccinated, I accepted it because I felt safe myself, because I was vaccinated.”

“The religious community to which I belonged before the pandemic and which fell apart because of it managed to rebuild itself. (...) Our inner need worked here. Due to my studies in another city, I am not as active in it anymore, but new members are joining it. The lifting of restrictions also helped. We, as old members, have also started to inform people that we can meet and function as before. And then people started coming back to us.”

“Overall, I say that the pandemic improved my situation because if it had not been, I would not have met my girlfriend, with whom I met just during the pandemic. I would not have gained the same work experience as I now have, there would be no podcast and me winning the contest. My high school diploma would also not have gone so well if I had not studied alone, because the pandemic forced me to.”

Keywords: education, final exams, student council, vaccination, professional work, religious community

PL04

Title: Bogna, a student who volunteers to overcome lockdown and social isolation

Narrative: “My name is Bogna. I am 21 years old. I study informatics. I come from D., not very large town in South-East Poland. I moved to a larger city in central Poland to study.

Before studying I was not involved in any community work, I was more developing scientifically (mainly mathematics and Science). The city I came to study allowed me to be more involved, having many nongovernmental and informal organizations where I could offer my time and work. I found informal support network for the process of digital equality. When the pandemic started, it was my last year of high school. I didn't experience any technical and equipment problems, because my family could afford to buy us computers. I rather suffered from lack of contact with my peers. However, I could observe that my education was rather of low quality, especially not all teachers had the ability to manage communication channels and applications, so we did not have any classes at the beginning. I studied mainly alone. However, studying at home was demotivating. It is difficult to maintain the line between work and relaxation. When you have a laptop you study, sleep, relax, eat, and drink with it.

My high school was in W. [name of the city], far away from my hometown. I met friends on Zoom. But after a few weeks we decided to meet in person because this is something different. In 2020 I started studying at the university. The first year I studied remotely. It was also very demotivating for me, especially that I knew that I should study for exams to pass them. Moreover, I missed direct contact with lecturers and my peers. My demotivation was so high that I did not pass my first year of studies. I also applied for the humanities, which I studied for a year. The exams were also conducted remotely. But because that was something interesting to me, I passed them all.

I don't think I had Covid. I got vaccinated as soon as possible. I wore a protective mask. My father was sick, but Covid did not affect his health much and ours economically. The pandemic only meant for me a lockdown and other pandemic-related restrictions. I know other people who were more severely affected by the pandemic, after having Covid they suffered physically and later mentally. They are on drugs now. I also know a Belarusian refugee who had problems during Covid illness with housing and with contacting relatives. My roommate, when traveling by train, met another two Belarusian refugees who came to K. [name of the city] on Friday evening. They were supposed to go to the immigration office, but they opened on Monday. Due to the pandemic, hotels and other apartments to rent were closed, so they did not have a place to stay. We gave them space on our floor for the weekend. The guy who spoke to them and my roommate on the train brought us sleeping bags for them.

The pandemic allowed me to be more engaged in helping others, first of all, I was sewing protective masks. We organized as a Facebook group. After the holidays, I again started studying the same subject, again everything was online. During scrolling the posts on social media, I saw someone searching for volunteers to pack and send electronic equipment. I applied. Although I study informatics, I had the feeling that I do not know computers on the technical side. And being involved in this action of helping others to be digitally equal reduced this feeling. Now I know much more about computers than my peers. Firstly, I helped once, maybe two times a week. After the change in our localization, I was doing community work everyday. This way we could get around the lockdown and social isolation. Initially, I packed and sent computers, sometimes, when one of the volunteers could not sacrifice more of her free time, I contacted people in need and chose people we helped. After some time I became volunteers' coordinator. We have money and equipment from grants, private firms, fundraising, and individuals.

All our beneficiaries sign the donation agreement electronically to reduce postage costs. Computers that we donate to people in need increase, in my opinion, the quality of life of family digitally and the access of children to the educational process.

After starting war in Ukraine, which changed the nationality of our main beneficiaries, I asked one of my Ukrainian friends to translate the application form to Ukrainian. Now I understand a lot of Ukrainian language because I have constant contact with Ukrainians. However, we faced problems calling them because our volunteers couldn't speak their language. One month ago I posted a message on social media self-helping group that we search for new volunteers who can help to deliver computers to Ukrainian children; the ad was also translated into Ukrainian. Ten people in need of a computer responded to me, which was not surprising. Two of them, Ukrainians, are now our volunteers. Mainly we act locally but collaborate with other nongovernmental organizations to enable delivery of our equipment to children living in Ukrainian child-care homes.

The pandemic and helping others allowed me to develop new skills of managing myself and others."

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: education, final exams, social isolation, lack of motivation, community work, digital equality

PL05

Title: Jan, an entrepreneur who decided to devote most of his time to community work

Narrative: "My name is Jan and I am 47-year-old man living in a large city in central Poland. I am married to a Belgian woman who lives in Poland for over 20 years now. We have 4 kids, between 10 and 16 years old. We have a partnership. I am very often at home. I make a living by managing an interactive agency. 30% of my time is dedicated to my professional work, while 70% to community work.

Due to the fact that I have a good team at work, Covid allowed me to devote most of my time to community work. In my private life, during the pandemic, we have experienced challenges but also possibilities, because if it wasn't Covid, there would be no #UwolniZlomka action, I would not devote so much time to self-understanding and relationships with others. Covid enabled me a lot rather than was a problem. However, computers for our children were our first family challenge. I brought computers from my work to solve the problem and then I thought that I should also share them with others. I created a team and then a lot of people joined me, mostly volunteers. I do not work alone; most of the work is done by volunteers. I must admit that my position as a person who has the comfort of owing a company and, therefore, has constant provision of income allows me to be socially active. My community work started in January 2020, when I decided to devote more time to zero waste and climate issues. Repairing computers for my kids, at the beginning of the pandemic, showed me that this is essential for their development. After fixing another 10 computers we - as people

engaged in the action - operate as part of a group that has around 6,900 members in social media. We have 150 volunteers; however, 10-15 are really collaborative and engaged. Their job is to deal with administrative issues and also to choose the beneficiaries of our actions. Sometimes, when we have money, we hire someone to help us. As we do not have a formal structure, we started to collaborate with K. Foundation, which is our incubator. It not only gives us an address, but also supports us a lot in administrative work. We also used the help of other foundation that helped us find our place. We receive donations from private companies, mostly computer equipment. The criteria for choosing our beneficiaries changed after the start of the war in Ukraine. Before the war, the criteria equaled the 'number of children' x the 'social-economic situation of an applicant'. Applications for computer equipment are submitted through a specially designed system. They are verified by some of our volunteers. The war has changed the criteria, since relying on one's economic and social situation before the war is pointless. Now, we mostly provide computer equipment for Ukrainian families and for organizations who work with and for Ukrainian children, e.g. schools. Another criterion is the applicant's previous place of residence in Ukraine. War zones have priority. Beneficiaries of our actions are various social groups and institutions: mostly women, teachers (who helped children get back to educational system), custodians, including social probation officers, local foundations providing help, community day care centers. In the Ukrainian context, we mostly provide for women with children and organizations that support internal refugees.

The government somehow managed to deal with digital exclusion, but only during the first two waves of the pandemic. According to our estimations around half a million computers were needed. As national and local support of different kinds did not solve the whole problem, we started to act. Very similar actions to ours are held in many Polish cities. However, helping in Poland is expensive due to VAT regulations. Companies that give us computers have to pay for this. During the Covid pandemic, some of the VAT restrictions were lifted and then the computers delivered to educational institutions were exempt from tax. Our action has two aims: first, equalizing social opportunities, and second, raising awareness of computer recycling (in line with the zero waste idea). We face rather general than Covid-related problems, and those are: human resources, technical/informatic, and administrative problems. We deal with them on a daily basis and try to solve them together, with the help of other organizations and individuals."

Specifically telling quotes: "Due to the fact that I have a good team at work, Covid allowed me to devote most of my time to community work."

"If it were not for Covid, there would be no #UwolnijZlomka action, there would be no changes in my work team, I would not have been able to spend so much time understanding myself. It turned out just before Covid that I have Asperger syndrome. During the pandemic, I could devote a lot of time to myself and my relationship with others. The #UwolnijZlomka action also allowed me to do that, because I meet a lot of people there, etc. Covid enabled me a lot rather than was a problem."

"At the beginning of January 2020, I thought that this is the time when I have to devote a little more of my energy to the zero-waste-climate relationship. Repairing computers for my kids showed me that this is essential. Later I fixed 10 computers for the next

people, and now we operate as part of a group that has around 6,900 members on social networks.”

Keywords: zero waste, digital equality, community work, education, climate sustainability, war in Ukraine

PL06

Title: Kaja, a single mother who established her own language school.

Narrative: “My name is Kaja, I am 40 years old. I am a language teacher and single mother of two boys – 11 and 17 years old. We live in a 3 room rent apartment in a small town, in south Poland. We live with 3 cats.

During the pandemic, as a teacher, I was completely on my own. I did not have institutional support in terms of providing tools and competences to communicate with children. I get by buying myself a license for Zoom and I learned how to use it in two days. The whole remote teaching was a big fiction and very demotivating for me. I was exhausted. Lockdown was the worst, as I was very active before the pandemic. With my children and my dog, I run away to the forest to get by with it. We get back at this absurd law that you could not go the forest due to the hygienic restrictions. During the second wave of the pandemic, we received more tools to work with children; however, I felt more powerless than ever. I avoided meetings, only visited my parents and met friends in the woods. At school it was confusing to jump from open to closed school, not only for me, but also for children. So, I decided to organize illegal meetings for them in public spaces, with the agreement of their parents, so that they can spend some time together. They were riding horses, making a fire, playing together on the playground. However, every lockdown was difficult for me, because the children were antisocial and I had to constantly focus on socializing them. The most critical moment was when my brother got Covid. We were concerned for our mother, who is sick. It was a time when vaccines were not yet available. Then I and my children were sick. My colleagues and friends, but mostly my father, helped me get through the illness by providing me with groceries. I was left alone with my own and my son’s illness. We were controlled by the police and it was an awful experience. One of my sons had breathing problems, the doctor advised me to put him in the hospital, but I did not agree. I was afraid I would not have contact with him at all. He stayed home. All ended happily. However, after Covid I was physically weaker and exhausted after one hour of teaching. At school it was obvious that children became addicted to the Internet and their cells. The same happened to me. It was the worst decision to close children in their homes with the 24 hour Internet and the difficulties of parents in controlling them due to their work from home. The pandemic, however, has some positive sides for me: I could reevaluate my life. Now I only buy what I really need. At work, I had a lot of problems with remote teaching and those included: getting permission to use Zoom instead of the teaching tool recommended by school’s director; lack of cameras, computer or Internet at children’s homes, and therefor, exclusion from the educational process. Parents were also afraid of all this. During the first six months

of the pandemic, we get organized with other teachers to support each other in the process of remote learning, especially from the technical side. I thought my work colleagues how to use concrete tools. We spoke on the phone, used Google document, and Messenger. Parents were satisfied with my way of working with children. They thanked me. I also organized some online parties and meetings for children at school. However, today I have a different approach to teaching than before the pandemic. I decided not to overload myself with the emotional and economic costs that come with online teaching. I had professional burnout and paid for everything from my pocket. Back then, I decided to quit my job at language school when I was teaching.

My sons and I were also going to the mountains to escape the world of the pandemic. For a longer period I felt powerless and did nothing with it. But after some time I started exercising, first with YouTube, I was going to the gym, and later I started going illegally to my friend's apartment where I could blow off steam.

After my professional burnout and quitting my job, I started working in high school and established my own, totally online, language school. I have students from Poland and abroad. My plan is to work in elementary school until the end of this school year and from September to completely transfer to high school. I work a lot now, but I do not feel controlled by others, I watch everything myself. That is what I needed."

Specifically telling quotes: "During the pandemic, I coped completely on my own. When the pandemic started, we, teachers, did not have support at all. We were given two days to prepare for remote teaching. No one knew the Classroom, no one knew the Zoom, no tools. What I did then, I learned the Zoom in two days.

(...) during the first two weeks of the pandemic, learning was one big fiction, there was no scheduled hours, everyone contacted [with children] on whatever they wanted, or not, just sending them billions of tasks to solve. It was really bad for me because I was just sweating. I connected with the children, but the way the whole system looked like was very demotivating for me. It was such a moment that people blackened the reputation of teachers for what it looked like. And I had, and still have such thoughts, that I am not surprised that the teachers were drag through the mud. But on the other hand, I justify them a bit, because they had absolutely nothing, no resources. Everything was one fiction. And it was a lot for me to bear. Since I am a person who likes to act, being locked up at home was the worst thing for me.

Then we started running away to the forest. We walked with my parents' dog in the woods as much as possible. It was an absurd rule to not enter the forest. It was complete nonsense. However, it was the only form of escape from being locked up at home.

However, in the second wave I had a strong sense of powerlessness. I hate not having influence. From a very active person, I became a person for whom going anywhere was a challenge. I avoided all kinds of meetings. I used to go to my parents and meet my friends in the woods. And that's it. It was also difficult to jump all the time from closed school to open, closed, open... because these children cannot find themselves in this reality. Then I figured out that I would organize illegal outdoor meetings for these children. I made arrangements with their parents where they were to lead the children and, for example, we went horseback riding or set a fire in the snow so that these children would be together. Or we used to go to the playground. But I couldn't write it down in

my journal. It was difficult for these children to come back after the lockdowns. They got totally antisocial. They forgot about social norms, about what they should bring to school. They became so wild. For me as a tutor it was difficult because I had to teach them everything from the beginning.

The most critical moment was when my brother fell ill. It was in the second wave, the fall. He was fine, but we were afraid of my parents, especially my mother, who is a sick person. My brother was locked in the room all the time, he only used the bathroom. Mom was disinfecting the door handles. There were no vaccinations back then. Then I fell ill, along with my children. And it was a terrible experience because I was very sick. I had symptoms of a very severe flu. And my sons as well. I was alone with everything. Only my father, who brought us groceries, helped us. I also remember that it was depressing for me when the police came and checked if we were home. During the entire time of our disease, no one was with us, no one examined us. My older son was short of breath. I called the doctor and they told me to measure the number of breaths per minute. We measure, the doctor says too much. The doctor told me to call the ambulance. I did not agree, because I knew that if they took my child to the hospital, I would not have contact with him at all, because I have Covid, I cannot risk grandparents' [health-EC], I will lose contact with him. I asked him to give us some medicine. And he did, but it was my responsibility. It was very stressful because I was left alone. I had to measure his breaths (...). I was wondering all the time if I had made the right decision not to put him in the hospital. In the end, everything went well. After my illness, I returned to online learning very quickly, I was away from work for 3 weeks. I sat down at the computer excitedly then, but after an hour I was exhausted. I was weakened for a long time after my illness, nothing else happened to me. My children returned to form without complications.

We had problems at work very often. I learned the zoom, I bought it myself. The students did not know this tool. My boss said it was dangerous [tool - EC]. I had to get permission from parents. No one argued. The lack of equipment and Internet in children's homes was a big problem. At home, we also had this problem, especially when all three of us were working online at the same time. The kids did not want to turn on the cameras. There were no laws that made them have these cameras on. So they did what they wanted. I ordered these cameras to be turned on, and they turned them on. (...) We also faced problems when controlling children's attendance. Back then, we still used paper, not electronic, journals. I could not require the camera to be turned on, I could not enter the absence, because they may not have a camera/computer at home. Few children were lost in cyber reality, the ones that I didn't see for three or four weeks.

However, after some time, my colleagues and I started to support each other. At the beginning, when I learned Zoom, we called each other and I was teaching them how to use it. I used the Google document and taught them there. We called each other on Messenger and exchanged screenshots. I felt the least supported by the authorities and our management. We had to do everything ourselves, prepare how to do it, especially during the first six months of the pandemic. So we supported each other in this whole learning process, especially from the technical side.

Today I have a different approach to teaching. When the children tell me that they will lock us up again because the energy crisis is coming, I say now that I am giving up. I no

longer have the strength to volunteer, paying money for the materials that the school should provide us. In fact, the last two years I have been working on my computer, on my paid Zoom, on my electricity, on my materials. That is why today I come to the conclusion that volunteering and online learning is over. Because for me online learning meant professional burnout. During October and November [2021-EC], I had such a burnout that it was on the verge of depression. Then I left the language school where I was teaching. (...) if there is such a need for me to teach online, I will go to school every day and use the computer from school and work on the school's electricity. And school equipment, especially the Internet, will not stand it, especially if 20-30 teachers come to teach at the same time and we all connect online. So now when someone asks me what I will do if we go online again, I tell them that I am going on health care leave.

To take a break from the reality of the pandemic, in addition to the forest, we also started hiking in the mountains. We have even developed a passion in this direction. (...) for a long time, when I felt powerless, I didn't do anything about it, but after some time I started to play sports - I exercised with YouTube, went to the gym, I went illegally to my friend who has a studio at home, and I physically took it out there.

During our illness, in addition to my father, my closest friends and acquaintances helped me, who offered their help. Thanks to this, I found out who I can trust or not.

After professional burnout I had, when I quit my job, I started working in high school and also started my language school, which is entirely online. I have students not only from Poland, but also from Switzerland, Italy, etc. This is another benefit of this pandemic. I was struggling with my thoughts for a long time whether or not to leave [this language school - EC] because I was exhausted with this job, constantly adding more tasks to me. One of my friends suggested that I should do yoga and TRE stress release techniques. After three weeks, I decided to quit this school. 25 students left with me. My school started in February 2022. My plan now is that I will work in elementary school, bring my class, with which I am very close, to the end of this stage of education and I will transfer completely to high school. I teach private lessons only online, I also have a lot of students in this school, I work a lot, I would even say that too much, but I do not have a sense of someone's control over me, I watch everything myself. And it was probably what I needed."

Keywords: single mother, teacher, remote teaching, social isolation, illegal meetings, professional burnout, new language school

PL07

Title: Kacper, a senior whose economic, social and health situation worsened due to coronavirus infection.

Narrative: My name is Kacper, I am an 89-year-old man. I have retired for almost 30 years now. I was deprived of employment for economic reasons, earlier than expected. I live in a two-room apartment with my wife. She is 85. We live in a city located in southern Poland. I consider our financial situation to be rather bad. In March 2021 I took a

coronavirus vaccine. Five days later I felt very sick and weak. I had a fever, was vomiting, lost taste, could not eat. My wife was terrified. She decided to call a general practitioner. I receive telephone advice on what to buy in the pharmacy for my condition. When nothing was helping, I still had a high fever, my GP decided to test me for Covid. We called our sons to help me get to the car so I could go to the clinic. It turned out to be positive. My wife wanted to call the ambulance, but it turned out to be problematic. She had to call the hospital and, again, a GP after tele-advice diagnosed me with Covid. The ambulance arrived after two hours. I was barely conscious. When they arrived I was afraid that I would not be able to function properly, so my wife slipped into my pajama pocket a card with my date of birth, the name of the vaccine I had taken a few days before and my wife's phone number. The ambulance took me to a hospital in our city, but after two hours it turned out that they did not have places. They took me to another hospital, 70 km from our apartment. My son was calling hospitals all over Poland, where they took me. At 10 p.m. that day the hospital called my wife that my condition was very serious. I was unconscious. After two days, my son gave me a cell phone to call my wife. That time, my wife was in quarantine and supported by the help of our sons. They brought her groceries. However, hospital care was a decisive factor for my health and my wife's mental well-being. The nurses helped me to contact my wife and informed her about my condition. I was examined in detail. And taken of also very kindly. I felt better after a few days and was transferred to another room. My two sons gave me things I needed. In total, I spent 12 days in the hospital. Just after leaving the hospital I decided to apply for health compensation from my insurer, but in the meantime they changed the rules due to Covid and my application was rejected. Now I regret, because I could have gone to the court with this, but I do not have that money to fight with them. I applied because after having coronavirus my health worsened a lot. I am constantly under the supervision of the doctor due to neurological and hearing problems being side effects of the disease. I am more nervous. I had pulmonological and walking problems. My wife has to constantly take care of me. She goes with me to the doctors. Neurological therapy is quite expensive. My wife was sick after every vaccination she received. Because of this, she has heart problems now. She goes to private cardiologists and was advised to do an immunological test. That is another money we need to spend and don't have. I would say that in general the pandemic has worsened my economic, health, and social situation. I have sporadically face-to-face contact with my children and friends. Fear of infection is the main reason for my isolation. We call our children and friends, but it is not the same anymore. Most of the time we spend at home. Sometimes, we talk to our neighbors.

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: Covid infection, health-care, quarantine, neurological, social and economic problems, self-isolation.

PL08

Title: Marcel, a man who views the pandemic as problematic in its entirety

Narrative: "I am Marcel. I am retired. I am 59 years old. I am a person with a disability. I don't work. I live alone in my own apartment in a small city.

The pandemic is problematic for me in its entirety. It was strange when our president started saying that we should get vaccinated to prevent the spread of the virus and after that organized presidential elections. So I asked: Are we fighting Covid or is it just a business between the government and pharmacy business? I am not saying that there was no virus. But I am saying that it was political propaganda. Moreover, for me, our government promised to help people in need, but in reality it did not help at all. My friend died from Covid, bad health care and inadequate treatment he received in the hospital. They put people in hospitals and infect them with Covid, treat them with Covid and not for that what they really came for. There is a drug that helps to fight the virus. It is the antibiotic, amantadine. He did not receive it because the government officially said it is not effective with Covid. I know people who were smuggling it into sandwiches made for their relatives who were hospitalized. And those relatives recovered. My other friend was also infected in the hospital and I was also smuggling this drug for her. But I saw a lot of deaths around me. I also bought the medicine for myself in case of another infection. Doctors have also made a lot of money. They took money for issuing a prescription with amantadine. I am sceptic about vaccination. I was called crazy, foiler, 'flat earth' propagator. I was ineffectively persuaded to get vaccinated. I know many people who after vaccination experienced several health problems. Nobody was informing us what is really going on with those vaccinations, what are their side effects. I had to look for alternative websites. Doctors deny recording an undesirable postvaccination reaction because it takes too much time from their working time. I am not also vaccinated due to my previous anaphylactic shocks after some vaccinations. I had Covid four times. I got sick for the first time in October 2020. I was infected in the hospital where I underwent rehabilitation treatment. After the illness I had problems walking and was mentally shattered. In January 2022 I get sick for the fourth time. And this time was even worse than the first one. My mum, who is also chronically ill, get sick as well. My girlfriend moved into my mother's apartment so she could help us during our illness. After a few days she was also sick. Then our friend provided us with groceries. I was taking care of my 84-year-old mother and partner. I self-tested for Covid. I did not report it anywhere. I was not controlled by anyone. I treated myself with the drugs I had and some prescribed by the doctor. Some drugs helped, some not. I felt like a zombie. After recovering, I had blood pressure problems and backaches. I tried to persuade people not to get vaccinated by giving them examples of its common side effects that are life-threatening. I did not follow the rules. I did not wear a protective mask. Because of that, I was kicked off the bus three times. My friend sent me a link to the site where proofs of mask ineffectiveness were collected. Once, a woman called the police because I was not wearing a mask in public. I do not believe that Covid tests are credible. I supported my friend who after Covid had a lot of neurological and walking problems by going with her to different doctors. The pandemic and my illness also had positive effects. I could be more focused on relaxing, watching television, reading a book. It was also a very reflective time. I consider the pandemic also problematic in terms of its

representation in the media. We could see the Warsaw demonstration around abortion rights in Poland and the exaggerated police defense provided by the state. In Sweden, they have a different attitude to the virus. They use drugs, not restrictions. And it helps, the virus is almost invisible there. Mainstream media were problematic because it was propaganda. I was reading alternative websites with information from health practitioners who advised how to naturally - with diet and vitamins - strengthen the immune system. After the pandemic, I totally lost trust I had in the government. The pandemic has changed our economy. In other countries (UK, USA, Belgium) not so many restrictions as in Poland were introduced. Many people refused to be vaccinated. There was no such panic around the virus. In Poland, the pandemic has its effects in fighting the opposition and undercutting the wings of anti-vaccine movements.”

Specifically telling quotes: The respondent did not agreed to be recorded.

Keywords: Covid-infection, health problems, Covid-restrictions, vaccinations, trust for government

PL09

Title: Greta and the worst time in her life

Narrative: “My name is Greta. I am a 38 year old woman. I live in the countryside. Actually, I am unemployed. I lost my job in April 2022. I live with my parents, who are retired. I consider my economic situation to be rather good. I am under psychiatric treatment. I have a mild disability certificate.

The pandemic is the worst time of my life. I started a job in January 2020, and lost it in April 2022. When the pandemic was announced in Poland, I fought that it would last a couple of months and disappear. But the government started to introduce restrictions and measures to prevent the spread of the virus. And then my problems started. I had trouble accessing health services and therefore extending my disability certificate, which was crucial for keeping my job. I was calling clinics, doctors, and most of the time I couldn't reach them. Finally, I went to other doctors who helped me renew my certificate. I was very afraid I would lose my job. The situation at work was also stressful. There were conflicts around our team's will to follow the covid restrictions, about the possible redundancies and a lot of fear related to commuting and police controls. Our employer did not want to issue us a certificate that we work, in the evenings, so that we could be outside on our way to and from work. Some of the rules (like wearing a mask or gloves) were not comfortable for our work as office cleaners. Some of us decided not to wear them during work, especially when people hostile to our behavior were distant or absent. The therapy center, where before the pandemic I went every day, was closed from October 2019 to May 2020 and then I could only visit this place for a very restricted time and with few other people. It only now started to function as before the pandemic. I missed people from the center, but to overcome our isolation I called or mailed them regularly. Some women at the center also helped me complete the disability allowance

application form as a way to provide me with partial financial security if I lost my job due to the pandemic. During the time that the therapy center was closed, I was taking care of my parents. They are more than 70-ty. I did not go anywhere to avoid being infected with the virus. My mother has asthma, so if she were infected that would mean hospitalization. I was vaccinated, but I did so to possibly not have problems at work and maintain my job. I was sick after every dose, fortunately without complications. However, I will not take another one."

Specifically telling quotes: "The pandemic is the most difficult time in my life. Fortunately, I had been working for three months, and at the beginning everything was fine, because there were no restrictions, but when the pandemic came and the restrictions came in, I could not get to the doctor, and the disability certificate I needed to keep a job was about to expire. It was a battle with the registration ladies to get anywhere. When I had an appointment for the examination, the doctor claimed that the examination could not be performed today due to the state of the pandemic. I made a lot of fuss. Then I went to the hospital, to another doctor who helped me in this matter. He copied the results from the previous study into my file. I finally got a certificate, but it was a very stressful experience. It was a circus on wheels. It was almost impossible to get to the registration or teleconsultation. The line was busy all the time."

'My biggest fear was losing my job. I had a contract signed for a year, and if I did not have this certificate, I would have had to end it after a month from its commencement. I started in January 2020 and finished it in April this year. At the beginning of the pandemic, I thought it would last a while and after the winter the problem would end. But the pandemic turned out to be problematic for my work. There were divisions at work. The proposed solutions were inconvenient for our work. Gloves were okay, but working in masks was a hard work. I cleaned the offices. This office building belonged to a public institution, so few people worked remotely there. In constant motion for several hours a day. We gave up on them after a while. Same with gloves. The reason was that I read that it causes ringworm because the hands sweat. There were conflicts and fears that we would stop working because everything would be closed.'

'Throughout the pandemic, I managed to keep my job, although the employer in January this year started to reduce jobs and dismissed women who worked part-time. With me, due to contractual obligations towards ZUS and me, he could not terminate the contract at that time. '

"Some people at my work have reported that we don't wear masks. Then we put them back on. But when we knew that the informants had already left, we took them off again. '

"I wore a mask outside. It was still bearable in winter. But summer was the worst. And these gloves."

"The worst thing was that I couldn't go to my day therapy center, which closed in October 2019. We could partially come back there, but only in May 2020, and with big restrictions on the number of people who could stay there during the day. In September 2020, the groups with which we worked were reduced, and only now began to return to normal. What I missed the most were the group classes and other people I met here. During the pandemic, we called each other and wrote to each other via the Internet. We had no

other place to meet because everything was closed: restaurants, cinemas. The most absurd was also the ban on entering the forest, even in a mask! It was absurd! The Minister had ideas out of this world. The outdoor gyms have also been closed. Where were I or the others supposed to go? For that, I had the urge to kick the Minister's ass."

'During the pandemic when I was afraid to lose my job, the ladies at the therapy center helped me obtain a one-off donation for people with disabilities, in the amount of approximately PLN 1,500. It was some kind of financial security for me if I were to lose my job.'

"Recommendations about staying home were also absurd. I was afraid that I would have to explain why I was going to work. The Minister of Health did not care that we had to work to earn a living. We also couldn't switch to remote work. After all, a broom will not sweep itself."

'At that time, when I couldn't go to the therapy center, I stayed home and helped my parents. They are over 70 years old. I hardly went out to avoid getting infected. Mom has asthma. If she got sick, she would immediately go to the clinic.'

I had to get vaccinated at work. I got vaccinated for peace of mind. If I didn't get vaccinated, my employer could pick on me and, for example, fire me on this basis. I took the first two doses and experienced it very badly, although without complications. I will not accept a third one."

'Pandemic means restrictions, sitting at home, fear of police checks, the employer did not want to issue certificates that we are working to have a pad for the police. Fears of being thrown off the bus for not wearing a mask. And I knew (as a former student of political science) that it was included in the regulation, so it was not binding.'

'Our team at work fell apart during the pandemic. Suddenly we started to divide into different subgroups. Physically and mentally, the pandemic took a toll on me. Locked in the house, scaring us with bad news. I did not suffer economically. But the atmosphere at work had a bad effect on my psyche. We didn't know if they would fire someone or if we would still have a job the next day. And that is why there were conflicts.'

Keywords: restrictions, disability certificate, problems accessing health-care services, day therapy center, stress, conflicts at work, isolation.

PL10

Title: Stella, a professional caregiver who rejects the existence of the pandemic

Narrative: "My name is Stella. I work as a caregiver for the disabled, terminally ill, elderly. I work every day of the week. I am 70 years old. I live in a small city, in my own house. I live with a dog. I have been retired for ten years. Since my retirement, I have worked as a caregiver. I consider my economic situation to be very good.

I believed in the pandemic for one month. But at some point I saw some contradictions between what is shown in the media and what is in reality. I started to doubt whether it was true. They said that the number of Covid deaths was very high everyday, but we could not see any bodies on the streets. At the beginning of the pandemic I was a bit

scared. I was cleaning doors and door handles. I was wearing a protective mask. I even helped my sister sew masks. After one month I stopped wearing a mask, disinfecting things. I did the opposite that was advised in the media to do. I did not take any dose of the vaccination. And I am alive. I work with people everyday. My patients knew that I am not vaccinated. No one resigned or died. I did not infect anyone. It was interesting to me that the WHO changed the definition of pandemic a few years earlier. It was the first step to the pandemic we have. The introduced restrictions were absurd: ban on entering forests, churches. At some point I remembered about the UN 2030 Agenda and found its interpretation on the Internet prepared by Ordo Iuris. Ordo Iuris argues that this document was prepared in a specific way, presenting goals without adequate measures for their achievement. This, as an effect, allows globalists to use any measure adequate to the pandemic context as a way to significantly reduce the number of people in the world. Vaccines are also one of the ways of depopulation. That is why I decided not to take any. Furthermore, I was able to observe side effects of the vaccine in people close to me. My sister was vaccinated because she wanted to travel. After vaccination, she has cardiological, cancerous, and gastrological problems. She is constantly sick. My patient, after three doses, developed vulvar cancer. During my work, only once a patient noticed the lack of a protective mask. Then I decided to wear it. But his wife infected me and him some time later. When I felt I was weaker, I took amantadine. I took the drug that I had previously arranged before it was withdrawn from sale. It was also a deliberate move from the globalist side. The only problem I had during the pandemic was difficult access to doctors. I tore my tendons in my shoulder area. It took a long time before I managed to arrange everything - a referral to an orthopedist, a visit, a referral to surgery, looking for a place where it could be performed. It turned out that due to the changes that occurred in the shoulder at that time, surgery would not take place. As a result, my right arm is now disabled. This causes problems with washing myself, it is also problematic at work because I have to lift people. It was similar with the operation for varicose veins that I have on my legs. My surgery date has been postponed three times. I have another one in March next year, but it is also not certain, because you don't know what will happen. I believe pandemic worsen my mental state, because governments lie to us and people believe in those lies. I cannot believe how stupid our society is."

Specifically telling quotes: "For the first month after announcing the Covid pandemic, I believed it. But at some point I started to check everything they say on TV, what contradictory information they provide us with, what nonsense they tell. I started to wonder if it was all true. Believing in what they were saying on TV about the deaths of Covid meant that the corpse should be staggering in the streets, because apparently so many people were dying, the hospital was supposedly overcrowded, but it was the only ward in the area where people were brought from various places. In addition, people who were not necessarily sick but tested positive for Covid were sent to this ward. A month, maybe a month and a half, I was scared, I washed the door handles, the doors with disinfectants and wore a mask. I even helped my sister sew masks. I found patterns on the Internet and she sewed. After a month, I stopped wearing a mask, disinfected my hands, what they said on TV, I did the opposite, I didn't get vaccinated even once and I am alive. I used to go to work every day. Everyone knew that I was not vaccinated. No

one has refused my services, no one has died, I have not infected anyone.

What interested me at some point was that a few years ago the WHO changed the definition of a pandemic. So, the ground was being prepared for what happened. The restrictions that were introduced were absurd, closing forests, churches. What? They don't get infected on the bus like they do in churches?

At some point, I remembered the UN document, which presents the development goals until 2030. On the Internet, I came across an interpretation of this document by Ordo Iuris. I read it and after some time I realized that Ordo Iuris is right, that the globalists want to reduce the number of people in the world to half a billion. Everything is fulfilled as they show it. The document does not mention which means will be used to achieve specific goals. This is puzzling. But when the vaccines came out, it dawned on me. After all, no one will tell me that I have take something from people who want to depopulate the world.

I told my sister not to get vaccinated. But she wanted to travel, and the vaccine made it possible. She was vaccinated twice. Since then, he has had health problems - heart, tumors, stomach, and intestines. This makes her not take another dose.

My patient, after being vaccinated three times, developed vulvar cancer. Her son insisted on vaccination. I insisted not to vaccinate her.

The people I dealt with did not comment on my lack of a mask. I use gloves at work. Once I was in a situation where after being noticed by a gentleman who I suddenly took care of after leaving the hospital, I put on this mask for his peace of mind. And so what that I wore a mask when his wife came and infected us both - me and him.

One afternoon, my patient's wife called to say she was sick. A few hours later, I also started to feel bad. But I took amantadine immediately. I got a prescription for this drug a little earlier because I knew they were about to withdraw it from sale. This, of course, was also a deliberate move.

The only problem I had during the pandemic was difficult access to doctors. I tore my tendons in my shoulder area. Everything took a long time. Before I managed to arrange everything, a referral to an orthopedist, a visit, a referral for surgery, looking for a place where surgery could be performed, it turned out that due to the changes that occurred in the shoulder at that time, surgery would not take place. As a result, my right arm is now disabled. This causes problems with washing myself; it is also problematic at work because I have to lift people.

It was similar with the operation for varicose veins that I have on my legs. My surgery date has been postponed three times. I have another one in March next year, but it is also not certain, because you don't know what will happen.

The pandemic has generally made my situation worse. My mind started to settle. When I see how they deceive us and others believe all this, I cannot believe that we are such a stupid society."

Keywords: caregiving, access to health-care, rejection of the pandemic, global conspiracy

Portugal

PT01

Title: Recovering control

Narrative: When my funding ended, I felt very upset. I was feeling useless again because I wasn't able to finish PhD in time. Covid and all the things happening in Brazil have put me really down. But I remember that when I talked with you the first time I was at the same time celebrating life and friendship. Since then, I have passed through several problems: I was asked by my supervisors to follow a new direction in my thesis. I felt they thought that I wasn't able to do it so I'd better to move to a easier version. That distressed me a lot. I couldn't identify with the new project but I struggled to do it. I really did. Then, in this Summer I realized that I was forcing myself to be someone I am not. Again, to do with my life what others want instead of what I want. I decided to take all the risks and go back to my previous project. I talked with my two supervisors and faced their criticism. Unfortunately my main supervisor and dear friend until now couldn't accept well my decision and things were complicated until the end. But I was determined so was finally able to finish it! I'm quite proud of my PhD. I don't care what is going to happen in the public defence. I was able to do it, I finished it. I never thought I would do it, a person like me, with attention disorder, I take hours to focus, to write a paragraph. But I did and now I know I can do this and maybe more. In what concerns my life and friendships, lately I've been having problems with some people I thought were my friends. And some for long time. I've been working in training in Porto because I needed badly the money. But I realized that the company was using public funding to do fictional training sessions. I was supposed to be there but the participants didn't show up. It depressed me a lot. I was happy with the perspective of working in this, even as a future perspective because I have certificate for being trainer. But this experience was terrifying, my friend, the girl that invited me to do this, didn't know also it was like this. I hope they pay me the money for the 3 months I stayed there. But at a certain point I decided to stop doing it and dedicate again to finish my PhD. AND it was a good decision. The worst part was the day of the delivery. I arrived at the university office and they said I couldn't deliver it because I had payments in delay. I had to ask my father for help. That was something really painful at my age. But it gets worse: the money transfer took long and the last day of delivery arrived and the money wasn't available at my account. So I went to the bank and asked for a loan. I was desperate. The money was available immediately, so I was able to pay all the debts to the university plus the delivery amount. But I ended up owing money to my father and to the bank. I am now waiting for the training payment to solve all this situation. I'm also looking for a job. So I'm still with a lot of problems in my mind but to have been able to finish PhD has given me the strength to believe I will be able to solve all this and to go ahead with my dreams of having a place of my own and living peacefully here at Covilhã.

Specifically telling quotes: "I realized that I've been doing what others think I should

do instead of what I believe.”; “Even if I reprove public defense I'm still proud of my PhD.”

Keywords: mental disorders; lack of financial resources; employment; isolation; migration

PT02

Title: Faithful to my ability to think

Narrative: I passed different phases during Covid. At the beginning (first lock down) I was really afraid. I stayed home and my daughter left me all the shopping at my door. I talk with her daily by videoconference. I didn't went outside. It was difficult but fortunately I am someone who likes to be alone. At that time the support of Veleda project group it was very important. we talked in whatsapp and that was central not to feel alone. I also have maintained all the groups I participate in. A group of meditation for example. I do Reiki and I am a Shaman. All the collectives have moved to videoconference mode so I mantained it. A very difficult question was not being able to go to the swimming pool. During the two lockdowns. And then when it has reopened I couldn't go because I wasn't vaccinated. I have not taken the vaccines. I am vaccinated to all other things but I decided not to be vaccinated to Covid. That decision came from what I felt after the reopening in 2020. All the policies by the second half of 2020 and then in 2021 made no sense to me. I felt it made no sense. I was being deprived from my capacity to think and decide by myself. And I could not accept that. So I follow the requests: I used the mask in closed spaces. Not in the street, never. I made the necessary tests when I had to. But I no longer stayed at home. I did my shopping and went outside. As I could not go to the swimming pool I did walks. Not long because I have problems in a knee and also artrites. In the rest I got back to my life more or less how it was. What have upset me more were two things: one was the way that some institutions addressed the situation, creating odd rules. It was the case of the swimming pool. From one day to the other it reopened to all people and despite Covid still being active (as it is now) doesn't matter any longer if a person is vaccinated or not. And the shower rooms were reorganised in a way that we are closer to the other persons than we were before the pandemic, it's absurd. The other was the persons reaction. A divide was created between those who are vaccinated and those who are not. But now my life is more or less the same. With some differences since my daughter has invited me to go live with her. She though it was the best solution for both of us at this phase of our life. We used to live togheter before she came to Fundão in 2009. I came after her but living in different house also because at that time she was trying to adopt a child. So now I'm living in a small village nearby but I come to Fundão to visit friends, to swim and other things. The meditation group stayed online because our leader who is not from here was very sick during pandemic with a cancer and now she needs rest, she is not moving so much as she used to be. I'm still organizing our house. Both me and my daughter have cats so we are dealing with them living togheter now. But we are quite happy.

Specifically telling quotes: “How is it that people continue to die but it is no longer important to keep distance?”, “What bothers me most is the way some institutions took the chance to define absurd rules”

Keywords: agency; ageing; moving home; living alone; access to infrastructures; anti vaccination

PT03

Title: New challenges

Narrative: I live in this region since 2009. Before I lived in Pinhal de Frades, a location in Lisbon metropolitan area. I studied in Lisbon and worked there. I was tired of having so much stress in my live due to commuting and my lifestyle. I wanted to live in a more calm place so I decided to move here. I like Fundão very much. My mother came after me. It made no sense for her to stay, our house was very big and my father has died and with me moving, the house was too big just for her. We lived until recently very close to one another, in the same street and we were together every weekend. Now we have moved together. I invited her to live with me because at a certain point I thought that in the coming future we will need to suport more each other. We have both a serious chronic autoimmune chronic disease. It is more or less stable now but it will get worse. I was hospitalised for a long period due to it. So living together is the best for us. During the pandemic my mother had a liver problem. It scared me very much, imagining that she might get worse or even die without me knowing. The pandemic brought good and bad things. I was lucky because at my job (now I'm in another job, the one I was at that time) my chief had a serious health condition that made the doctor advise her not to be vaccinated. She and her husband, both working there, were not vaccinated. This way they need to accept that employees were not vaccinated too if we decided this way. So at my work place no one was vaccinated against Covid. I say I was lucky because I did not wanted to have the vaccine and I was not obliged to it. I know people there were forced to be vaccinated by their bosses. I passed through several changes in recent times. I quite that job because of things I didn't liked. Then I moved to another one but it was not in the area I used to work and also their need was temporary so I stayed unemployed short after. I was by this time that I took the decision to sell my house and move with mother again. When I was selling my house, with a dear friend I know since I live here, I told him that if he knew of a job opportunity to tell me and send him my CV. Some weeks later he told me his boss saw my resume and was very interested. We talked and I was offered my current job. I though I was having some spare time to move house and to settle down a bit but instead I moved and started a new job in the same time! But it was good because I'm enjoying very much! Things are good now if not exactly what I have expected for my life. During several years I was waiting to adopt a child. But time passed and she/he never came. I do believe that despite having accepted my application, Social Security never considered it because I was adopting alone. That made my life being hanging for several years. After some years I began to think it might not came but I was

still expecting so I was stucked, I could not make changes in my life like this move because if the child came after all I need the space to welcome him/her. So just before the pandemic I decided to withdraw the application. It was painfull. Then Covid came and all that suspension again. At the begiining I was very afraid, for me, for my mother, for all. Then as time went by I started to realize I was again hanged. Because society, the institutions were puting us in lock down and creating a lot of rules. Too much rules for a dubious situation. It was by that time that I decided that I would stay calm but would take my life the more normal as I could. I decided that I would not be vaccinated and I started to think about all the decisions I took next. Now here I am, starting a new chapter and willing to live peacefully in our new home.

Specifically telling quotes: "I realised it was time to make some changes because in the future we will be needing more to support each other."

Keywords: single woman; chronic disease; life changes; ant vaccination; adoption process

PT04

Title: Doing for Life. Doing for my children.

Narrative: I am mother of 3, I'm married and live in a farm with my husband and children. I have two girls, one is 21 and the other is 16 and a boy of 11 years old. I used to be a cooker but then my youngest son started to need more attention and the schedlues I had at the restaurant weren't adequate. So I left the job and came home to take care of them, specially of him. I spent some time helping my husband at the farm since he explores it for living. We produce milk. But the money was not enough and also I was used to be with people and to spend the entire day just with him and the animals was driving me mad. It was then that I started to do cleaning. I started slowly with just ironing at a former colleague house. But then I was getting more demands and when Covid arrived I had already the full week occupied with clients. During the pandemic I mostly maintained my activity. Excepting two ladies, the rest of my clients said that I could continue to work there. They asked me to be carefull and to use gloves. I never use gloves, I don't like it. But I had to and also always to use the mask. Most time I have mantained my life as it was. For my children it was a dificult time. Specially for the youngster. But it is worst now. This year he has changed school and he is resenting a lot. He has panic attacks and he wants to be always with me. I'm so worried with him. He keeps calling me all the time, he calls me every break. I have modified my schedules to be able to take him and get him from school. But I still have concerns since he doesn't like being there. I don't know if it was because changing school, I mean the physical space. He was used to his primary school. ALso having mode disciplines and the teachers. I don't know We are being supported by a psychologist and she gives me advices. For example she said I can't return his calls or messages. I'm not sure if that's the best solution and what I do is to conciliate her advices with my perceptions of his

needs. He is alone there, all his colleagues went to others classes. He is the only from our village in the class. I try to deal with it in a daily basis and hoping that with time passing he gets used to the school and his new lifestyle. I was able to organize my life in a way that I have availability for him.

Specifically telling quotes: But how can a mother do that? If he says he is not feeling safe?

Keywords: motherhood; mental health of youngsters; gender roles; house keeping; conciliating

PT05

Title: Too much

Narrative: I am graduated in Social Work. Five years ago I started working at Casa Qui in the attendance to victims. In 2019 when ReaJo answer was created I was the person defined to do the direct management of the house. Still I mantained doing attendance so I was supposed to conciliate both tasks. In January 2020 we have received our first youngsters. I was able to be with them and to support them until the first confinement. Then with lock down rules I went much less to the house. We essayed different strategies, for example week meeting by videoconference. But things were really complicated. This youngsters arrive very distressed and traumatized. Most of them come from living in the streets.They need people there for them. In most cases they know nothing of house management, cooking, cleaning, cloth washing and so. That's why a person present is so important. We have experienced several problems: conflicts, loneliness, lack of personal care...the house is for 4 persons but at a certain point we had 5 there, a couple that we could not separate. At the same time, the experience with the institutions was positive. It seemed that people in charge were more available to help and process things with ease. Systems were not working so for example the requestes to change personal name needed to be done directly with the responsible. That facilitated a lot. For me, as a professional and as a person it was highly demanding. I was confined at home and as a I live alone, I was full time thinking about this and also about all the pandemic context. I had the phone of ReaJo so often I 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. But I felt that at the same time it was not me. It was the system that made me burn out. Because if I tried to spare myself more from work I would not be able to do it as I needed. Things all work like that. It was in May 2021 that I quite the job. I couldn't stand anymore the pressure. I considered to ask for a leave but I understood it would not solve things. Slowly it would all return to the same. SO I decided to leave. Just simple as that. I had nothing, I didn't knew what I would be doing next. But I knew I would not be working in Social Work. Currently I am a yoga instructor. I feel good with me and my life, I don't have stress.

Specifically telling quotes: I did not even try to take a disease leave. Because I knew that it was not me who had a problem. Burn out is not really a personal problem. It is the system that makes that.

Keywords: LGBTQI+ youngsters, social work, leaving alone, mental health, life change

PT06

Title: A forced rebeginning that end up a blessing

Narrative: I am divorced from my husband since my younger son was two years old. Dealing with him was always difficult, I had several problems. But the kids were living with me. Then in 2016 he decided to come to Portugal and bring the kids. I agreed with that but we organised in a way that I was always talking with them and I used to see them in the vacations. The summer vacations were always with me. With the pandemic he said it was not safe for me to go and meet them in Portugal as it was planned. As trips became conditioned, you needed a person to be responsible for your stay. He refused to do that. He said I was putting the kids and him in danger by coming. He even put my younger son against me, saying terrible things to me. He took this as long as he could so I understood that I would lose my kids. So I decided to come. I was still working at home. By that time I was working in advertisement, that was my occupation for 34 years. I said nothing to my company, I sold a lot of things, I have emptied my entire house (except for the rooms of my kids. Because when they first came to Portugal with her father they asked me to keep their room as it was because it was their story). I was living with my mother of 90 years old by that time. She moved to my sister's house. All my family supported my decision. In 15 days I looked for ways of being legal in Portugal and I saw that to get back to university was my best chance. By that time a Brazilian could not stay for more than 3 months without a job or being a student. So I applied for the master in Sociology and I came. I maintained working online as long as I could, conciliating with the master. Because of my job I decided to do the master part time. And I kept going to Porto every weekend to meet my kids. Sometimes I don't see them. The father creates difficulties. Sometimes they don't want to. Specially the younger one. Now he does not speak with me since September. But I go the same. And call him and text him. At my job, when they obliged us to return I explained the situation and they didn't accept it. I had to leave the job. I got a new one but it was free lance and after 3 months of not earning nothing I decided to change life. Also due to a lot of people and projects I meet here. I want to stop working in advertisement and do something good for local society. I want to help other people to grow, specially women. I am now in contact with a local social incubator working together in a project to help women to change their lives and to be entrepreneurs. I am discovering a lot about me and the world. Things are still not well, specially with my younger son. But I like better my life now.

Specifically telling quotes: I believe that my story could be a film. People say - you are

very brave to have made all that changes at your age.; Now I have my kids at a distance of 300 kms. It is much better, I used to have an ocean between us.

Keywords: migration; parental alienation; getting back to university; social entrepreneurship; feminism

PT07

Title: Hostage of the past

Narrative: My name is Nininha, I'm 82 years old and I'm living a nightmare. Seven years ago, our landlord died. The heirs wanted to sell the house. My husband said we could not afford it. Now I don't believe it was true. But at that time I believed when he said we didn't have money enough so we needed to move house. I wanted us to find another house in the same city but he said that the best plan was to go to our country house for a couple of years. That way he could finish it's reconstruction and then we would rent a house in a town close to where we used to live. But years passed and never was the time to get back to the city. So now I still live there, with the lizards as my only friends. I don't even have network coverage insided the house, I need to go put the hill to make calls. And the electricity used to depend on the generator so I had to wash my cloth on hand. Now it is better because he finnally put the sun panels. I hate all this, I feel happy only when I get myself on the bus and return to my town to visit my sister and my nephew and also my son. I missed them very much. My grandson has grown and my son had a baby girl in these years and I almost don't see them. All this was already sad enough. But everything got worse two years ago. I don't know if it had to do with the pandemic or not but it was by that time that my husband suddenly started to act and to speak strangely about our life back in Africa. One day he mentioned "the lovers you had there". I was shocked and asked him what was he speaking about. In that day things stoped but shortley after he began to talk about this everyday, insisting with me to "tell the truth and confess that I had several lovers in Africa". Then later he started to argue that he was not the father of our son. And pressured me and him to do an DNA test. Which after a while we did, despite the complication of doing it in time of pandemic. It took long to do it. When the result came proving that my husband was wrong I asked him if he was going to apologize to me and to our son. He said that he would apologize to our son but not to me because even if he was his son I had lovers the same. In fact he did never apologized to our son until today. He also says he has contacted a guy he is sure that was my lover. I don't know if it is true that he called this person. I don't even remmember the person! I continue living there and with him. Nothing rests of our marriage. I'm not afraid of him physically but since I'm not able to drive there, we only have his car and we live in an isolated house, I depend on him to get the bus to meet my family. I'm also very far away from the closest hospital. I have decided that will leave him. Now I will. Until now I was upset with that perspective because both my son and my sister don't have conditions to host me, I had nowhere to go. You know, my pension is very low, I don't have money to live by myself. And I would really like to have a house of mine, don't like

the idea of imposing myself to my family. But now things went too far. It's just the time of my sister moving to a better house, with more conditions. I will come to help in the move and then I will stay for a longer period, probably forever.

Specifically telling quotes: He says that if I admit that I had lovers we can stay together as we were. But if I don't admit, one of us has to leave.; Sometimes he says that he only takes me out of here to go to a doctor or to the hospital. Nothing else.

Keywords: aging couple; psychological violence; mental issues; isolation; dominance

PT08

Title: My job saved my life

Narrative: One year ago I could not imagine I would be so much better now. Since I returned from Switzerland - I have double citizenship and lived in Switzerland until I was nineteen - things only got worse. I studied web design but it is not easy to get a job in that occupation, there are a lot of others better than me since I have not make a high school degree, just a professional one. I used to have a girlfriend but i'm alone for several years now. Womens are not serious these days, I think. When the pandemic came I had just left a job I was because it was really awful. I was distributing advertising and I came to a point when I thought what was I doing with my life. I could do much better than that, it was exploitation. So I left the job to look for something better. But then the pandemic started. And lasted for so long and suddenly I was unemployed, without money to help my mother with the expenses of the house, our new house was developing a lot of humidity problems and we could afford to solve it. My mother - who spends half of the time with me and the rest with her partner in his farm house - could not come due to lockdown and the fear of being infected. I spent several months alone. My depression got worse and when I'm depressed I eat more so I gained more weight. It was really a bad period. I was very lucky to get out of it and ot was thanks to a friend. He was working in this company where I am now. Then he left because he needed to move to another place. So he recommend me for his place since he knew I was unemployed. He also knew I am a good worker. I work hard and I'm very organised. So I started the job and everything went well. I like it a lot because I like active things. I need action and in this job you are always doing things. I already lost 7 kgs. I work in shifts and that the worst part because my sleep is getting disturbed. I cannot sleep properly now. But it's ok. As soon as we find a nice house at and affordable price my life is going to be well, finally.

Specifically telling quotes: I'm a new person thanks to this job.; I used to stay at home, looking to the television the entire day. And I couldn't help eating. I always eat when I'm anxious.

Keywords: masculinities; overweight person; loneliness; depression; unemployment

PT09

Title: Fighting for my rights

Narrative: I was a single mother of my older daughter when I met my current partner. We stayed together since then and we had two more kids. Now the five of us live in a house that is not the house of my dreams but it's now much better thanks to my partner efforts to rebuilt it. Our life is ok now! It got better in the last year and if it wasn't for this crisis we are starting to live now things would be great: I have taken my driving license and I have my own car. Now I can go wherever I want. I can go shopping in the mall or the shops in the center and I can drive my kids to things. We can go to the park without depending on rides. All my kids are at school now and they have support with their homework so when we are together is just for play and have fun together. During the pandemic it was terrible because I had to take care of the two younger full time and still help my oldest because home schooling was very demanding. I had no support. Spending the entire day with them concerned with earning less - my factory stoped and send us home in lay off. And all the fear of the pandemic that my partner could bring home because he was going out for work daily. He works as car mechanic and that was considered an essential job so they could work. When he arrived things needed to be well because he likes things well organised. But I was so tired of caring the kids the entire day! I love to be with them but at home is not the same of being in the kindergarden. At home we don't have those things for to play and learn. And we could not go out, not even to go to the park....Also, in the last years, with the project Veleda, I understood better my rights and needs. I need some time for myself and I had none in that period. Veleda project was a big support. We could laugh and chat in the group even if it was online. Also I felt part of something. I do hope we are able to continue with the project now. One shift in my life in the last year: I was asked to become the union representative at the factory. First I said I had no time, with the kids and all. But then I gave it a second though and decided to accept. We need to participate in things to fight for our rights. This strike we organized now, to fight for having a decent meal subsidy. A lot of people participate. Because our meal subsidy is below the legal onem can you imagine? I'm satisfied that people are now back in the streets and aiming to fight for their life conditions. I want my children to learn that.

Specifically telling quotes: I know my rights.; I know now better the importance of fighting for our rights.

Keywords: working rights; social intervention; group of women; feminism; caring; lay off

PT10

Title: An emancipated (Roma) woman

Narrative: My life changed very much. I was not expecting things to happen this way. Especially the pandemic, it was very unexpected and affected so much. It was due to it that I lost my shop. Shops were closed and we could sell nothing. Even in the markets, that I used to do together with the shop. All the markets stopped. We had to pay the license the same to the municipality but we could sell nothing. It was the same with the shop, I asked my landlord to wait but after a while he ordered me to leave. I'm sure it was because I'm gipsy. And a woman, doing business. Before this I have always paid my rent in time! But all this had also to do with my ex-husband. We got divorce because I was tired of him cheating on me. One day I decided I also could have another man. He then asked the divorce and started to say bad things about me all around. I could not go to the markets I used to go because he put people against me. He said a lot of lies to my landlord. And he involved my parents in the confusion, he also said lies about them. Looking back now I realise it was really difficult. ! If the situation wasn't already bad enough... we that awful disease! My kids stayed at home. Fortunately my youngest daughter is a very good student so I had no concerns with her. My oldest son was already working at that time but he also had to come home. He was here then but now he lives in France with his wife and my dear small baby. They are well there. My middle son now is living with his father. He preferred to... but during the pandemic he was still with me. We were at home the five of us. With the divorce starting was terrible to be at home with my husband. Fortunately he left short after. But as soon as he left he started the "campaign" against me that I told you about. Now I live just with my girl. She is very well behaved. That is good because I now got this job at the elder care center of my village. I'm very happy for it. Some years ago I could not see myself working in this job. Not only because of me - I never liked this kind of work - but also because I would not expect that people wanted me to be there, working in this type of job.. I'm proud that I was accepted. I work hard. I'm not afraid of work. And I guess they understood it. They knew my story and my shop. One other thing was that when we could not sell in the market I did online selling in the facebook and instagram. That way me and my parents could do some money during the lockdowns. But now I rarely work in the markets because my job is in shifts and most weekends I must work. Things are going well now, I hope it continues like this.

Specifically telling quotes: Why not, can you tell me? Don't I have the same right?! (to have an affair)

Keywords: Roma women; unemployment; lockdown impacts; markets; divorce; betrayal

Romania

RO01

Title: Virginia, schizophrenia patient, finds mental health support and shelter with local NGO

Narrative: “I am a 51-year-old woman living in Bucharest. I was diagnosed with schizophrenia in my twenties. I live a very isolated life and I rely for connection and support on an NGO, my former room-mate and my brother. I have no one else in my life. In the first post-socialist years, when factories were being shut down and privatised and unemployment was skyrocketing, I was working as a skilled manual worker in a leather goods factory. I had not graduated from high school, but I had frequented a trade school. When I was diagnosed I had to give up my job. I was committed into a psychiatric hospital for a month. Subsequently I was committed for another 3-4 times for a month each. There was no disability pension awarded during those days, so my brother supported me financially. Then I received disability pension, which I still rely on currently. I am not eligible for retirement pension, because I was only employed for a few years. My disability status allows me to work 4 hours per week. Once every two years I have to be re-evaluated by the Disability Commission. I have to commit myself into the psychiatric hospital for 1 to 14 days to be evaluated and then my disability status is reconfirmed. My last visit was in March 2021.

I used to live with my brother, in our parents' apartment. Six years ago, my brother got me a puppy, so that I have something to do, to take care of it. She is like my baby. In 2020, when my brother became ill and started his divorce process, there were some special circumstances and I could not live in the apartment with him and his family anymore. My brother contacted the social services, who directed my case to an NGO, which put me up in a protected apartment, where I currently live.

For over one year I had a flat mate in this protected apartment. She left this spring. Now I live by myself and I have the dog. I am very happy that the NGO allowed me to bring the dog in their apartment. My brother still calls and meets with me sometimes. In addition to hosting me in the protected apartment, the NGO takes care of me in many other ways. There were some critical periods during the pandemic, such as the states of emergency and alert, when going out was restricted or dangerous, but also the two times I fell ill with Covid, in January and in March 2022.

During the first state of emergency I was still living in my deceased parents' apartment and my brother took care of me. He could go out because he was allowed to go to work, so he did the shopping and walked my dog.

The two times I had Covid, I was already living in the NGO's protected apartment. Then too, I had to stay at home for two weeks each time. The NGO helped me with the shopping and medication. They also give us masks. The NGO is central to my life. They helped me survive the pandemic. I was not in the best state of mind. I am very isolated in general, but with the pandemic I became even more isolated. I have no other friends except my former roommate, so I spent the pandemic watching TV. Entertainment

shows, mostly. I sometimes talk on the phone with my former roommate, with my brother and with the ladies from the NGO, who check up on me. When I go out of the house, it is for shopping, for walking the dog and especially for participating in the courses organised for us by the NGO. They employ lecturers and we can study or learn different skills. I chose painting, music therapy, personal introspection and gymnastics. They also organise daytrips for us, to the mountains or to the seaside. They are the highlight of my year. I cannot travel alone because of my illness, I need someone I can trust, so I very much enjoy the NGOs trips, they are my only time when I can travel. The NGO supported me to get a job. They helped me become employed with a social enterprise, for 4 hours a week, the maximum of time I am allowed to work. We make sewing, decorations, accessories. I earn a little money this way.

I also rely on my former roommate for emotional support. She has the same diagnosis, we get along. We sometimes go out together during the weekends, for a cappuccino or to McDonald's.

I am not the same person as I was before the pandemic. I am more confused and my mind is hazier, but I am optimistic. I want to stay here, at the NGO, for as long as it is possible. I feel good here, with the NGO: I have my courses, I go to work. I feel included."

Specifically telling quotes: "I am not the same person as I was before the pandemic. I am more confused and my mind is hazier."; "I am more of a recluse. I have no other friends aside from my former roommate. I lived in isolation most of the pandemic. Just me and the TV. Entertainment shows, mostly. On the phone, I keep in touch only with my brother and with my ex roommate."; "If I had more money, I would like to buy myself a birthday cake. And to travel. But because of the illness I do not venture to travel. [...] I am recluse myself. I cannot travel without someone I can trust."

Keywords: mental health; isolation; engagement; keeping active; psychological support; shelter

RO02

Title: Albert, visual artist, is struggling to preserve his socioeconomic status and to reactivate his professional life

Narrative: "I am a 48 years old man whose life took a dramatic turn a couple of decades ago, when I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I have struggled to cope with the situation, but under circumstances I prefer not to speak about, I lost my home and ended up in the psychiatric hospital. Foundation X practically found me in the hospital in 2016 and put me up in a protected home which they manage. I am living in this apartment ever since. My mental state fluctuates from time to time. Schizophrenia affects my capacity to focus, my attention span, my memory and my patience and so I cannot cope with most situations. For example, I would like to work in an advertising agency. Most of my university colleagues work in the field, as graphic designers. But I cannot anymore, because I cannot handle the stress and the deadlines. It is a shame, because I would

really like to, but it is out of the question for me. I am working though, but only for four hours per week. My disability classification does not allow me to work more. Foundation X matches me with potential employers who can offer me such part-time jobs. I am currently working from home as a computer operator. It is quite dull and repetitive. I have had similar jobs since 2017. Now I am trying to change my job. I have some promises of a better paying job. This would also mean working in an office, which would change my life significantly. I would like to have contact with colleagues, to not be alone. Having flat-mates also helps. We try to be sociable, to share. The social contact helps us develop psychologically. It is a good opportunity. I consider them my friends. I also do my best to keep in touch with my friends from university.

During the pandemic, I had my ups and downs. I spent a lot of time at home, trying to do the best of the situation. I would listen to music, to watch TV. During lockdown I missed my daily routine of going to the corner shop to have my coffee. I really enjoyed and needed this habit. Because of my schizophrenia medication I cannot function without coffee. After I wake up and take my medication, I feel the need to go out for air and for coffee and I was deprived of that for a while. When the restrictions were lifted, in May 2020, and people could go out of the house freely, I had a psychotic attack because of this. When I saw so many people crowding everywhere after I had stayed isolated for so long, I was overcome with a terrible mental state. Because of my diagnosis, I had the impression that the people were crowding because of me or in connection with me. It was overwhelming for us psychiatric patients. The Foundation's psychologist consulted me and recommended that I commit myself in the hospital. The hospital stay helped me. I received psychiatric support, the doctor changed my medication. That period was also difficult. The hospital was quarantined, we lived in complete isolation, like we were in jail. However, the hospital stay helped me. Afterwards I felt more confident to go out of the house, to meet with friends, without the overpowering panic. I experienced it like a relief.

The Foundation was a salvation for me, mainly because of enabling my access to jobs and to classes. I have been going to their classes for a month already. They help me escape the routine and make me feel more anchored in reality. I took up a German language course. I want to learn the language because I am interested in German video art and I would like to subscribe to the [German Cultural Institute] and to be able to find materials more easily.

With the support of the Foundation I took up painting again, a few months ago. This is the best thing which happened to me. They bought me the painting materials and encouraged me. I had taken a break from painting since I graduated from university, but I was surprised to see it come back so naturally. It is a very intimate and personal thing. I told a former university colleague of my renewed interest and he bought me an easel. I keep him updated about my painting work, he advises me. I do not really have the necessary space in my room for the easel and the painting materials, but art requires sacrifice. Another former colleague lent me a photographic camera and I started to go for long walks in parks and take photos, especially now since autumn offers such nice

light and colours. If I have good photos, I plan on putting myself out of my comfort zone and post them on Facebook, at least, that's what my friend encouraged me to do."

Specifically telling quotes: "I have been painting for a few months now. This is the best thing which happened to me."; "I have recently took up painting again. The people from the Foundation supported me with materials and psychological support. [...] I had taken a break, I hadn't painted since I graduated from university. It came naturally to me. It is a very intimate and personal thing. A break of 20-30 years from painting... ."; "I hope to succeed in changing my job into one with physical attendance. This would change things. I would have a fixed programme and it would be better. I am not at ease with the thought of receiving money while staying at home."; "I have been participating to courses since last month. I am taking up German language courses. I am interested in German video art and I would like to subscribe to the [German Cultural Institute] and to be able to find materials more easily."; "Going to their classes helps me escape the routine and makes me feel more anchored in reality."; "The Foundation was a salvation for me.";

Keywords: psychotic attack; anchoring; professional identity; professional integration; connections

RO03

Title: Tina, single mother of two, fights for better educational and a career breakthrough

Narrative: "My name is Tina, I am a single mother of two boys, who are 9 and 4 years-old, respectively. I am suffering from depression and I am struggling with my weight. The children's fathers are not involved in their upbringing. My second boy's father tried to convince me to abort him. He was also violent with me. I decided to keep the pregnancy but had to leave the house, so I found a maternal shelter where I could stay for two years, until early 2020. I gave birth while I was there.

Right before the pandemic started I moved from the shelter into my own place, because I had managed to save some money. The first months of the pandemic were terribly traumatizing for me and the children. I think this period had a very big negative impact on their psychological development. We lived in fear, we would not go out and the apartment was underground and full of mould. My eldest son developed an allergic dermatitis while we were there, but I could not afford anything better.

In 2020, we jumped at the first opportunity to move out, even if we had to leave the capital for a small town 100 km away. Someone offered us a house there, to stay for free until it was sold. Two years after, we are still living there, but the house could still sell any day now. When we moved here, I dropped out of university. I was in the third year studying Social Work. It should have been easy to follow courses, as they had been moved online during the pandemic, but here we found a house which had been

abandoned, there was no running water, it needed to be deep cleaned and painted. I was under a huge stress and I ran out of psychological resources for my studies.

I always worked, until I gave birth to my youngest son, after which the improvisations started, because there was no one to help me with childcare. In the early summer of 2020, when my youngest was two, I found a foundation which was supporting women with professional reorientation. I wanted to train as a masseuse. They did not have that course available, but they were open to our wishes and inclinations and organised a massage course for me. Plus, at the end, they gave me a massage kit with everything I needed to start the job. After we moved to the small town I was quite disconnected from the opportunities for gig work that I had in the capital and I could not look for a job outside the home anyway, because my youngest son, born in 2018, was very small and my eldest son's school was online. I had no one to leave them with. I started working for a MLM company and it was going well, but the company restructured. In the meantime, I had started to offer massages to a local teacher, as a reward for her helping me in the past. She recommended me to her friends and I started to earn money from massage. My health and physical state forces me to adapt. I am overweight by about 40 kilograms and I have back pains, so I do not have enough physical strength for sustained effort, so I switched to offering foot reflexotherapy and a short massage as a bonus, according to my physical state.

I am proud that I re-enrolled in my Social Work studies last month. I just could not stop thinking about my quitting. I had already quit another faculty (Pedagogy) after 3 years of study, because I was pregnant with my first child and was separating from his father. I could not accept another failure. An internal struggle urged me to re-enroll in school. I would have liked to repeat my second year but, because now I need to pay a yearly tax, I chose to re-enroll straight into the third year, considering my financial situation is so unstable. Luckily the professors are supportive, they allow me to follow their class without physical attendance. They know me from before, I used to take my kids to classes with me in the first year. I plan to graduate next year.

It is time to make a breakthrough. I do not feel comfortable in this vulnerable position anymore. I rely a lot on other people's help, especially on money that my nephew sends me monthly from Denmark, where he is working. My youngest son is older now and has overcome some of his problems, so I have a bit more freedom. So now my focus is on securing a job. A neighbour recommended me for a job and now I am hoping to be called for an interview. I need to practice Italian until then, because the job is for an Italian-speaking call centre. Even if I do not take the job the first time, I will try again and again, they open positions all the time. It is well paid and I can work from home. I just need to bring my Italian language up to standards, I started practicing already. I know some Italian from a few months of working in Italy as a caregiver for an elderly person.

My nephew, who is about my age, has been temporarily living with us for a month and it was a revelation to see what it is like to have help with the childcare. In four years I never experienced this relief; no one had taken my youngest son to kindergarten, to the park,

no one had done homework with my eldest. I felt spoiled this month. It made me realise that my living conditions have exhausted me. I was left completely out of breath, out of resources. I struggled so that the kids do not notice the absence of a father. My personal life is put on pause during this time. I only live as a mother. My extra weight is embarrassing me and sometimes I cannot even bring myself to go out of the house because of this.

I am very preoccupied that the kids do not stand out as from a broken home. They need to look and act as children who have a family: to not be more modestly dressed than their colleagues, to have all they need at school. If they had to bring money to school, I took a loan and they took the money in the first day, so that the class does not wait after them etc.

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Specifically telling quotes: “It is time to make a breakthrough. I do not feel comfortable in this vulnerable position anymore. My youngest son is older now and has overcome some of his problems, so I have a bit more freedom now.”; “I have always worked to support myself, until I gave birth to my youngest son, when the improvisations started.”; “I am trying to finish my Social Work studies because I know firsthand what the needs of a single mother are.”; “I would like to be independent, but I am aware this is only up to me. I would like to be more mobile, to feel free.”; “Because of the depression it is harder for me to do some things which I used to do easily before, which came normal to me.”; “I struggled so that the kids do not notice the absence of a father.”; “I had already quit another faculty after 3 years of study, when I was pregnant with my first child and was separating from the father. I could not accept another failure. An internal struggle urged me to re-enroll in school.”; “My nephew has been temporarily living with us for a month and it was a revelation to see what it is like to have help with the childcare. In four years I never experienced this relief; no one had taken my youngest son to kindergarten, to the park, no one had done homework with my eldest. I was spoiled this month. This made me realise that my living conditions have exhausted me.”; “My life is paused. I only live as a mother.”

Keywords: single mother; education; gig work; stable job; depression; childcare

RO04

Title: Irina makes peace with her new life in early retirement

Narrative: “It is just me and my mother. I used to have a different life before my schizophrenia diagnosis, seven years ago. I worked as a human resources manager for a company. I am an engineer by training, but I got this job in HR early on, I took additional courses, like accounting, and developed into a jack-of-all-trades for the company. I worked for seventeen years, and now my disability status forbids me to work. I suffered a lot that I had to give up my professional activity. I also lost most of my friends ever since

I am ill. They found out I was mentally ill and they put me in a corner and I did not insist. I am alone while they have family, jobs, they are busy.

I was lucky though, to find a good environment at home after being diagnosed. My mother was my salvation. Back when I was working, each of us was focused on her own affairs. I used to have a good financial situation and I acted as if I needed to protect my mother. Now the situation is reversed, I feel like I am a child again. I became weaker. I have no power and control anymore: I have a minimum pension, I am practically a child in some ways.

Now I am the beneficiary of a Foundation which supports mental health patients. My discovery of the Foundation had an extraordinary impact on my situation. Before this I used to spend my days watching TV, nothing else. At the Foundation I signed up for activities, I started socializing and become closer to people. I feel as if I found another family for myself. It's extraordinary how this has changed the atmosphere at home, how pleased my mother is that I go out. I tell her all about it, I show her photos.

There were periods during the pandemic when the Foundation suspended its activities, for safety reasons. They only kept in touch over the phone. This helped me not feel so shocked and distanced from reality. During the pandemic I was sometimes so worried of the risks that I felt as if my eyes were popping out of their sockets. I spent the pandemic watching TV, I had nothing else to do. We had to isolate strictly, I had to protect my mother. I am very preoccupied about her health and she is about mine. At first I did not want to be vaccinated and neither did my mother. I would tell myself that the body needs to fight it out by itself. Then I decided to get the vaccine, but because we do not have a computer or internet at home, we did not manage to schedule a vaccination appointment on the online platform. We took advantage of a vaccination campaign offered by the City Hall with the occasion of a festival, where we could just show up, without an appointment. We went on a weekend and after vaccination we took a walk in the park. There were so many people, children on bikes and scooters. Yes, we were all masked, but it was spring and I had this feeling of detachment after such a long period of anxiety and isolation.

The pandemic was really hard on me, but now I do so many things there: music therapy, general knowledge classes, psychology, reading group, mountain hikes. In the Foundation I have rediscovered my former self, from before the illness, in several bits and pieces: my sporty self, my literary self, my paperwork-savvy self, my study-loving self. Here I can find and develop what I had been holding buried inside me all this time when I have been isolated. I found people here who experience the same feelings as I do. We share the burden.

Some everyday experiences make me aware that I am not who I used to be. In the morning I sometimes go to the supermarket for groceries and I cross people going to work, chasing trams or starting up cars, children going to school. I contemplate this life routine from which I am left out. I am not part of this world anymore. I lost these things.

But I keep busy with something else and I try to make the best of the situation. I am open to change. I have no hopes about my diagnosis evolving in a positive direction, because my mind has not force to do anything in this respect. But I had such a wonderful encounter with the Foundation, that I am looking forward to something similarly wonderful happening again in the future.

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Specifically telling quotes: “I am not part of this world anymore.”; “My arrival at the Foundation was something extraordinary. After I went out of the hospital all I did was watch TV. Here, at the Foundation, I tried to enroll into the activities, to socialise. [...] I feel as if I found another family for myself. It's extraordinary how this has changed the atmosphere at home, how pleased my mother is that I go out. I tell her all about it, I show her photos.”; “In the Foundation I have rediscovered my former self, from before the illness, in several bits and pieces: my sporty self, my literary self, my paperwork-savvy self [...], my study-loving self. Here I can rediscover and develop what I had been holding burried inside all this time while I was isolated.”; “I have found myself a new normal.”

Keywords: sense of communion; family; mental health; new normal; reconnection

RO05

Title: Romina is a retired woman caring for a husband with Alzheimer's disease while struggling to preserve her own mental health

Narrative: “I am a 67 years-old retired woman. I am the sole carer of my husband, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease eleven years ago. My whole life revolves around caring for my husband and slowing down his disease. I struggle to not become a widow. I want him to grow old with me, to make plans together. I am religiously administering his Alzheimer’s and heart medicine; I am helping him with movement therapy. There are days when he cannot walk, is absent, cannot focus; he makes his ‘Alzheimer’s face’, his face droops, he cannot coordinate his steps and becomes inert. I learned to spot the signs and keep him at home during those days. In all other day I take him out. We even take trips by train together. We go to the sea or to the mountains, just like we did when we were young. Other people think I am crazy for taking this risk, but it is important for me to escape. I seldom leave the house without him. It is dangerous for him to stay alone. I installed a very simple phone that he can answer and if I leave him alone for a couple of hours I call to check up on him. If he does not answer, I ask my neighbour who has the keys to peek inside our apartment and to make sure he is fine.

When the pandemic started, they kept telling us on TV that the virus was attacking the elderly. I started seeing the paramedics in hazmat suits around the block, with neighbours being brought out on stretchers. My husband was really affected. I am extremely active, so being forced to stay at home during the lockdown was a punishment to me, but for my husband the shock was truly terrible. He 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. As he has Alzheimer's, I need to make sure he gets plenty of exercise. I started doing gymnastics with him, I even filmed the sessions to show to my daughter that I am working on a solution. 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. The media did more harm to us than the virus.

We are both vaccinated, booster included. Right after the first dose I found my peace of mind and could finally focus on comforting my husband. I am a big believer in the vaccine, despite being an absolute minority in my neighbourhood and among my relatives. I was very disillusioned with the people around me because of their opposition to the vaccine. Last year I carried the additional burden of taking care of my neighbour's cats and dogs for an entire month while she was in the hospital with Covid, from not being vaccinated.

In 2021 my husband suddenly fell into a coma. We had holiday bookings and in the morning of the departure he fell into a coma, which lasted a week. He recovered eventually, but we said goodbye to the holiday that year. I called two ambulances to take him to the hospital and the medics refused or advised me against it. They said that because of Covid regulations they can only drop him in the hospital by himself and that might be the end of him, considering his mental condition and that he is also very likely to catch Covid in the hospital. There would be no control regarding where he was and what was being done to him. One medic recommended that I call a priest instead and light a candle. I admit, he did look like he was dead. Another medic suggested that I try to administer him a perfusion. Our family doctor had suspended her office hours because of Covid, she was only available by phone, so I decided to try and do the perfusion myself. I rushed to the pharmacy to buy the instruments and the fluids. The pharmacist was reluctant. I yelled at her: "I need to make my man wake up!". She said I needed a nurse to administer it. I could not believe my luck when another pharmacy customer overheard us and said that she was a nurse. I was so desperate that I dared to ask her to come home with me. She put him on perfusions for a few days. She was impressed with the hospital conditions I had prepared for my husband at home: everything was white. It took several weeks until he went back to his normal self. He still hallucinates sometimes after the coma, but at least I am grateful he did not die.

I sometimes lose patience with him and yell. I try to control myself, but he pushes my buttons. I have moments when I have no compassion for him. I started seeing a psychiatrist, because sometimes I feel I cannot cope by myself anymore; the pressure is too big. I could not sleep because I always worry that he might need something during the night. The psychiatrist told me that an Alzheimer's patient affects the life of seven more people around him. I am his main target. At the psychiatrist's advice, I either cry it

out or leave the house when I feel I am about to lose control. The treatment prescribed is working. It was a good decision to seek medical help for me as well.

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Specifically telling quotes: “I am extremely active, so being forced to stay at home during the lockdown was a punishment to me, but for my husband the shock was truly terrible. He 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.”; “In 2021 my husband suddenly fell into a coma. We had holiday bookings and in the morning of the departure he fell into a coma, which lasted a week. [...] I called two ambulances to take him to the hospital and the medics refused or advised me against it. They said that because of Covid regulations they can only drop him in the hospital by himself and that might be the end of him, considering his mental condition and that he is also very likely to catch Covid in the hospital. There would be no control regarding where he was and what was being done to him. One medic recommended that I call a priest instead and light a candle.”; “I sometimes lose patience with him and yell. I try to control myself, but he pushes my buttons. I have moments when I have no compassion for him. I started seeing a psychiatrist, because sometimes I feel I cannot cope by myself anymore; the pressure is too big.”

Keywords: Alzheimer's; carer; health providers; vaccination; mental health

RO06

Title: Adrian, a janitor in a public hospital, find balance between his work requirements and a risky working environment

Narrative: “I work as a janitor in a public hospital. I have had this job for about five years, an NGO found me this better job. Before that I worked at a warehouse. I am single, I have no family or close friends, I live with two flatmates.

I could see many advantages to working in a hospital during Covid: the work pace was much slower, because the access of patients was restricted during the pandemic to patients brought by the ambulance, so my work became much more relaxed. I had peace and quiet. Plus, the status of indispensable employee meant that I could continue going to work during lockdown, but could also move more freely outside the home compared to other persons, on the basis of my work ID attesting my place of employment. I felt I could keep my freedom and not be forced to put my life on hold.

One downside of my job is that in the hospital I caught Covid, in 2021. I was just about to apply for a personal leave when I started having a high fever, 40-41 degrees Celsius, headaches and other symptoms. They tested me in the hospital and when I turned out positive, we agreed that it was best to stay in isolation at the hospital rather than at home, because I had two flat-mates and I could not stay in isolation. So instead of a holiday leave, I was committed for seven days in the hospital where I work. Half of the hospital staff fell ill with Covid roughly at the same time, we all caught it in the hospital. I had quite a bad version of the disease, they put me on antibiotics and perfusions. It was hard because I have no friends or relatives to bring me food and supplies, but I had work colleagues who thought of me and bought me food, coffee and cigarettes. I was also preoccupied about the drugs they were administering to me, I asked details about each one before they administered them to me. I told the colleagues who were treating me that I have no one to care for me, so I could not afford to have a bad reaction to the drugs or end up in the ICU. They calmed me down and convinced me I was receiving proper healthcare.

I would often have contact with Covid patients during the pandemic, for example when I had to move beds or heavy equipment around the wards. The death rate was not high in our hospital. I am used to seeing death anyway, so it does not affect me anymore.

My work is far from easy, but I am pleased. I would not want to change it, because of my age. I cannot go back to a more physically demanding job, because I am not in my twenties anymore. And who would hire me at my age anyway? I have a busy period at work now. For example, the nurses could be calling me that they want to move an entire ward somewhere else. Or they need help with carrying supplies. I do it, I do not say no. They slip you a little something, because it is not our obligation to help. If you are hired as an electrician, for example, you cannot sit around waiting for the lightbulb to go out, just because you have an official job description and a contract. You need to do whatever type of work is needed at the moment. If the plumbing gets clogged, you go and help, no discussion. My colleagues are more reluctant to do these things. They go hide in the basement, we have a couch there behind a cabinet and they stay out of sight. So the nurses rely on me a lot. But you need to know how to work. To not exhaust yourself. Because if you do this, that and the other, it is not good. You do not realise it in the moment, but then you are home and the exhaustion starts burning at you like a flame. You need to know when to take a break, to devise a strategy to work within reasonable limits. 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. When I need to stay out of sight, I go into the basement and stay behind the locker. Or I wonder to another wing of the hospital. I am still on the premises, just not in the janitors' closet, where they would look for me. And if they call and ask me where I am I give a vague reply and stall them. You need to know how to manage this. To pace yourself. 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.
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Specifically telling quotes: "I could see many advantages to working in a hospital during Covid: the work pace was much slower, because the access of patients was restricted during the pandemic to patients brought by the ambulance, so my work became much more relaxed. I had peace and quiet."; "If you are hired as an electrician, for example, you cannot sit around waiting for the lightbulb to go out, just because you have an official job description and a contract. You need to do whatever type of work is needed at the moment."; "When I need to stay out of sight, I go into the basement and stay behind the locker. Or I wonder to another wing of the hospital. I am still on the premises, just not in the janitors' closet, where they would look for me. And if they call and ask me where I am I give a vague reply and stall them. You need to know how to manage this. To pace yourself. 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."

Keywords: hospital work; exhaustion; self-preservation; physical labour; middle-age

RO07

Title: Rebeca fights for her independence in the sex work business while trying to connect and create networks of solidarity with her colleagues

Narrative: "I am a 34-year-old sex worker doing independent escort work to what I estimate is a middle-class clientele. I took a leap of faith towards independent work in the spring of 2022. In Romania only erotic massage and video chat are legal. Considering that sexual work is not legal, your work is always in a grey area. I used to be employed formally at an erotic massage parlour, which was also a cover for the provision of explicit sex services. Of course it is worse for workers who recruit their clients off the street, because they are constantly harassed by the police. But the work at the massage parlour was also precarious and exploitative in some ways. The employment was offering me rights to medical insurance, social security and seniority in labour, but I was employed on minimum wage which I never received anyway. It was only on paper. All our earnings came from commission, according to the number of clients whom we serviced. My colleagues also had to pay the taxes and contributions out of the commission they earned. If the parlour did not do enough marketing and advertising, you could spend 14 hours per day there and not earn anything during a whole day and not be allowed to leave either. Plus, you could not turn down clients at the parlour. Because of this system of payment, I had to work to bring clients to the parlour. It had come to a situation in which about half the parlour's clients were brought by me. At that

point I decided to just resign and focus on independent work. I now work alone in an apartment, which improved my life and work quality. I make my own schedule; I work as much as I want. I consider myself privileged to have the luxury of choice to decide on my working conditions, but it comes with risks and downsides.

Firstly, I had to rent an apartment, which is very difficult for a sex worker. I could not rent one apartment I wanted because the owner was asking for proof of legal employment for the last four months, which in my line of work we cannot normally provide. Plus, you need to hide from the owners. They do not want commercial activities in their apartment, understandably, let alone prostitution. There is the stigma of the profession. The neighbours can denounce you as well. You need to look for location, discretion, hygienic conditions. You can also resort to renting out nightly or hourly locations, but you need to carry everything around with you and it becomes very expensive. And you cannot use the apartment where you live, both for safety reasons and for your mental hygiene.

The system does not encourage you to bring your earnings to the surface. I am systematically paying my health insurance out of my pocket. I actually was on medical leave during the last two months, because a motorcycle accident ruptured my ligament and I could not work. I did not receive any financial support because of not having a work contract and I had to rely on my savings. I faced the additional financial burden of having had to keep paying rent on my working apartment even when I was not earning an income.

Also, doing independent sex work is riskier from a safety point of view; you lose the safety associated with an organised workplace. But I have perfected various methods of filtering the clients. I rely significantly on some WhatsApp groups and an internet forum where sex workers circulate the phone numbers of violent or non-paying clients. We also use the internet forum to recruit clients. You can create a profile and post an ad and receive reviews, you build a reputation. Recruiting from the forum, as opposed to placing an ad on a sell-and-buy website, also helps filter the clients out of a pool of users with a certain education and inclination for research. It is a form of control. In September 2022 the fee for an escort account on the forum increased tenfold, from 50 to 500 euros monthly, but for me the safety and access benefits make it worth the money. Other independent workers pay for security services or install surveillance cameras at the entrance if they have the budget.

During the pandemic the sex services business fluctuated with the return and subsequent re-departure to and from Romania of the sexual workers activating abroad, in Western Europe. At the beginning of the pandemic many returned home because of the strict restrictions imposed by the Western European countries and they had to work locally. A very competitive situation emerged, when there was a lot of offer and a very slim demand. Now, starting with the spring of 2022, most of the returnees went back to Western Europe, as restrictions were lifted.

In 2019, together with some colleagues we have founded an association advocating for the decriminalisation and recognition of sexual work, access to social and health services and justice. We created an emergency shelter for sexual workers in situations of vulnerability, especially street workers, Roma or trans workers. During the pandemic we created an emergency fund for mutual support and we offered advisory for those eligible to access the Covid-19 state support schemes. The association's activity

intensified during the pandemic and we focused on community support, as we had to respond to workers' needs. We paused the activity in mid-2021, because we discovered the president had been stealing large sums of money from the association's projects funds. We had to stop and do damage control and the association has been adrift ever since. I became president in order to handle this administrative hassle. It was an overwhelming work, plus I had to inform to the grant-makers and donors. After this I lost motivation to organise. I focused on my work, I distanced myself slightly and I moved on and so did other colleagues. I stayed in touch with my association colleagues, we collaborate with LGBT associations, and we keep the board, but we did not apply for new projects. We still support some extremely vulnerable elderly and disabled workers who have no pension and are forced to keep working at 61 and 67 years-old respectively, one with an amputated leg due to diabetes and the other dependent on an oxygen machine. I paid their rent this summer for a few months out of my pocket, but now I cannot afford this and their situation is uncertain.

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Specifically telling quotes: “The work at the massage parlour was exploitative. The shifts were very long, of up to 10-14 hours. [...] We were paid minimum wage on paper. But we in fact did not receive anything from this minimum wage, all our earnings came from commissions. The salary was only on paper. At least I did not have to pay taxes and contributions out of pocket, because I gave consent to have my face publicly on the website and this was the reward. My colleagues, however, had to pay the taxes and contributions out of the commission they earned. If the parlour did not do enough marketing and advertising, you could spend 14 hours per day there and not earn anything.”; “I now work alone in an apartment, which improved my life and work quality. I make my own schedule; I work as much as I want. [...] It is riskier from a safety point of view; you lose the safety associated with an organised workplace. I have perfected various methods of filtering the clients. [...] I could not turn down clients at the parlour.”; “During the pandemic, in 2020, many persons had returned to Romania because of the strict lockdowns in the West. The offer was very wide with this influx of returning work migrants. In the spring and summer of 2022 many workers returned to the West. But now the financial crisis is impacting how people spend their budget and we feel this crisis.”; ‘At our association [for sex workers’ rights], we were renting an apartment with the purpose of offering shelter to colleagues in situations of vulnerability, especially street workers.”; “After the fraud revelation, I lost motivation to organise. I focused on my work, I distanced myself slightly and I moved on. [...] We keep in touch with some persons whom we support via the association or informally. [...] I stayed in touch with my association colleagues, we collaborate with LGBT associations, and we keep the board, but we did not apply for new projects.”; “I am on a few WhatsApp groups and an internet forum where we circulate the phone numbers of violent or non-paying clients.”.

Keywords: sex work; work precarity; social security; health insurance; recognition; informal labour; advocacy

RO08

Title: Florian is keeping themselves away from emotional burnout while transitioning away from a somewhat sheltered pandemic life back to the educational, labour market and relational challenges bound to vulnerabilise neuro-divergent, non-binary, low-income persons

Narrative: "I am a queer non-binary neuro-divergent 23-year-old student. I have ADHD, anxiety and depression and sensorial sensitivity. I take medication and I see a psychiatrist for my conditions. The therapy and medication are very expensive for my family budget, so I struggle with the uncertainty that I will not be able to afford the mental care I need. I have been raised by my single mother. I currently live with her and we rely largely on her income in our household. I was admitted into university in 2019 and had mostly online classes starting with the second semester. Now we have resumed face-to-face activities. I feel less comfortable during face-to-face classes than during online classes, as my non-binary and neurodivergent identity exposes me to bullying from professors and colleagues. I chose to pursue a technical field for my university studies. I am very much into poetry, I considered journalism or sociology as fields of study, but I eventually chose the technical field because I knew I had to secure a well-paid job after graduation. Resuming the face-to-face university classes this year was awful for me. I was not well at all. I took up smoking again and the financial issues began. During the pandemic I had more control over things... I had given up smoking to save money for therapy. Now I have to go again through these situations that not everyone experiences, the need to buy a pack of cigarettes or food while I am away from home and to travel in crowded busses every day, to stress about how and what I am going to eat if I am stuck in the city for the day... all these things are awful for me. I am still adjusting. I somewhat miss the pandemic a little, if I think about it. Given that I am neuro-divergent and I like to move and not be restricted and not be in front of someone else made me feel more relaxed during online schooling. Now I need to pursue masking strategies to be accepted, plus the financial struggles associated with going to school every day while people expect you to be grateful for the privilege.

I stirred up a big scandal in my university year's WhatsApp group last year, while we were studying online. I questioned the fact that a younger professor was flirting with and harassing female students. I knew I had many misogynous colleagues and I fought with my entire class. There is a lot of toxic masculinity in this university department and in general. I used to be the quiet one, but in that case I stirred up a scandal and people remembered me. I reported the situation anonymously to the faculty board and I received a favourable reply, but the fight and the tensions took their toll on me. I would like to take more stand against sexual harassment in the university and I would normally be up for the fight, but now I try to prioritise my studies, given that I am in my last year of study and I have failed exams. The Dean and the Vicedean are aware of my condition and they gave me a pass, because they knew I had been active and involved during classes, but something was obviously wrong with me, because I was too anxious to attend the exams. But first of all I prioritise myself. For the rest, activism, my anarchist and leftist causes, I do what I can. Even when I feel like a vegetable, I try to at least keep up

with the updates on my topics of interest. I cannot keep up with everything, because for autism, you only get a limited number of 'spoons' per day: for every task, like getting out of bed or going to the store, you get one spoon. The number of spoons is limited so that you do not enter in burn-out mode. I cannot bring myself to attend large events, such as protests and other forms of direct action. Considering I barely let my family members come into my room, I am very much triggered by crowds. Unfortunately, I became reluctant to such things that I enjoyed before the pandemic.

At least now I can get myself to go university and attend classes. I even found a thesis supervisor who is supportive with my condition. I kept telling her I have ADHD and she always laughs, she does not get it, but she was also the most understanding when I had a panic attack during her class exam. Her reaction made me feel supported, especially since I had no psychiatric support at the time, neither therapy nor something else. I am contemplating my professional future and I am also building bridges and escape routes to fields unrelated to my studies, so that I have something to fall back on and I am confident I will manage. For example, I have my poetry and my publishing opportunities and since spring 2022 I became a volunteer writer for an NGO which has an online platform about autism, where I could maybe do paid activist work in the future.

In order to support myself financially during the pandemic I had to ask for donations to buy my medication. I typically take anti-depressants, mood stabilisers and ADHD medication. The latter are not supported by the medical insurance if you are diagnosed as an adult. If you cannot afford the medication, tough luck! But I have built a support network, my community, who understands and supports my monthly need to ask for money for medication.

An LGBTQI+ NGO offered me food stamps during the lockdowns and restrictions. And money. And I also took those unemployment benefits offered to persons with earning from copyright contracts. The bureaucratic requirements and eligibility conditions were ambiguous and I appealed to an organisation which is doing work for independent workers in the cultural field to help me understand them. They explained to me that I would not be considered eligible due to receiving a social scholarship. But I went forward and applied for it. All this audacity to go forward was emotionally draining, my anxiety was spiralling, I imagined being found out and thrown in jail for this, but nothing happened in the end and I pulled it off. I only applied for two months, I did not have the courage to go further. Unfortunately my financial needs expanded after the pandemic restrictions were lifted."

Specifically telling quotes: "Resuming the face-to-face university classes this year was awful for me. I was not well at all. I took up smoking again and the financial issues began. During the pandemic I had more control over things... I had given up smoking to save money for therapy. Now, the need to buy a pack of cigarettes or food while I am away from home and to travel in crowded busses every day is awful for me. I am still adjusting. I somewhat miss the pandemic a little, if I think about it."; "Given that I am neuro-divergent and I like to move and not be restricted and not be in front of someone else made me feel more relaxed [during online schooling]. Now I need to pursue masking strategies to be accepted, plus the financial struggles associated with going to school every day while people expect you to be grateful for the privilege."; "There was a big

scandal in my university year's WhatsApp group. I questioned the fact that a younger professor was flirting with and harassing female students. I knew I had many misogynous colleagues and I fought with my entire class. There is a lot of toxic masculinity in this university department and in general. I used to be the quiet one, but in that case I stirred up a scandal and people remembered me.”; “Now I try to prioritise my studies, given that I am in my last year of study and I have failed exams. But first of all I prioritise myself. For the rest, activism, my anarchist and leftist causes, I do what I can. [...] Even when I feel like a vegetable, I try to at least keep up with the updates on my topics of interest.”; “In order to support myself financially during the pandemic I had to ask for donations to buy my medication. I typically take anti-depressants, mood stabilisers and ADHD medication. The latter are not supported by the medical insurance if you are diagnosed as an adult. If you cannot afford the medication, tough luck! But I have built a support network, my community, who understands and supports my monthly need to ask for money for medication.”

Keywords: queer community; non-binary; mental health; unemployment benefits; fitting in

RO09

Title: Georgia, a single mother of two in her late forties, precariously employed, resolves to improve her financial condition and to guide her teenage children's life decisions in a context ridden with risks and uncertainties

Narrative: “I am a 49-year-old woman working as a shop assistant in a small town near the city where I live. I have been doing this job roughly since the pandemic started. I work since early 2020 in the shop of a friend of my ex-husband. The working conditions are poor. The shop is near a beltway, it has no heating and no toilet, and I am not formally employed. My boss pays me out of his pocket, but it is not a fixed sum every month. It depends on the earnings, which took a plunge during the pandemic and never recovered. The shop sells products destined mainly for fairs and festivals, such as the Christmas Market and others, which made it irrelevant during the pandemic and it never recovered after the festivals resumed.

This makes me fall behind with rent and utility payments. The informal status of my job also exposes me to lack of health insurance, lack of pension rights and no social security. Recently I gave my boss two ultimatums: to place a job ad to occupy my position and to pay his debt to the state budget, for a car tax which he put on my name (he is a foreign citizen) and then failed to pay its taxes for several years, leaving me with a debt which prevents me to collect social support of any sort, including social scholarship for my children. I am resolute to escape from this professional and financial blockage. I am acutely aware that my age and my health conditions are significant impediments in the search for jobs.

My ex-husband came back from Sweden where he went to find work six years ago. He did not pay child support for the eleven years since we are divorced. I chose not to take

legal action in order to protect the children from family scandal. I always tried to encourage them to have a good relation with their father. Now that the pandemic drove my husband back to Romania, he is trying to reconnect with the children. He moved in our neighbourhood and invited our 17-year-old son to live with him. After all these years of raising my children by myself, I was reluctant to let their father back into their lives again. I eventually accepted, because I want to encourage him to become involved and to support them at least now as they approach adulthood.

I am struggling to get over the 2021 death of my brother, who has been my main source of support with raising my children after my ex-husband stopped being involved. I also lost my father soon after, in the spring of 2022. I am trying to cope with their deaths and I had to help my son, especially, cope with my brother's death, whom he regarded as a father figure.

My children are becoming more and more independent. My 18-years-old daughter has been earning her pocket money for the last years working in supermarket sampling or from doing make-up and nail art. She studies at an architecture technical college. She does not want to apply for a university architecture degree and honestly we could not afford tutoring lessons, plus the two years of online teaching were a disaster, they learned nothing. She in fact is trying to convince me to let her drop out of school for one year to work for an online betting agency where she would earn a lot of money which she could use to open the tattoo business that she dreams of. She promises that she will enroll again to receive a high-school degree but I am not sure what to advise her. My father did not allow me to finish high-school and I was forever condemned to losing opportunities because I did not have the baccalaureate diploma. This is why I want her to prioritise her studies, but at the same time I try not to filter my advice through my personal regrets. I am proud of how they both cope with the limited resources, never complaining or blaming me for the hardship they had to face. They work a lot to relieve our family of financial burden by earning their own pocket money and buying their own clothes.

"

Specifically telling quotes: "I am a 49-year-old woman working as a shop assistant in a small town near the city where I live. I have been doing this job roughly since the pandemic started. I work since early 2020 in the shop of a friend of my ex-husband. The working conditions are poor. The shop is near a beltway, it has no heating and no toilet, and I am not formally employed. My boss pays me out of his pocket, but it is not a fixed sum every month. It depends on the earnings, which took a plunge during the pandemic and never recovered. The shop sells products destined mainly for fairs and festivals, such as the Christmas Market and others, which made it irrelevant during the pandemic and it never recovered after the festivals resumed.

This makes me fall behind with rent and utility payments. The informal status of my job also exposes me to lack of health insurance, lack of pension rights and no social security. Recently I gave my boss two ultimatums: to place a job ad to occupy my position and to pay his debt to the state budget, for a car tax which he put on my name (he is a foreign citizen) and then failed to pay its taxes for several years, leaving me with a debt which prevents me to collect social support of any sort, including social scholarship for my

children. I am resolute to escape from this professional and financial blockage. I am acutely aware that my age and my health conditions are significant impediments in the search for jobs.

My ex-husband came back from Sweden where he went to find work six years ago. He did not pay child support for the eleven years since we are divorced. I chose not to take legal action in order to protect the children from family scandal. I always tried to encourage them to have a good relation with their father. Now that the pandemic drove my husband back to Romania, he is trying to reconnect with the children. He moved in our neighbourhood and invited our 17-year-old son to live with him. After all these years of raising my children by myself, I was reluctant to let their father back into their lives again. I eventually accepted, because I want to encourage him to become involved and to support them at least now as they approach adulthood.

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Keywords: precarious work; single motherhood; child support; close-knit family; middle-aged employment-seeker

RO10

Title: Mira, an independent theatre actor, is recovering after two years of no or very little performance work and is contemplating a career change

Narrative: "I am a 38-year-old independent theatre actor and director, and a single mother of a 6-year-old child, in shared custody. I have been in this field for fifteen years,

working mainly in a collective or theatre artists who conceived and staged social and politically-themed theatre plays in independent spaces and under a project-based approach, based on short-term public cultural grants.

For me the pandemic was a terrible turning point, professionally and personally. The pandemic restrictions forbade live performances for most of 2020 and 2021, with some permissions which were de facto unavailable to independent theatre collectives. All my professional plans came crumbling and the worse thing was the uncertainty: you did not know how long it will last and how it will evolve. My child was 4 years old when it all started. Kindergartens were closed, I was all alone at home with the child, no job and no prospects.

In April 2020 the authorities announced that they would offer this unemployment support for independent artists working on copyright contracts. Initially I saw it as a relief, then I quickly learned that the money that we were to receive were in fact the lump sum out of which we were responsible of paying the taxes and contributions amounting to half the sum we were given. We had to hold on to these sums until the next fiscal year. It would have been impossible for me to hold on to this sum until next year. I applied for a few months and I used the money to pay a large fiscal debt from the previous year, which was outstanding because of another terrible fiscal regulation of independent work activities which forced you to pay contributions once your yearly income was even one cent above the minimum wage of the respective year. I was 150 euros above that threshold and I had to pay 2000 euros because of these 150 euros. After a few months of applying for these benefits, I decided to stop applying, for fear of accumulating too much debt. It was a constant interior conflict at the beginning of every month to decide whether I wanted to become even more indebted to the state. The state acted as a creditor who is now out to collect. I struggled to find other work opportunities instead. I tried to transfer my work online.

The autumn of 2021 was the first time I could act in a play, on condition that the number of spectators is reduced. This was after 2 years. It only lasted for a short while and then we could not organise any play until the spring of 2022. So practically us theatre artists had two years when our job disappeared. It took me one year to adapt and adjust and realise how I could reach online audiences. In 2021 I put on a project for a series of online play which won financing. Theatre is not easily adapted to the requirements of online art. A totally different type of resources and know-how were needed compared to our live performances: thinking in other lengths, other forms, reconsidering structure etc. We worked a lot to respond creatively to these new constraints, but the process and the end products were affected by the lack of experience. In addition, our project-based work during the pandemic meant that we had to meet certain deliverables, such as numbers of audiences reached, which we could not meet during the restrictions of assembly. This forced us to record some of our performances and broadcast them online in order to reach the project's indicators through online views, but we could not receive copyright for the online shows, which was unfair.

The professional side was frustrating and depressing. But if we had a safety net it would have been easier for us to adapt, to seek out different forms of artistic expression.

During the pandemic I thought that independent art will disappear forever. Spaces were disappearing, colleagues migrated abroad or reconverted. Now it is all over and we

contemplate a huge load of opportunities, but we find ourselves working in worse conditions and with less pay than before the pandemic. I could not turn down anything because of the crippling debt I was struggling with and the fear that something else will prevent me to work again in the future. In independent arts we rely mainly on a single source of financing from cultural grants. This creates a terrible work rhythm, with 'dead' seasons with no income and very tough periods when we are overworked, with 12 hours working days, 7 days per week. I recently had a 4-months period like that. In times like these I feel that I am sacrificing my child, my life. Autumn has passed and I have no memory of it. It is very unhealthy to live like this. What I sacrifice most is my psychological welfare.

I am decided to seek for a job. If I had to name one benefit of the pandemic, it would be the realisation that I do not want to live like before anymore. The pandemic provided me with an opportunity for self-reflection. I realised then that I was defining myself mainly through my work and through my social relations. Everything in my life crumbled during the pandemic. Job, personal relations, social connections, all gone. For a very long time I was alone with my child, very lost. And with a sense of uselessness, the feeling that no one needs artists. Many of my colleagues from our collective had recently found stable employment, so it was not a chance for us to forge solidarities between us, independent theatre artists. It was very alienating. I reached the point when I realised that I had the right to simply exist on this planet, without having to define myself through my work and my relations. I can escape this capitalist logic in which I can only justify my existence as a wheel in the system. I learned to value myself for the emotional and domestic work that I do, in which I have to substitute the state's obligations for childcare provision, for example. I found joy in other, smaller things, such as plants, cooking. I found solidarity in other constellations, such as with other mothers of young children. I was forced to slow down and reconsider everything. I realised I do not want to live as before.

After the pandemic finished, I realised I need to become employed and be stable. I am aware that my acting studies are limiting my options, but I have many skills in addition to my diplomas. I am actively reaching out to my network and looking for a job adapted to my financial and domestic needs.

Specifically telling quotes: "After the pandemic finished, I realised I need to become employed and be stable. I am aware that my acting studies are limiting my options, but I have many skills in addition to my diplomas. I am actively reaching out to my network and looking for a job adapted to my financial and domestic needs."; "I am decided to seek for a long-term contract job. If I had to name one benefit of the pandemic, it would be the realisation that I do not want to live like before anymore. The pandemic provided me with an opportunity for self-reflection. I realised then that I was defining myself mainly through my work and through my social relations. Everything in my life crumbled during the pandemic. Job, personal relations, social connections, all gone. For a very long time I was alone with my child, very lost. And with a sense of uselessness, the feeling that no one needs artists. Many of my colleagues from our collective had recently found stable employment, so it was not a chance for us to forge solidarities between us, independent theatre artists. It was very alienating. I reached the point when I realised that I had the right to simply exist on this planet, without having to define myself through my work and

my relations. I can escape this capitalist logic in which I can only justify my existence as a wheel in the system. I learned to value myself for the emotional and domestic work that I do, in which I have to substitute the state's obligations for childcare provision, for example. I found joy in other, smaller things."; "After a few months of applying for these benefits, I decided to stop applying, for fear of accumulating too much debt. It was a constant interior conflict at the beginning of every month to decide whether I wanted to become even more indebted to the state. The state acted as a creditor who is now out to collect."; "Us theatre performers had two years when our profession disappeared. It took me about a year to regroup and adapt. In 2021 I managed to write this project about motherhood during the pandemic, for which I receive financing and made a series of five films broadcasted online. It was a project where I needed to direct and produce. I had to work with people specialised in digital technologies, completely out of my element. And also to rethink lengths, form, structure for the online medium. [...] Our lack of experience affected our processes and our end products."; "The professional dimension was very frustrating and depressing. But the lack of financial security and of a safety net was the most terrible. This was, in fact, the root of the problem. [...] We were hanging on to a thread even before the pandemic."

Keywords: independent artist; project-based work; single motherhood; Covid-19 unemployment benefits; professional reconversion; precarious work

Serbia

RS01

Title: I longed to get back to normal

Narrative: "My name is Maria, and I am 44 years old. I am disabled, and I have been one all my life. I move and speak with difficulty. My otherwise fulfilled life changed entirely during the pandemic. Restricting movement threatened my health, job, relationship with people, and girlfriend, whom I hadn't seen for days, even though she lives in my immediate vicinity. Our routine was to sleep at each other's place, mostly me at her place. She has a dog, and I have a cat. It's easier for my cat to be alone one night than for her dog. During Covid-19, I danced and returned to the belly dance I used to practice. It helped me stay physically fit. When the measures relaxed, I replaced dancing with exercises that consisted of marching in rhythm around the house. Fortunately, I live on the ground floor, so no one complained about the music or the knocking on the ceiling.

I almost didn't notice how quickly the time passed, occupied with that work. Even when the measures relaxed, I didn't leave the house often, only to go to the store or see my girlfriend. And even then, whenever I could, I avoided public city transport. Instead, I was driving my tricycle. But my muscles weakened a lot during the pandemic, regardless of exercise. What saved me was that I received an electric tricycle as a gift from the city.

They put a motor on my tricycle, so it was easier for me to go to the store alone. I could put everything I needed in the basket, sit down and start the engine.

There was less danger of fumbling with heavy items from the store. What kept me alive was my job. I am the main organiser and founder of the disability film festival. As we could not organise the festival in person, as we used to do it before, I decided to do it online not to endanger the people who came to it. So I worked throughout the lockdown to organise the festival online. That kept me alive the whole time. Films had to be collected, and authors contacted, technical support organised. It was a period of endless sitting at the computer day and night and minimal movement. That's why I started exercising regularly. My strategy was a strategy of routine. I called my mom every morning at seven in the morning, and then I exercised, and then I worked at the festival. My partner would come if she could. It is this routine that reminded me of my previous life.

I realised that my first outing with people beyond the store and daily routine was in September 2022, only later. And it was me, who is a very sociable person."

Specifically telling quotes: If there were no parents of children with autism, none of us, disabled people, would be able to move anywhere. They fought for all of us.

Keywords: dance, work, movement, film, staying normal

RS02

Title: How can I be of help to others when I can't even help myself

Narrative: "My name is Lola; I am 50 years old and live alone. I have only primary school education; as a child, I got sick of cerebral paralysis and have been limited in movement my whole life. Even before the pandemic of Covid-19 virus, I lived alone. I lived with my mother for a while, but I started living alone when she died. I have only one sister in my family. To function, because it is difficult to move, I have help in the house, which is provided to me through the Centre for social work. But that was before the pandemic. When the pandemic broke out, the woman who helped me in my daily functioning could not come, so I had to move in with my sister. It was difficult for me because my sister's apartment, unlike mine, was not adapted to my disability, so even with this limited movement, my movement was even more restricted.

I was very upset about the government's lack of care for people with disabilities. We were left on our own. My sister had to go to work and was exposed to people there. It was additional stress for me, and the fear of illness gripped us all. I was desperate that I could not help my sister and was not valuable. When I was alone at home, at least I wasn't a burden to anyone, and now I felt like a burden. For example, I could hardly even go to the toilet alone in my sister's apartment because there was a lot to walk through and many obstacles to get there. And then what could I do? I noticed that the institutions completely forgot us; nobody thought about us, people with disabilities who live alone. Only if you were 100% disabled, i.e. with 100% physical damage, could you count on the

help of the Red Cross.

And then I decided to help. I collected and disseminated information regarding the various needs of people with disabilities. For example, who they can take into the house and make it safe. That was important because those who live alone are at the same time powerless to resist someone who would like to take advantage of their powerlessness. So it was vital that we all connect and that we know who brings us food and who brings us medicine. I started writing letters of protest to all institutions that were able to help, the Protector of Citizens, the Ministry of Social Affairs. I asked them why people with disabilities who are not 100% impaired do not have the right to help volunteers, what is the situation with people who are placed in institutions, whether and how they are taken care of. Internet communication enabled me to get involved, to listen to lectures and be a lecturer, to follow and enrich my interests. For example, to attend training from psychological workshops for women with disabilities, to transfer my experience to women who do not have disabilities. One of the best things that happened to me was that I got over my fear of dogs and talked my sister into getting a dog. It is a wonderful little house that has made our life better. I am proud that I started it, that I conquered the fear."

Specifically telling quotes: 1) You can do it all! But you can't now because it's not safe. 2) I managed to share my experience, I managed to be useful and supportive!

Keywords: Being useful; overcoming fears, independent living, activism.

RS03

Title: And suddenly everything went back to factory settings

Narrative: My name is Mary, I am 40 years old, and I am a disabled person. I live alone, my parents are not alive, and my brother does not live in Serbia. I was born prematurely, and it affected my disability. I walk slowly, with the help of a walker and crutches; sometimes, I need someone else's help. When the pandemic broke out, my business moved to the house. It was very difficult for me because I am a very cheerful and sociable person, work, although the job at the telephone exchange still meant leaving the house for me. My apartment is very small, and the equipment for working on the switchboard is huge, so it took up half of the table where I normally sit when I'm not at work, eating lunch or writing. However, considering that I am physically weak, I could not move that huge computer by myself for the whole 6 months. I live on the very bank of the river, and I'm used to walking. That was very difficult for me during the lockdown because I couldn't remember and go out alone. My relatives brought me food even though shops and restaurants were nearby. Neighbours often left food for me, but I never found out who exactly. I would just wake up in the morning and find a bag with breakfast attached to the front door handle. At one point, everyone left the city to their surrounding houses or cottages, and only one old grandfather and I remained in the building. That was the time when I read a lot; I had nothing else to do. I don't have a TV, so I read everything I didn't

have time to read. I used to write poetry, but during Corona, I couldn't. Something broke in me, like a thread of writing. My life before Covid-19 was very active and rich. We always went somewhere with the association; we sat in the van and went on a trip. During the pandemic, communication was reduced to Viber. But my friends and I have established a practice where we gather on Viber every week and talk. Our first question was How are you? Then each of us would answer how we spend our time, what bothers us, and what we miss. These were almost workshops where we supported each other. And 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. The thread we see each other daily has been lost as if everyone got married. And I had too much time to think. I was suddenly afraid of my age as if I was at a turning point and I had to do something important, but I don't know what. As if I have not achieved anything or done nothing in my life.

Specifically telling quotes: 1) It is mine to live as best as possible in every moment. 2) Suddenly everyone started living in the first person singular.

Keywords: disability, travel, feeling good about yourself, being with friends

RS04

Title: It was: manage if you can, if you can't what can I do.

Narrative: "My name is Djosla; I am 56 years old and a Roma woman. When we were closed, I did not experience any problems. I have a regular job; I receive a salary. But 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. I went to their settlement and wore masks, hygiene, and food. They had nothing. There live 300 families who were returned from Western Europe according to the readmission procedure (return to the country of origin since they were not granted asylum status in the country from which they were deported). The life they were living now was stressful for them, especially for Roma women. They were in great fear - primarily because of the ban on movement. For them, Corona was worse than the war because they were on the move during the war; they travelled, and now they couldn't move anywhere. I was like a psychotherapist to them, not just someone who brought hygiene and food.

We talked on the phone every day. We had group workshops through Viber and social

networks; they mostly use social networks, nothing else. They felt safer; someone was taking care of them, which was essential to them. Many were hungry. Women did not have sanitary napkins. That was something new for our community. It had never been like that before. When the state of emergency was lifted, the institutions got involved, but the help was distributed at points and not at houses directly, so I didn't know how many women got anything. I didn't get vaccinated, but I didn't dissuade others from doing so.

On the contrary, I see that there was some fear in people, fear of the vaccine. And not only from the vaccine. I tell them, look at me. I am a widow, raised three sons, had brain cancer, and survived all that. You will survive this too. We will all survive. And so, seven, eight to twenty women talked weekly via Viber about how we felt, what was happening to us, where we were. Discrimination is greater now than before Corona; hardly anyone looks at the Roma, and there is no longer the empathy that was there before. Everyone is tired of sharing. People have become selfish, angry, and furious. And they have a right to be angry. Not every measure is good for everyone; you must listen to each man and woman individually and study deeper into their lives. I got the idea to create a project to train Roma people on what to do in emergencies and how to deal with them. Although getting permission to move during the lockdown was difficult, I remembered to say that I would take medicine to the settlement. Sometimes I carried the treatment, and sometimes I just used it as an excuse to let me go during the curfew."

Specifically telling quotes: 1) As if there is some fear that civil society will do something better than the institutions. 2) People have become selfish. Only their problem is big, only they need something and for them it is most important that something be done. They don't care about the other anymore.

Keywords: activism, poverty, Roma, discrimination, power of action and agency

RS05

Title: That doctor treated me with his eyes!

Narrative: "Closely after the president and a group of corrupt doctors told citizens that the virus was ridiculous and didn't mean anything, I got sick with Covid-19 and barely stayed alive. I'm Magda; I'm 75 years old, and I live mostly alone. Sometimes my son comes to visit me, and sometimes, my granddaughter lives with me but less and less as she gets older. But the most significant support comes from my daughter, who lives on another continent and comes to see me once a year, but I also go there. When she heard that I had gotten sick, she immediately returned to Serbia. I don't even know how she managed it. I only know that she had to pull all possible connections and pay much money. I was already in the hospital. I can't say anything wrong about our doctors. There was one who took care of me; I still think he was an angel. That's how it was in the beginning; after I was released from the hospital, 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. She was always next to me, and I just heard her talking. Mom, open your eyes so that I can see your eyes. That was until she came. When she arrived, she went with me to isolation. She rented an apartment for the two of us. I don't know how I would have survived without her. After that, the two of us went to our house in the countryside, it was nice there, the air, the proximity of the river and socialising with the neighbours. A lot has changed for me since Corona.

First of all, my health is now much worse than it was. But thanks to my daughter, who can finance all that, I also go to the spa and the sea. She took me to Rome for my birthday. I wouldn't be able to do that with my pension. My pension serves as my pocketbook, thanks to my daughter. I wonder why she is so dedicated. After all, maybe I know. She had caring parents and grew up surrounded by love. I know I am lucky to have such a daughter and that she can pay for all that for me. Many are not so fortunate."

Specifically telling quotes: 1) That doctor of mine, my angel, healed with his eyes! 2) I talk to my daughter twice a day. I don't even know what we are talking about so much, but we are talking and we still haven't told each other all the stories to the end.

Keywords: daughter, travels, illness, return to normal life

RS06

Title: Things are changing in the world, you have to change yourself too!

Narrative: I am Maja, I am 60 years old, and I am a single mother of one son and a Roma woman. I have been an activist for Roma women's rights for over 20 years. I don't know how many times I've had Covid so far, probably 4 or 5 times. That's because I'm constantly active; I never stop. I'm constantly going around unhygienic Roma settlements, visiting them, and bringing humanitarian aid. My life has changed because of the coronavirus. For example, the health centre where I regularly go and have my doctor became a Covid-19 hospital, and now there are no more regular check-ups or a general practitioner; you can only go there if you have the virus. After so many viruses, my breathing function has weakened, and I have to use a pump for asthmatics. But I didn't stop working. However, this job of mine is important. Even when I tell the women I visit, especially those who call us on the SOS phone, that someone else will come, they say, "Why don't you come? We want you!" I notice that violence has escalated with covid, and poverty has escalated. And those who used to do something now don't work anymore; everything has stopped and has not returned to the way it was before. From my experience, violence against women increases during the holidays, when everyone is at home, poor, has nothing, and drinks, and then there is violence. And that's how it was during the corona as if those few months of lockdown were one long holiday that seemed like it would never end. That was terrible. Mortality among the Roma increased,

especially among the elderly, although young people also died. We cannot say that the cause was the coronavirus because most were not even tested before death. Few have gone to the doctor, or doctors come to them. Doctors do not come to Roma settlements. Those health centres near the settlement were closed; they had no money for transportation. And they could no longer avoid paying for public transport; there was a control at the entrance to the bus. So, we didn't know that the cause was the coronavirus; it could have been anything. But of course, we knew it was from that. The Roma did not even get vaccinated. God alone knows how they survived. That's why we most often gave them cards for transportation, the monthly ones. And instead of them coming to us, we went to them. And then, we went to the Covid clinics and informed them where sick people were. Before the pandemic, we had a group of women in every settlement who were like contact points for violence against women. That all stopped when the pandemic started. Neither could they gather nor could we reach them. They began to use more electronic means of communication, the telephone, and social networks, which was the only information source. I may have had more time for myself, thanks to the corona. To work on me. I never had time to study, to do what I was interested in. For example, I am interested in philosophy; I want to learn more about it. Another thing that changed is that I started thinking about my health more. I realised I was not young anymore and had to take care of myself. I noticed that my hair started to fall out. And I see that others are thinking more about it, even young people. Now we no longer ask people how they are for the sake of order, but we are interested in their health. I found some comfort in crocheting. I make very beautiful things from wool. There will be a sales exhibition soon. You know, when I start to strike, I just get lost; nothing exists for me anymore. It helps me to psychologically disconnect from everything and be alone with myself. It's not that I'm a withdrawn person; on the contrary, but I think I've become more withdrawn because of the pandemic. And for the first time, I followed all health instructions, wearing masks, washing hands, and disinfecting. And yet it didn't help me because I couldn't leave these women of mine in the settlements that were waiting for me to come. I just didn't.

Specifically telling quotes: I didn't want my life to happen and me to stay somewhere in the same place where I was before.

Keywords: personal well-being, health, Roma, violence, poverty.

RS07

Title: Life is normal again, like nothing has happened!

Narrative: "My name is Silvia. I am 71 years old and live alone. Both my children live abroad. I also spend at least a few months with one of my sons in America every year. I'm very bored there. My grandchildren are grown up now. They don't hang out with me. And I have no other company there. I'm mostly alone. I'm not here. I also have a "boyfriend" here - a wonderful man whom I am seeing. I have my sister and my friends. I

am very close to my sister. She is my biggest support. The coronavirus struck me in America, and I couldn't return home for months. I only came back when it was allowed to travel, and then everything was over for us. Both the locking and the corona, everything is back to the old way, as if it had never been there. I felt that lump in my breast there, in America, but I had to wait to return.

I returned from the USA in May 2020, they operated on me in August, and then chemotherapy and radiation started. Everything was the same as before. I had just lost my hair. I even think chemotherapy cleansed me and removed all my diseases. I never even got corona, even though I had to miss vaccinations because of chemotherapy. I lived normally. She was hanging out like before. The doctor told me not to listen to the stories in the corridors, and I did not engage in conversation with other women who were undergoing chemotherapy. They talked about some alternative medicines, methods...I didn't want to try any of that, nor did I want to believe that it could help me. I am the biggest optimist; nothing can shake me to keep fighting. Although I must admit, it was not easy for me. However, he was with me the whole time. He is better than any husband I know!

Sacrifice, he drove me to therapy every day and waited for me for five hours in front of the hospital; it was already getting cold outside, so I begged him to go home and pick me up when I called him. Chemotherapy has killed my taste for food. And then, just one day, I said, "I'm hungry for soup!" and I knew that I had recovered, that everything was as it once was. When that was over, I returned to hang out with my sister. We went to the village and played cards. I'm not someone who likes to read books, but I like to sit and play cards. And every afternoon from five to seven, we drink coffee. And life is normal again like nothing ever happens."

Specifically telling quotes: Don't listen to the conversations in the corridors, the doctor told me, live as you have lived up to now and do everything you have been doing up to now.

Keywords: cancer, loving partner, life as before.

RS08

Title: It's too hard for me, I don't have my husband, my support anymore.

Narrative: "My name is Danica; I am 81 years old and live alone. I have two daughters and three grandchildren; I even have great-grandchildren, but they live separately. I have been a widow for 2.5 years. It was corona when my husband died, but he didn't die from it. He died of old age. I had covid twice, and each time I had a severe form. I barely survived. The doctor came every day. My daughters paid for it. I once told him, doctor, I'm embarrassed. Let me pay, and you don't say anything to my daughters. And I paid. Only then did I realise how expensive it was. That one visit of his per day cost me 50 euros on top of my pension of 250. It was clear to me why my daughters were paying for it and not me. I wouldn't be able to afford anything.

I will never regret not going to school; I remained a seamstress. And I could do anything; everything was possible back then. You finish your trade and pretend you've graduated from university. My husband was a good man, but I still haven't recovered from his death. I lost 30 kilos in weight. I couldn't eat anything when he died. It's like I died too. We had a good marriage for 58 years. No marriage is perfect, but he never hit me, even when he was very angry. When he got angry, I went to the other room and kept quiet; I didn't say anything until he was good again. We get along very well here in the neighbourhood. I also have a young married couple here who look after me. They keep calling to ask if I need anything. She is a nurse, and he is a soldier. They saved my life when my heart gave out; they took me to the hospital—saved my life. After that, doctors implanted a bypass just three months ago. They also brought me food during the lockdown. They bring it and hang it on the door and leave. Here I will give just one example of how much we meant to each other. My husband was sick, and I wasn't by his side for a few minutes; he tried to get out of bed and couldn't. His leg got stuck, and he started to fall. I shouted so loudly that the whole neighbourhood heard me through the closed door. We don't usually lock the doors here in the neighbourhood. And the neighbour's son heard me and immediately ran and lifted my husband onto the bed. That's how much it means to have a good neighbourhood. We weren't supposed to see each other, my friends, neighbors and me. We only spoke on the phone. And my friends and I, it didn't stop. Medicines are very expensive for me, and I have to take many of them. But nothing is worth whining and complaining about; that's how it has to be. I don't like anything political that I have to talk about. I don't like politics. When my friends come over, I forget about everything, and we never talk politics.

Otherwise, I do not remember. Now, if you insulted me, I would forget. But that's partly also a consequence of the coronavirus, which I crossed twice. I started to forget. That is a direct consequence. And I started to think about what would happen when I died too, so I called my daughters and divided everything from my property to them! I don't want them to have problems. It's better to solve everything now while I'm still alive."

Specifically telling quotes: 1) They couldn't be better towards me even if I gave birth to them. 2) Corona costs the devil and a half!

Keywords: loneliness, illness, death of spouse, consequences for health, loss of support.

RS09

Title: Coronavirus was a death sentence for women in Serbia

Narrative: "I'm Nina; I'm 59 years old, I'm highly educated, I have one child, and I'm in early retirement. For me, covid started suddenly; I was then in the phase of some medical investigations regarding my health condition. I just retired from a job that was traumatic for me. Life conditions impose a model of behaviour on you. I couldn't stay in Belgrade any longer, I had to go back to my mother, who is over eighty years old and not in the

best of health, so I couldn't let her live alone during the corona. But then the chase started between her and my son, who stayed in Belgrade. I mean, he's not that little anymore, but still. The desire to be at the service of everyone, consultations with doctors regarding my mother's health, and a return to friends and acquaintances from a past life when I lived in that small town. I'm referring to my friends from elementary school, my neighbours. I was still interested in collecting data related to violence against women. I have always been interested in that, and I deal with it a little bit as an activist, even though I am not so active anymore. And then, for example, I found out that in that town of my childhood, a small town in central Serbia, out of 120,000 inhabitants, emergency services intervened 17 times in just one night in connection with violence against women in the family. It shows how much of a death sentence this coronavirus has been for women. Women who did not belong to the older category but were not over 65+, which I belong to, for example, were in a problem. We were not directly threatened, but we were constantly in a situation to help. For example, my neighbours, who are old, did not even know how to use mobile phones, let alone computers. Then I trained them a little bit and lent them my equipment - a tablet so they could talk to their children, who were often abroad and could not visit them. Or they want to apply for vaccination and don't know how to do it online. So, apart from my mother, I started to worry about the whole neighbourhood. That was my preoccupation. I did everything around the house, like most men, I suppose, during the lockdown. Everything that stood for twenty years as it was now needed to be repaired, the fence, the water heater, gas heating, and constant communication with the craftsmen who don't come any more than they do. And the institutions were not prepared at all. So, nothing could be done online in the beginning - to be completed, for example, the introduction of gas heating in the mother's house. I want to say that the crisis is not only the crisis staff and the press conference but the preparedness of the entire administration to serve the citizens during the crisis and perform its regular duties without interruption.

I realised the advantage of living in a house compared to an apartment. You can go outside, be in the garden, work in the garden... we can't do all that in the city. But I realised how much sacrifice women made. Well, me personally also. Everything was on me, my mom and son, the neighbourhood, and my illness. Women were the first everywhere: both in healthcare and at the market, and in the store. I have the impression that the men did not cope at all. And women are. The pandemic has shown who is who and what is what. Such situations show all the power of individuals, especially women, to repair the consequences and actively participate in the fight against the pandemic. Even the story I heard was about the death of two nuns who treated priests but died of the corona after two men recovered. And I saw that many people turned to religion—for example, my neighbour who became religious. What kept me going in life was countless seminars and training that I could attend or be present at online conferences. It meant a lot to me that I could be present virtually at those meetings. I didn't feel isolated. It helped me learn English a little. It was really good. So, I'm painting my fence and listening to a conference on headphones. You are part of the world and yet still in your backyard!"

Specifically telling quotes: If you really want to help people, you never have to leave

your building or street, all those who need your help are already there.

Keywords: care for others, selfcare, breast cancer, violence.

RS10

Title: Get me arrested for cats!

Narrative: I am 85 years old, but I still don't give up. I agreed to this interview only if who and what I am is not published anywhere. I don't want anyone to know that I gave the interview. My father is Slovenian, and my late husband is Croatian. This is why this country, after the '90s, has never been overly fond of my family or me. Although all of us, my whole family, sacrificed a lot for it. That tells you how Belgrade used to be a different open city. Everyone was coming to Belgrade!

The Coronavirus is still around us. There are no more press conferences, no more daily news about the sick, and no more death statistics, but Corona is still there. I did not understand our country's hatred towards old people during the pandemic. I did not understand who was protected by those abnormal measures of locking up the elderly. That multi-day closure, that torture of going to the store at four in the morning, so that old people and young people wouldn't meet... That wasn't any protection for me, on the contrary. It must be that the president hated his grandparents a lot when he arranged this for us! However, I can say that the pandemic, at least in terms of that period of the worst violence against people over 65 and restriction of movement, has brought some novelty to social life. I usually wake up at five in the morning, so I didn't mind waking up at four and going to the market. The market was, of course, not a market. 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! It was happening that you didn't even have to buy anything; the peasants would give you products as gifts. Take it, take it, they would tell me. I won't be able to sell it anyway; everything will become rotten. Another thing that I absolutely did not want to give up - regardless of the consequences is my cats. I have my cats in front of the building that I feed and look after. I couldn't live without them. 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! I had a corona and a very severe form. I barely survived. I lost ten kilograms in ten days of being sick from the coronavirus. But I had very nice treatment from the doctor. It was all too expensive for me; I went to private treatment. I didn't know where I should go; even if I went, people waited for five or six hours to get their turn for testing and examination. Many died that way. I could not stand and wait. I went privately, and it was very expensive. I knew I survived when I got out of bed one morning and said to myself, now you're going to cook a tomato soup. I had an urge for

tomato soup. Afterwards, I went for a check-up and had blood testing. The results were as if I were a girl, not an 85-year-old grandmother. Before corona, I had a rich social life. I like to go to the pub. When I go to the theatre, after the show, we always go to a bar and talk about the show, exchanging impressions. It is an integral part of experiencing that play. However, that is no longer the case. Here and now, the other day, we met, but it couldn't be spontaneous; everything has to be scheduled, so make sure that the tables are not too close. The same is in theaters now - every second seat has to be empty. I lost that sense of unity in cultural events.

Specifically telling quotes: I miss going to the pub, I really like the pub, I love the company, I miss it all!

Keywords: pub, solidarity, social life, neighborhood, cats



Sweden

SE01

Title: Being long-term sick

Narrative: My name is Angela and I am 53 years old. I am married and have two children, a 17-year-old and an 18-year-old. I live in a big city, in an apartment, and I am a patent consultant and work part-time.

I've been sick throughout the pandemic and initially received no support from the Health Care Centre, as they did not want one to come in. After 12 weeks I was allowed to meet a medical doctor and they took some tests which showed nothing. The substitute doctors didn't make an effort like my regular doctor that was much more committed in finding out what was wrong with me. He didn't give up and took the necessary tests needed.

At the beginning of March, 2020, I got sick again and in the fall, I got better and worked full time from home. However, I got a lot of pain in my back and was sent to a physiotherapist, which gave me exercises with rubber bands, which made me worse. They thought I had Post-Exertional Malaise (PEM). The infection in my body was ongoing and I didn't get better.

In January, 2021 I got registered at the Post-Covid Clinic at Karolinska Hospital. There I've received both examinations and rehabilitation. The tests show that I have an abnormally high heart rate and damage to my lungs.

The Clinic has given me the tools to manage my everyday life through so-called Pacing - Activity Balancing for PEM. I need to build up my energy-levels. "The occupational therapist said I'm like an old cell phone battery that needs to be recharged over and over again". Today, I never work more than 30-60 minutes and then need a little rest. This means I can alternate relaxation exercises with work from bed.

I have very good support from my employer. I still can't work more than 50 percent. It's been hard I've been sick for two and a half years now and I'm slowly getting better. However, no one knows when I can get back to a 100 percent or if I can.

My husband has had to take the big load when it comes to everyday chores. The fact that I ended up at the Clinic improved my life situation drastically. Pacing has been a good strategy for managing my illness. It has given me the tools to know how to rest, relax and gather energy. Although, I wish there was a medicine I could just take and get better.

I have been at Post-Covid Clinic for just under a year. I applied in March 2021 and only

got the invitation in October 2021. In November I had three pre-meetings before I got enrolled. If I had gotten there sooner, my rehabilitation would have been positively affected. Unfortunately, there are many who need help and they are understaffed at the clinic.

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. The clinic has in turn gone to the National Board of Health and Welfare and taken me as a learning example as they believe that the Agency makes the wrong assessments over and over again. The doctors have to spend time writing testimonials and assessments that the Agency doesn't take seriously, even though they are specialists.

At the moment I only have half an income which affects our finances. If I don't want to lose my income-based insurance I now need to register with the Unemployment Agency as 50 percent unemployed. I just think this is such a waste of our time. That these two agencies have two different opinions about my well-being and welfare has affected me a lot. This takes a lot of energy and has affected me physically and emotionally. At this point I not only worry about my rehabilitation, but also my financial situation, which is really counterproductive.

I feel like it's really difficult to defend one self. I mean I'm still highly educated and have no problem reading legal texts, guidelines and speak my case. I'm healthy enough, not like some Covid patients. I think for future that it's important to have specialized Clinic's like this, since they have a holistic approach to the patient and work interdisciplinary. This should also be available in all regions and there should be national coordination.

Specifically telling quotes: "The occupational therapist said I'm like an old cell phone battery that needs to be recharged over and over again"

Keywords: Not being heard, long-term covid

SE02

Title: Gertrud - finding support in the most unlikely places

Narrative: I am 72 years old and married. We are two retired people in the household, and I also have a 40-year-old son and several grandchildren. I live in a small town. In my previous profession I was a science teacher.

In March 2022 I got sick; I had already received my three vaccination shots. After Covid, I found it difficult to breathe and it turned out that I had fluid in my lungs. I was at the

Health Care Center and was x-rayed. They decided to drain approximately three liters of fluid in my lungs the first time, but I was only in for the day. After three weeks, the x-ray showed that I still had a lot of fluid, but they only drained a liter, since the body itself would regulate this naturally, according to the doctors.

I also had to take cortisone on two occasions, which caused my face to swell like a balloon twice, as a side effect. I was also x-rayed a third time which showed less fluid in the lungs. The swelling on my face is almost gone now, but I still have trouble breathing. I've been sick on and off for about 8-9 months. I was very surprised to get Covid, when I stayed so healthy throughout most of the pandemic.

I think, I have received very good support from the Health Care Center and the hospital. I've been taken seriously, and they have informed me and listened to me. I've been able to ask all of my questions to the medical team and have been well taken care of. Right now I'm receiving rehabilitation not mainly for covid but for being too still during covid. Since I didn't exercise enough during the pandemic I didn't move as much and I have a lot of pain in my right leg. I think it's an effect of the pandemic. As I still have fluid in my lungs, I easily get a lack of oxygen and have to go to a physiotherapist so that I can get my body going. It certainly goes away with time. I notice the results of the rehabilitation.

I have had to reconsider a lot in everyday life and do it at a leisurely pace and not take in too much. My body stops me. I get to do things at a different pace, which has been a challenge for me. My social life has shrunk, but then I haven't been someone who has been to markets and other types of events. I'm more of a nature person. I prefer going out in nature and into the forest. I have done some gardening, although, it has been limited. The heavier tasks have been carried out by my husband. I've had good support from my husband.

Through various media channels, I also learned that it takes time to come back. I'm also old, so it may have something to do with age. Today I have more stamina and my mood is better. I rested a lot in the beginning and then you had to take the initiative for a lot of everyday chores. I have also accepted that there are no answers for everything as the pandemic is a new situation. The most important lesson is that I have taken things a little more slowly. I've also had to let go of a lot that I felt was important in my everyday life. For example, I didn't have to change five curtains a year and it's enough to change autumn and spring. I have been stressing over unnecessary things for many years in my life. I also really appreciate having a healthy husband even though I do some things better than him, he has felt good too and grown as a person. This is due to the fact that I haven't been able to participate in the same way as my body has stopped me. If I work too much, I get really tired and exhausted the next day and have to rest. I get to knit or read a book and take it easy.

Previously, we had clear gender roles between my husband and me, but now "the area of operation" in the household has been blurred, which is quite good. I've had a hard time letting go of certain things. It's a bit like painting with charcoal, our roles in the family is not as sharp anymore.

Specifically telling quotes: “we had clear gender roles my husband and me, but now “the area of operation” in the household has been blurred, which is quite good... It's a bit like painting with charcoal, our roles in the family is not as sharp anymore”.

Keywords: Getting support, gender roles changed, long-term covid

SE03

Title: Living with a person in a risk group and how I coped with it

Narrative: “My name is Selma, I am 64 and live in the capital with my partner. We have a daughter who doesn't live at home. I work as a teacher at a school with special needs children, such as various neuropsychiatric diagnoses and ADHD.

In the beginning of the pandemic, I had to go to work even though my partner was in cancer treatment and I was very worried about infecting him. We were already set up for digital classroom and had all the necessary equipment and programme's to work remotely. However, it wasn't possible to do this, as the students were at school. This in turn created a lot of stress and anxiety for me, as my partner's immune system was lowered.

I tried to find my own solutions during these trying months. For example, I brought my own food and didn't eat in the school canteen, but in my study. I didn't have coffee with my colleagues. I tried to avoid places where there were many students. In the classroom, we divided the students into smaller groups. They were not allowed to sit next to each other. I didn't touch the students' computers, didn't greet them with my hands. I had to live like this for two whole months. I simply tried to find a way to cope.

I also used public transport, but was lucky, since there weren't a lot of commuters when I was using it. The bus from home was not that full and I got to sit in the front of the bus and I had a face mask. Not many people wore face masks then and much later it wasn't even mandatory.

My well-being was affected as I constantly worried about infecting my partner. I should have said something to the principal, but I felt compelled to be at the school and I felt that there was no room for anything else.

The good thing about digital classrooms, everything is on the computer; all assignments, texts from literature, so students don't even need the books. We were actually prepared, as we had worked with digital classrooms before and I corrected exams digitally too. I could see my 12 students working from home in their digital classroom. Several did not do so, but I could check their contact details so I could get in touch with them.

When I worked from home we had regular staff meetings digitally, we could talk about difficulties that existed or if we needed any support with a student from the Student Health Team or any other resources at school.

The digital classroom worked very well for me although I could see that it mostly affected the students whom needed to be connected to others or struggled with school. But these students were already struggling in one way or the other even before the pandemic. Another thing that improved for me was having more time in the morning, not rushing away, eating my breakfast in peace.

In hindsight I think when new situations arise, the employer must be flexible, especially when it comes to staff that have risk groups at home. I also think it should be mandatory to wear face masks in public transport, which would have been good. The authorities were quite late with various measures.

The funny thing is my partner actually infected me with Covid. He didn't keep his distance, especially after the third vaccination. Before I did the grocery shopping, after the third vaccination, my partner did it. I was very careful; I always wore gloves when I opened doors. I think he got infected in the store. He also stands very close to people he speaks to.

Personally, it's been tough since my partner got diagnosed with cancer. After his treatment my partner had back pain for a long time, during the pandemic. We went to the Health Care Centre which told him he had to see a physiotherapist and gave him pain killers. It was cancer in the back that was found after an MRI. The vertebra had been destroyed by the cancer and he had a wound on his back that kept growing. When we went to the hospital, they said that it couldn't be cancer since his medical status was good, there was no fever, no weight loss, so it was orthopedic. We got a referral in May but no date for an MRI. We even went to Greece on Holiday and had one done there which showed a growth. Back in Sweden we changed to a Greek doctor, since we've kept being sent back and forth between different departments in the hospital, orthopedics and cancer. Finally our doctor managed to get us an MRI and it showed cancer. He lost half a year and would have probably waited another 6 months to get an appointment while the wound kept growing and with all that pain and stress. I felt like the hospital just didn't care and we should report this to someone it was exhausting.

Specifically telling quotes: "He lost half a year and would have probably waited another 6 months to get an appointment, while the wound kept growing and with all that pain and stress. I felt like the hospital just didn't care and we should report this to someone, it was exhausting."

Keywords: Self-care, risk group, distance work, coping strategies

SE04

Title: Not falling apart in a time of crisis

Narrative: My name is Alice and I'm a 46-year-old nurse, married to a man from my hometown and we have an 11-year-old son. I came to Sweden in 2007 from a central African country. I work at an intensive care unit in the infection clinic in a hospital in a large city.

I have been at the infectious disease clinic throughout the whole pandemic. It was quite chaotic at the beginning, nothing worked, and many called in sick or wanted to change jobs. Every day there were new directives on how we should wash our hands, how we should dress or other routines we had to upright hold. We worried about getting infected ourselves. People felt very bad.

I got covid at work, twice. At least none of the staff died so that was good. Extreme fatigue and exhaustion were a big problem. Those who got sick from covid didn't get back completely either; if they did they got sick again. They just weren't healthy enough and still aren't. Out of three wards only two are opened and functioning, since there is no staff. In my ward the situation has also deteriorated considerably as most of my colleagues actually quit. This means I have to take on a greater responsibility to teach the new staff and supervise them, which is hard when there're so many. I'm the only one left and I sometimes wonder why I should stay when so many new have arrived. I am now the only experienced on the ward; I have worked almost five years. The employer doesn't want us to quit. But, I want to try something new. I have the experience. Also, the patients that come to our ward now aren't as sick or dying as before. Many have received the vaccine several times and it seems that we have some sort of herd immunity, which is positive. I'm not as worried about infecting my family. The patients will be able to go home; they will not die like before or die completely alone. That's positive.

This whole situation has been so stressful and it has affected my personal life, it has been like a dream, or rather a nightmare. When I get home, I feel like I have no life at home. I can see now looking back that I haven't been myself for some time. For instance, when I got home, I generally argued with those closest to me. Was it the menopause or just work-related stress? Initially, I took care of myself, was motivated, cycled a lot to work, but now I have gained a lot of weight. So, the pandemic affected my health and my relationship with my family a lot and it's still not good.

The employer has offered so called Feel Good-activities, which includes meeting a psychologist, on two occasions. Despite the fact that it was very traumatic at the beginning with patients dying and several dying alone and many of my colleagues in my home country who were very young, my age, dying of covid. 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. As of today, we're the only ward at the hospital taking care of covid patients. We get 5-6 new patients every day. They're seriously ill.

I'm still happy that we've gotten over the worst phase and it's more normal than before, not a 100 percent, though. The employer invited the staff to a party, recently, and it was lovely to dance, it feels like life is back. We've also had an After Work with the assistant nurses and I will initiate one with the nurses, as well.

I was also studying during this period. Next year I hope that I can retake my exam, since I failed it. My specialty is tropical medicine; I am very interested in it. Maybe my exhaustion, stress and anxiety made me less focused on this last exam, which was so basic, but I just wasn't able to concentrate. I feel a little bit more energized to start over. In the future I would like to do research, maybe a comparative study regarding patient care in Sweden and my native country. I'm very interested in that. In a way it was good that I failed my exam this gave me an opportunity to reflect a little on what is important.

Specifically telling quotes: 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.

Keywords: Helping others but not oneself, infectious clinic - high risk patients, PTSD

SE05

Title: How the pandemic changed the course of my life

Narrative: My name is Åsa. I'm a 30-year-old student and I live with my partner and two cats in a 2 bedroom flat in the capital city.

I was born in Sweden, but my parents moved to Greece when I was 6 and I lived there until I was 25. When I came back to Sweden I started working as a substitute teacher and studied Swedish to get a second language qualification. In Greece I'd trained as a special education teacher in, but in Sweden I mainly worked as a substitute or a so-called assistant teacher.

At the moment I'm studying to be at certified Biomedical Analyst (BMA) and this is my third and last year. I changed career, due to the pandemic. The BMA's carried out the covid tests and I became very interested in the profession and wanted to learn more because it sounded very exciting. I'd previously resigned as a teacher's assistant to study mathematics in 2020 so I could become a math teacher. When I was in Greece, I wanted to study to be a doctor but didn't qualify. I've always been interested in the medical profession. It feels right studying BMA and it's something I really want to work with. For

this reason, the pandemic has been very positive. On the other hand, I've heard that the work situation is not good for the BMAs'. The wages aren't high considering degree and university level education. During the pandemic the profession received more attention, but as I have heard from several people whom work as BMAs, that their situation hasn't improved. There're also many who will retire and they are already understaffed. I think this will become a patient safety problem as many certified BMAs will leave. So, I'm really worried about my future, even though, I've made the right choice.

During the BMA training, most of the teaching was via distance learning and Zoom. I was at home and it was nice to avoid public transport. Now that we've recently gone back to school, I've noticed how lonely I really was and that I wasn't feeling well. I was also sitting a lot, because the first year was so intense. My partner also worked from home, sometimes it got cramped, and we don't have such a big apartment. We were together 24 hours a day. Many couples probably ended up breaking up with each other, since you argue more. However, it was better than living alone. We managed to find strategies to avoid each other at home, for example isolating ourselves in separate rooms. My well-being has been negatively affected; I have pain in my back and neck. The students did have a Facebook-group; and the lectures were divided into break-out rooms. It was hard to build relationships with the other students. We didn't connect until the end of second year, when we went back to university.

I'm still quite an introvert, even though I didn't feel that I was lonely, it was noticeable in the long run. The university offered no real support, but some of the BMA students organized regular zoom meetings, which I attended. There are counsellors at the university that you could seek help from. Our teachers at the course were wonderful, especially since they got extra work due to having to organize smaller groups, but it didn't affect us students. My cats also helped a lot, it didn't feel quite so hard when you could play, pet and cuddle with them.

My dad is also in a risk group so we didn't want to go out the first year. It took a very long time before we went out to eat. We were home all the time. We were naturally worried about my parents and ourselves, that we could get infected. I did catch Covid in late March of 2020 and had it for a month. I got no help from the Health Care Centre neither the official 1177-hotline that I called every week. Once a week a doctor checked in and asked how I was doing. My body didn't recover and I couldn't get out of bed, I also had strange sensations, diarrhea, vomiting, and chest pressure and heart palpitations. The Health Care Centre said it's because of stress or anxiety and they didn't take me seriously at all. The following year I paid a large amount of money for a T-cell test to see if I actually had Covid or not. I chose to do the test after I saw it on the news and which company was offering it. The test showed if you had actual immune cells for Covid, and the free antibody tests I did showed nothing. I therefore contacted the company because I felt crazy. I was so sure I've been sick while the Health Care Centre said it was, due to my anxiety or stress. For a year I was completely confused and worried. For my own sake, I wanted to know that I was sick, just get a confirmation. It also made me less stressed knowing the next time I got sick, that I actually had it.

Specifically telling quotes: I was so sure I've been sick while the Health Care Centre said it was, due to my anxiety or stress. For a year I was completely confused and worried. For my own sake, I wanted to know that I was sick, just get a confirmation. It also made me less stressed knowing the next time I got sick, that I actually had it.

Keywords: Career change thanks to pandemic, not being believed by the system

SE06

Title: How government policy made me financially vulnerable and completely exposed

Narrative: My name is Monika, I'm single and 57 years old, without children or animals and have a small business. I've been working as a consultant for 15 years. I have no co-workers, but a network of other consultants to support me.

Several parts of my life have been affected by the pandemic. I am incredibly extrovert and frankly addicted to people. Many have felt great working from home, but not me, I don't feel well, not doing what I love. If you're so used to meeting new people and living alone and not having children, you become good at being active. During the pandemic, everyone became their inner circle, the nuclear family, and the people they hung out with. I was outside the circle. My mother was in a risk group living in another town and my brother also lived in another city, so there weren't many people that I met. There was a lot going on online. But for me this was not an option due to the questions I worked with.

To me, everything became illogical, why did families with children run in and out and met a lot of people and I couldn't. Why were germs from kids more ok than from me? Why not shut-down the whole society if it was such a danger to us. There were a lot of feelings of being lost which was heavy at times. You couldn't talk about these matters in the beginning, there was no room for that. I just found it hard that we gave up on human contact because we were so utterly afraid of dying. When one began to understand that it was the elderly and the sick that were most affected, it was even more difficult to understand the Government's arguments and restrictions. I think we were losing sight of what is most important; like the children or saying goodbye to elderly relatives on their deathbed. I think we lost sight of what it means to be human and what the meaning of life is.

In my profession I meet up to a 100 people a time to discuss certain issues. From one day to another all the meetings and assignments were cancelled. It didn't help to work for the public sector and they worked from home the longest. So, in terms of my profession and income, it was dead for almost three years. I received no support from the government, since I had a small business. Later we were invited by the authorities to apply for unemployment benefits as a way to provide support, rather than grants which

was given to larger companies. However, to receive these benefits you are forced to shut down your business entirely. I had to kill the whole thing. In addition to this, I worked in the cultural industry, which was also dead.

In the spring of 2020, I started to receive the benefit, which was not based on a real income, so even there I received very little support. Then the authorities finally provided a grant for small businesses too. I could have gotten back half a million SEK that I'd lost. When I filled in the form digitally, it said on the last page that I was not allowed to apply since I had collected unemployment benefit. So, I was disqualified and couldn't apply at all. Closing down my company hurt me and it was a huge financial loss. I had to take out all my savings and even sold my apartment in Stockholm and moved to Malmö which had lower apartment prices. I would have liked to keep my apartment as future insurance, but I guess I was luckier than most.

My business hasn't really normalized and being away for three years has been devastating. As a consultant you live on recommendations and meeting potential new clients at your assignments. I have not been given any support what so ever. I even written to some politicians that they had actually urged us to shut down our businesses and go on unemployment benefit and then couldn't receive grants that were given. The answers I got were so dumb I don't even want to repeat it. I'm mean I feel like everything about me was wrong; working for the cultural sector, having a small business, being single without children.

My salvation was my cross-fit training, and I'm far from an athletic person. The cross-fit community is small so they didn't shut down only followed the restrictions and recommendations. I also volunteered at a shelter for homeless EU-migrants. Even though the authorities urge us not to take public transport I decided to do so anyway, because I thought it was important. I also volunteered outside a hospital where we cut aprons to healthcare staff. But after a while it felt absurd and sick that I was completely without supported and was helping the hospital that hadn't made their orders correctly. At first I did it to meet other people and to contributed, but I got angrier and angrier. There were many in the cultural sector with me volunteering. A friend gave me an hourly employment as coach for the unemployed cultural workers, which was a triple irony, since there were no jobs to apply. It got to the point where they were forced to come to the meetings on how to write a CV and there were no jobs to seek and the Unemployment Agency was only interested in following the rules, despite the fact that there was a pandemic. There were a lot of anger and frustration towards me, but also the system that failed to see their actual needs instead of pushing them to go to these labour market measures. The disdain for the authorities is so great in this group. It's not right, when the whole society is upside down and some public authorities act as if it's still normal. So the measures backfired on these individuals and as well me. Forcing people to sit in humiliating meetings is not good for anyone, not even the authorities. I wasn't rigid, though, if someone didn't show up I didn't write it up, but that's what corruption looks like. So when the rules are so stupid that you can't follow them, people tend to find ways to bend them.

Specifically telling quotes: Forcing people to sit in humiliating meetings is not good for anyone, not even the authorities. I wasn't rigid, though, if someone didn't show up I didn't write it up, but that's what corruption looks like. So when the rules are so stupid that you can't follow them, people tend to find ways to bend them.

Keywords: government policy don't give adequate support in an extra ordinary situation

SE07

Title: The importance of human contact in a nursing home and the effects shutdown

Narrative: "My name is Teresa, I am 45 years old and have a daughter and a partner. We live in an apartment in a suburb outside a major city.

My mother was living in a nursing home for four years when covid-19 broke out and it was a home that was very quick to close down for all visitors. They had just posted a note at the entrance one day and think it was 3 weeks before pandemic broke out.

My father visited my mother every day and we were there with her grandchild at least once a week. She was 74 years old when it broke out and she had multiple illnesses and was in a wheelchair. I think the biggest difference was for my mother, as from one day to the next, she had no visits from us at all.

We had no complaints with the public nursing home and we were happy with. They had many activities like Friday bingo or the Thursday gym. The visits were an important part. We tried to have phone contact. Those who worked did not have time to help her. I called often but no one was in her room. She couldn't key in the number herself, so it made a big difference not talking to her or seeing her.

After five months they reopened at first we spoke through a plastic screen outside. In our first visit we noticed that she had become much worse. During our visit she fell asleep several times and barely spoke a word, and even her attendant mentioned that she had gotten worse. As relatives, we received no information about this. The strange thing was that we didn't even get information about Covid-19 outbreak at the nursing home. The first time I heard about it was from the florist who said that many people had died and gotten sick. We were never told that several people had died, nor if the staff had been sick or died.

When we finally could visit her in her room, we tried talking to her neighbours; even my daughter knew them well. Two of her neighbours just stared blankly and didn't answer back. We were then told that they had not had any joint activities. Only activities the attendants could organize themselves, no external ones. The residents became

completely passive and what was clear was that it happened very quickly. It was like a completely different nursing home.

A doctor had diagnosed my mother with a TIA - brain clot, but the doctors diagnosed this over zoom by the attendants' description. But my mom didn't have TIA. When she did get a proper doctor's checkup it was rather a lack of human contact than a brain clot. Since, not just the activities but also the shared lunches and dinner were also cancelled for the residents. There were just far fewer opportunities to speak. Although they met the attendants, they had face masks, perhaps it was even more difficult for the residents to understand them as they could not hear well and could not see their facial expressions.

I tried to calling several times; there were no people in my mother's room. I found out that the permanent employees were approximately 60 percent and 40 percent temporary, and when the nursing home shut down there was a loss of 40 percent of the staff. They never told us this and we didn't ask as relatives either. That explains why we couldn't communicate well over the phone or zoom which would have been much better.

We did not receive any support from the municipality or the nursing home as relatives. Some nurses also pointed out that the residents became so much worse because their contact with relatives was broken. Dad started going there every day with a mask. After seeing a picture of my daughter, she said grandchild. She started speaking again.

We were so happy that mother had started speaking again that we didn't question anything. When she was fully recovered, I heard the nurses say it was a bit of a miracle and from nurses came from different wards just to meet her. It was very peculiar.

We probably needed support and information as relatives. It was so odd it wasn't just my mother, but also everyone else at the ward, they were so quiet - it felt like a corridor of death - they walked silently, with dead eyes and slowly along the corridors. I remember that it was very difficult for me, especially when I called and I recall that my own calls became shorter and shorter. It was quite traumatic seeing mother for the first time, her whole face was stiff and she wasn't talking, before she had been very happy and talkative. A year later she died. It felt like a sense of false hope that she survived the shutdown, from being completely silent and then recover and being happy and alert for a year, then she died within three days of Covid-19. There were delays with the third shot of vaccine; I think she had gotten corona during the shutdown as well, but they never told us this either. We got a year with her even celebrated her 75th birthday. We should have received some sort of support. I needed it was so traumatic to see how much worse they got so quickly.

Specifically telling quotes: It was so odd it wasn't just my mother, but also everyone else at the ward, they were so quiet - it felt like a corridor of death - they walked silently, with dead eyes and slowly along the corridors.

Keywords: Shutdown of nursing home - fewer human relations - the loss of humanity and care

SE08

Title: Digitalization and literacy - leading to discriminatory practices by government authorities

Narrative: "My name is Lena and I'm 35 years old, married with a 3-year-old and 8 months pregnant. I work in a medium-sized municipality as a guidance counsellor with unemployed newly arrived migrants. They are illiterate and I mainly help them with labour market issues.

I had a very privileged time during the years of the pandemic and I have had several gains; I was able to work from home, and not hit as hard as others. With my first child I had time to give birth before the outbreak and join a parent groups, whereas many of my friends had enormous problems during this period, they weren't allowed to bring their partners to the birth and there was a lot of worry among them with regards to child birth and the care after. My workload has been constantly high and very stressful at times even before the pandemic. You sometimes feel inadequate when you work with social work. So it's been different, but compared to my target group I realize how good I have it.

The municipality has gotten Quota Refugees from the UN. In my group everyone is more or less illiterate and they have lived in a refugee camp for several decades. The ones from Syria and Afghanistan that came arrived without any help were mainly educated. So there is a difference. Many have lived in Sweden between 6 months up to 5 years mostly from Afghanistan, Syria and Eritrea.

Their main concerns are contacts with various different government authorities, understanding the system, filling in the forms, how to get access to various grants and not get sanctions. It's difficult if someone says over the phone that you have to apply for 10 jobs or you won't get your grant, and you don't even know how to apply for a job.

The restrictions have eased, but what is remarkable and concerning is that the authorities have changed the way they operate and continued to work from home. All the supervisors at the Employment Agency worked from home and had only a few contacts with my target group over the phone, while the groups have a need for physical meetings. Even Swedish for immigrants (SFI) have been done digitally. If you are illiterate, it's not easy to study via Zoom or Teams. SFI has opened up after almost three years. Many of the people I meet say that they have missed their first two years at SFI, because they weren't able to take part in the lessons.

I, on the other hand, have been working as usual; we've had group activities and

individual meetings. I don't think the Employment Agency will reopen again. The change to digital societal services' is happening regardless of the pandemic. The Agency has, for instance, closed down many of their offices where unemployed people could get help applying for jobs. They've been replaced by the State's Service Offices, which is a joint office between three government authorities: the Employment Agency, Social Insurance Agency and Tax Authority. I can see that they don't get the same help as before, that's why they come back to us and want us to help them instead. It's a collaboration problem and we have to compensate all the time for what is not done by the government authorities. High demands are placed on our target group who can't even email or write a CV. My task has been to ensure that they do not lose grants and documents are sent at the right time.

I think there's a big difference in meeting a person and not meeting them and yet give them sanctions for not reaching set goals. This type of distancing becomes very strange to me, how can you work with people and not even know whom you have in front of you or what their needs are. The migrants that arrived during the pandemic have had it tough, shutting down society like and it really hasn't helped integrating people into society. I can see how many thirsts for physical contact. Many come with different kinds of government forms to be filled in and in that meeting it's easier to see what a person actually needs.

There are other challenges as well such as when I need an interpreter who explains what the Employment Agency's forms mean. We are subject to the same administrative law and service obligation and sometimes I wonder if it's really the municipality's responsibility for these costs. Also, things get lost in translation when I inform the participants of other Agencies application forms and laws, my limited knowledge of their system can also cause problems for my group. To me, it is very strange to send letters in Swedish when you know the person is illiterate.

The point is, my target group's situation hasn't gotten any better, being bounced around different public authorities and with so rigid rules and demands. I have become their guide in how they should navigate in society and get their rightful assistance as stated by our Administrative Law. For me, this whole situation becomes discriminatory, when people are excluded and don't get to participate in society on equal terms. I wonder how the authorities view availability and service obligations. We have to be more open and meet people. Most of my target groups don't even have computers and studying or applying for a job via mobile isn't really an option. You also need money to wait in phone queues for hours. We are the only stable contact these people have had.

Specifically telling quotes: I think there's a big difference in meeting a person and not meeting them and yet give them sanctions for not reaching set goals. This type of distancing becomes very strange to me, how can you work with people and not even know whom you have in front of you or what their needs are. The migrants that arrived during the pandemic have had it tough, shutting down society like and it really hasn't helped integrating people into society.

Keywords: Digitalization and literacy - discriminatory practices by government authorities excluding people with disability

SE09

Title: Business as usual, when the crisis hit ...

Narrative: I work as a mobile youth coordinator in the municipality where I live. I am 36 years old, married and have three children. We live in an apartment in a socioeconomically segregated suburb of Stockholm.

During the first months of the pandemic, we as mobile youth coordinator had to work outside with the young people, while our co-workers, management and all administrative staff worked from home. As a youth coordinator, we work with outreach programmes and across the entire municipality. Our target group is young people between the ages of 12-18.

We had to work outside amidst the beginning of the pandemic when people were getting sick all the time and there was no information. That is why, we thought it was strange when the risk of infection was so high and we had to work outside among the civilian population. The directive we got, if I remember correctly, was that we were to use hand sanitizer and face masks, which was provided by our employer. However, we didn't have to work full time and the rest of the time we worked from home. In the end it worked out well.

We were very limited in our fixed activities like football, excursions and boxing. For our youth, it was a big impact when everything closed down and there were no physical meetings or activities like before. Many complained about the situation and we tried to offer a few activities, like outdoor training in smaller groups. They thought it was nice that they didn't have to go to school, but everything was closed, even the shops in the centre, the cinemas, and sports facilities. I could see that some youths suffered from mental illness and one was very open about it. We contact his parents and the school nurse and we talked openly about it and we also did a follow-up and we were quite supportive.

I also worked a lot with digital activities such as quizzes on various topics in social media. We had around 200 participants and through social media we also chatted and got many questions about our planned activities or just one-one chats about different issues the youth might have. We have over 1000 followers on Instagram so we are quite popular and have a large network of youth. The activities have varied, but the excursions have had an even gender distribution, we also had gender specific activities like girls boxing or football for the boys. I used to have 50-70 youths in our indoor football that I organized, but it was cancelled during the pandemic.

We weren't allowed to drive kids in our mini bus with nine seats, which had been a useful tool to shuttle youths various activities. The youths with no parents or means got hit the hardest by this. Our scout cabin was also on total lockdown. Later it became a limited number of youths that were allowed to come to the cabin.

In the beginning we felt it was unfair that we had to work outside as business as usual while everyone else work from home. I think at some point we even said to our boss that - we're being sent to die while you work from home - now I'm being a bit dramatic, but it felt like that in the beginning of the pandemic. For a while it was quite serious and many people in our residential area died or got sick, due to corona. There were also many people we met who were sick or had relatives who were infected and we felt like oh are we really going to work as before. Eventually I got infected myself and so did my colleagues. I wasn't so worried because of my outlook on life. The positive thing about a crisis like this is that many people get a better picture of what it's actually like out in the world. It is not just one country or a few people, everyone is affected, it is global, nor is it just a poor country. We've had it so good with no wars or major crisis like in other countries. I think you also appreciate what you have and above all that you are healthy which something you can't buy. In terms of work, I didn't see any improvement.

I stopped listening to the news as well, since there was so much talk about corona in the media and out in society. I understand that we need to clarify certain things but it could be a bit stressful, especially the issue with the vaccine. I got a lot of questions about whether or not I was vaccinated. It felt like a pressure from society, as well as, some co-workers. I, who haven't been vaccinated, felt that it was too much, partly because it was developed quickly and partly because so many people got negative side effects from the vaccine against swine flu. That is why I chose not get vaccinated. Sometimes it could get ugly at the workplace when colleagues tried to persuade me to get vaccinated. I felt like it's my choice not to and it's your choice to take it. We have free will.

The pandemic also gave me an opportunity to think about what is important in my life, such as taking care of your loved ones, appreciating life when you are alive and that everything can happen suddenly, a bit like the Triss's lottery slogan, suddenly it happens.

I went and talked with my wife, but also my closest co-workers. I did meet with my closest friends as usual and we greeted each other like we usually do in Turkey, kisses on the cheeks and handshakes. We wanted to try to live normally. I expected my friends to tell me if they were sick or had symptoms or were sick so we didn't infect each other. The funny thing is after the restrictions dropped, we started right away with all of our activities like nothing had happened, it's was a bit crazy.

Specifically telling quotes: I think at some point we even said to our boss that - we're being sent to die while you work from home - now I'm being a bit dramatic, but it felt like that in the beginning of the pandemic. For a while it was quite serious and many people

in our residential area died or got sick, because of corona. There were also many people we met who were sick or had relatives who were infected and we felt like ooh should we really work as before.

Keywords: Youth coordinator, working as normal when management and others working from home

SE10

Title: Being pregnant on uncertain times ...

Narrative: I am 32 years old, married and have three children and work with youths at youth centre a school in a municipality outside Stockholm. I live in an apartment in a segregated area.

I was pregnant when the pandemic broke out and there was a question of whether or not I should even work. The school's management team did not think it was serious and that we shouldn't worry, while the staff had a different view. I wasn't the only pregnant one.

There were a lot of different narratives when it comes to pregnant people during the pandemic. The management and the Maternity Care Centre said that there wasn't any concern and the news and media said something completely different. I felt that there's something off about what everyone was saying.

Management worked from home while we couldn't do that, we were at school and didn't receive very few directives on what to do. For example, they told us to just use hand sanitizer and ordered us to clean the surfaces in the youth centre. This wasn't part of my job description and then I felt that there is a risk with this pandemic after all especially being pregnant.

We were given mixed messages; we were told that there was no danger, while we met several different people and there was nothing to worry about. If we were worried, we should talk to our closest manager. We got no other support. Interestingly, after a few months I went on sick leave, not related to the pandemic. 2-3 weeks after my sick leave, my colleague was ordered to go home on the spot, which was also pregnant and was due to give birth later than me. I had continuously asked my manager if there're any risks. And from one day to another you apparently had to go home. Maybe the Public Health Authority came with new guidelines about the risks of Covid and pregnancy, it's unclear why. The thing is, when you work with young children and youths you can't really work from home. When you work with youth, you can't have smaller groups or distance yourself in that way. I mean if a student was sad, I tried not to hug them or greet them as usual and it's difficult when you work with young people.

Today, I think that they could have done it in a differently. It should have been clear from the start that they really didn't know any better. I felt that it became very black and white from one day to the next, mixed info was given and there were so many of the staff that actually became ill. That made me very concerned.

In my unit, we talked openly about the pandemic and how serious it was. The pandemic spread quickly. That is why; we created our own guidelines to reduce the spread of the virus. For example we tried to stop the guardians from entering the youth centre at school to reduce the spread. We avoided physical contact with the students and cleaned up. It took a while before the cleaning companies came in and cleaned more. Some things were sanctioned by the managers, others were not. Many of the staff were afraid and called in sick even though they weren't.

When I was on sick leave, there were still mixed messages until the Public Health Authority came up with new directives where they made it clear that a child could be harmed by the virus. When I was on parental leave, I didn't really have a handle on my workplace. I was constantly on my guard, though, avoided certain situations and became very isolated and only met my friends outside. When I had given birth then the pandemic had a low infectious rate the maternity ward had opened up somewhat. During the birth of our child, my husband was allowed to come in. I would have liked him during my other visits as well, it was a difficult situation to experience, being alone at the beginning, but I understand that measures were needed to be taken.

I mean I'm usually not afraid of these kinds of things, but it's different when you're pregnant or get so much mixed messages from media, authorities, and your employer. Because it creates anxiety and I know others who felt that way too. What really worked out for me was the sick leave, and then I could focus on myself and my future child and keep it healthy. Life ended up a bit on hold and you had to adapt. Then I was at home throughout the pandemic.

I think a lot of anxiety is also created when the authorities issue such harsh directives; it creates stress and feeling of isolation. I've gone back to work now, it's like there hasn't been a pandemic at all, and it feels strange.

I remember that I got infected with Covid, but my symptoms were mild. I also think that many people think they were sicker than they actually were, and then I have colleagues who got sick from Covid and now have breathing difficulties and suffer from fatigue. It has affected so many people in my residential area as well. And now everyone works as usual. In the beginning they told us that we should work outside with the students, but around 80 percent of our activities are already outdoors. The directive came after a long time and we already did that.

I think one insight is that information about the next pandemic should be clear and directed to different groups, staff, guardians, pregnant persons; safety for us whom work on the floor should come first. I think you should act first, rather than act like you're completely unsure and send mixed signals. People are different and take in information

in different ways and that is why you sometimes need to act first and develop your own routines as you go and trust in yourself and not wait for management. It's something my unit has gotten better at, for better or worse. At least no one died in our unit.

Specifically telling quotes: What really worked out for me was being on sick leave, and then I could focus on myself and my future child and keep it healthy. Life ended up a bit on hold and you had to adapt. Then I was at home throughout the pandemic.

Keywords: Pregnancy, covid, not being able to work from home



Slovenia

SI01

Title: Pandemic was an overall positive experience for a 22-year student

Narrative: "I am 22 years old and I am finishing my studies of health care. I think that young people were really affected by the epidemic. Students, and especially medical students. Socialisation and studying at the faculty was very impacted. At the beginning of the epidemic I didn't find the situation so bad, I would say I was even glad that everything closed, since I have social anxiety. It was not a problem for me to work with people, patients, I work in medical settings. This was not a problem for me. But being around peers, sometimes I didn't feel as one of them, I felt as being old fashioned. So when everything closed I was glad, I enjoyed being at home. But after some time, I realised I need contact with people, even if it is just talking to a cashier at the store. When we went back to normal life, I felt relieved. And when recently they started talking about restrictions again I didn't feel as glad as the first time. I need some contact with people. So I find this epidemic a positive experience in a sense I somehow overcame my social anxiety. It is not so present anymore. So the epidemic helped me.

At the beginning of the epidemic when our faculty closed the doors it was not so bad, but after some time we started to go to the faculty again and we had a lot of practical lessons. At some point there was no public transportation, so we had to find another ways to get to the faculty. A friend of mine would pick me up in her car and we drove to the faculty together, since it was winter and I was not able to ride the bike, and also it was too far to walk. For me this period was not so bad, but some of my fellow student, who lived further away really had problems.

I was constantly in contact with Covid-19 positive people. I had my practical lessons in hospital settings and I constantly feared the infection. From the moment I woke up in the morning to the time I went to bed at night I worried about it, I searched for possible symptoms. For example, I had I headache and I worried to be infected. If I would get infected that would mean I would have to be at home for 2 weeks and I would not be able to participate in practical lessons. So I would have to do them in summer. And I also worried about other fellow students who would also have to go to quarantine for 2 weeks and miss studies. This fear of infection really gave me anxiety.

The turning point for me was when I went to the center of Covid infections. I went to work in a nursing home where everybody was infected. I worked with Covid positive employees, we were hanging out together, some even without masks. We touched the same objects and surfaces, we ate the same food from self-service. This was really a turning point for me, as I didn't get infected. I realised I must have a really efficient immune system. So I was more relaxed, not so anxious anymore. I still respected all preventive measures, but I stopped worrying so much. And this epidemic experience was an overall very positive for me. Also because I get to experience totally unique

circumstances and exceptional working conditions in health care.

During lock down I tried to maintain contacts with some friends. We met online and talked for two or three hours. Just to have some sort of interaction. Sometimes we also met outside. All clubs and cafes were closed, so there was no other option. But it was winter, so hanging out outdoors, in the cold, at night, for several hours is not really fun. So I wouldn't go out very often, I also had studies in the morning and I worked in the afternoon. Before the epidemic we sometimes went to a vacation house in another region, another municipality and when everything was closed we didn't see each other for half a year. Well, we met a few times, but we were really busy so it was hard to even find time due to regular jobs, studies. But then we said we should go to the vacation house since we haven't seen each other for such a long time. But the borders were closed so we dropped the idea. After some time living with all these measures, we said we should do it. Some of us were somehow reluctant, I was not sure what would happen if we get caught. I had so much to do at the faculty and at work, I was not sure what would happen. But then somebody heard that some people cross municipal borders and they do not get caught, so we decided we should go. And one friend knew the area and said we should take the road through the woods, which was longer, but that is how we would be able to avoid main roads and not get caught. And then we started doing that on a regular basis and it became our ritual. We would go there for every holiday, birthday. Before the epidemic we would wait for this friend to invite us, but now we are all very eager to go there, to hang out. We realised the importance of a friendship."

Specifically telling quotes: It was difficult, because every day I went there, every day it was this fear of infection. If you were on the bus you could get out of the way by not go sitting next to someone. But in a hospital, you can't be a nurse, a health worker, you cannot stay away from the patients and not go into a room because they have covid. You have to be there and you touch them and they cough on you and everything. It seems to me that a lot of health workers were afraid of getting infected. Those who have families were afraid they would bring something to them, for me it was because it couldn't be worse if I couldn't go to the faculty. It was not because I would find the faculty so enjoyable, but because I couldn't imagine I would have to miss two weeks.

Keywords: Student, social anxiety, fear of infection, prohibitions, gatherings, socialising, public transport, nursing home, hospital

SI02

Title: 36-years old professional managed to advance significantly in his career due to the pandemic

Narrative: "I am 36 years old, I was born in ex-Yugoslavian country and I moved to Slovenia in 2019. The lock down was a surprise for me and first days were surreal, when nobody was allowed to go out, not even to open spaces. I was slightly depressed and

after some time a minor inconvenience became a rather unpleasant situation. Being locked down in a foreign country was difficult. It was also difficult knowing that my parents are in another country and it was not a close distance, given the limitations of public transports at the time. This was also a reason for anxiety, since I knew if they get infected they would probably have complications. And not being able to immediately help them was stressful. Maybe I am sugarcoating it now, since we are no longer in this situation, but at moments I was terrified.

I had to find ways to cope. At the beginning I started drinking alcohol. I drank a few beers a day, I think it was because it is an easy and quick way to feel better while being locked and not free. But soon I realised it is not a wise thing to do, because you cannot continue living like that, so I stopped drinking after a month or so and I started working out, I started exercising in such a manner I didn't need any equipment, since everything was sold out. I think I chose exercise due to my sedentary work and also because I was consuming too much food, which was also some sort of coping mechanism. And my clothes stopped fitting me. So exercise helped a little bit, it helped to offset a mild depression that was kicking in. But still I had a lot of time to think. I worked, I was working from home at the time, and then I worked out and that left me 4 or 5 hours a day to think. And depression set in. So after some time I realised I have to keep myself busy for the rest of the day and I started working on my career. I started improving my technical skills, I obtained certifications within the industry that are very valuable and that led me to this situation I am currently in. I switched to a slightly different branch in the industry, with better pay and in the place that I like to live. So I guess it turned out for the better in my case. Otherwise it is very unlikely I would have the time and energy to do everything that I did that resulted in where I am today, what I do. I also maintain the habit of working out. In my area where I live a lot of gyms open early in the morning so I go there to work out before going to work.

During epidemic I tried to spin it to be positive as much as possible, because there were really no alternatives. I spoke a lot to my friends and family and everybody had problems. Some people simpler, some people very difficult problems. We all tried to motivate each other and help each other to remain in a good spirit. But now I think it might have been better to ask for professional help, because asking for advice somebody that is in a crisis mode doesn't always result in the best advice. But still, we talked regularly on Zoom, just telling stories, cracking jokes, laugh about it. And given that a lot of my friends live in another countries it was a convenient time to catch up. Regardless of these contacts being online, they helped the mood. But still, people need human contact, to hug somebody that is dear to you. It feels so surreal now, as it happened a long time ago, but really it was just two years ago. I am slightly forgetting it all and I try to remember only good stuff. For example, after some time we would start meeting in person again, without the police knowing. Just to relieve the fact that we have been isolated. We would meet in parks or for lunch at the apartments. Nothing special, no wild parties, just a few close friends. In general the population has been fed up with all the restrictions. Now it feels surreal, although it was just recent. I guess we all made some sacrifices to protect vulnerable members of our society. This was a responsible thing to do, although it was

enforced to the general population. But luckily because of that some people survived. So in that regard I think doing a little bit of sacrifice to help others is very satisfying at the end.”

Specifically telling quotes: Initially for the first month it was alcohol. I mean, this sounds really bad, it was just couple of beers per day, but, that is the definition of alcoholic. More than one beer per day is clinically alcoholic. And I think that was prevalent in majority of the population around the world. Because it just... it is just a very quick and easy way how to soothe the pain from being locked, for having your freedom taken away. This may be a harsh word, but in a sense it was, freedom was taken away from us. Because initially we couldn't go outside for couple of days, then we could only go to store to buy groceries and parks and gyms and public spaces were out of the question. So yes, in a sense freedom was taken away.

Keywords: Exercise, alcohol, career, anxiety, depression, gatherings, prohibitions, migrant

SI03

Title: 43-year old working mother started growing plants to stay sane and changed her job for the better

Narrative: “I am 43 years old, I live in a city, I have one child, a partner and a dog. I have a regular employment. At the beginning of epidemic it was difficult. Especially because we didn't know what was going on. When things became clearer and you knew how to protect yourself and others, when you knew not every contact would kill you, it became easier. During the time of epidemic I began to grow plants to remain sane at the time of total lock down. Ant I think plants are really good, taking care of them relaxes me, especially if they grow nicely. I liked plants my whole life, but when we moved to the current apartment there wasn't really any space for them. But then I realised I can make it work even in this apartment so I started growing them. And also because plants were one of few things I was able to do indoors, when we were in lock down and we couldn't socialise. I soon joined different online groups to sell, buy and exchange plants and especially to get advice on how to grow and take care of a specific plant. Stores were also closed, so I couldn't buy plants and I also prefer home-grown plants, while they tend to be of higher quality. If you buy a plant in a store there is always a possibility of bringing home a sick plant, infested with pests which then attack your other plants. I wasn't aware of that before joining those groups, so I gained knew knowledge. So now I have a real jungle at home and I had to install new shelves. I have a lot of plants, maybe around 50, some duplicate, but those are those that I really like. And just recently I bought my first rare and also more expensive plant.

I also kept my social contacts during that time. We uploaded new applications, some of us learned how to use them, and we met online with family and some close friends. And

sometimes we would also meet outside in person, although it was not allowed. We really needed to spend some time together. One time I also accidentally crossed the border of my municipality when the borders were closed. I was in my car on highway and I accidentally ended up in another municipality. After that I stopped taking highway to avoid breaking the rules. Otherwise we respected the rules, although some of them really made no sense. For example to wear a mask in the woods.

During lock down a lot of us also reflected about our lives, about our jobs, the things that matter. I used to work 14, 15 hours a day and during that time I realised I have enough. I realised that job is not all there is in life. I used to be available 24/7, which resulted in a lot of nervousness, stress, impatience, which also influenced my private life. I was nervous, my mind was not present. At the time of lock down I was working from home and also taking care of my 3-year old. I had to feed, entertain my child who was not in kindergarten, while they were closed. Well, they were available only for certain parents who did certain jobs, but this was not the case for me. My job didn't save lives, so my kid was at home. And my partner was working, so I had to juggle my job and taking care of my child. And when my partner came home, I would then work until 9 or 10 PM to have the work done. And at that point I realised I have enough. It is not worth it, maybe I am also too old for that. A lot of companies don't understand that workers are an asset and they do not have a good work-life balance, but maybe this will change with younger generations, who understand the importance of free time. 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 6 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.

Another positive outcome of the epidemic was that my grandmother was able to get into a nursing home. This was due to nursing homes being available due to number of residents passing away during epidemic, which is a negative outcome. But for my family this resulted in something positive. Because my grandmother really left herself go, she layed on the couch for 90 % of the day, gaining weight, becoming less agile. She then got hit by a car, my grandfather died, my uncle died, a lot of things happened and she stayed at home all the time, alone. And this also impacted my mom, she worried a lot and she took care for her every day. And then we managed to persuade my grandmother to go into the nursing home. So after she filed her application she actually got a vacancy in just one week, which was much better than to wait half a year, one year and maybe change your mind about going. And after a week or two weeks in the nursing home she really changed, she says she regrets not getting there sooner. She actually prolonged her life, she has a new lust for life and my mother is also not so worried any more. So this is a positive outcome of the epidemic."

Specifically telling quotes: And we actually finally managed to convince her that she

would be better off at the nursing home, that she would have company, that she would always have some kind of support if something happens, if she falls. She simply was no longer capable of being alone at home, because she also forgot to turn off the stove and stuff like that. And when she got over this obsession, what will others think, that we left her and put her in a nursing home, she went and in fact within a week, 14 days there was really such a change in her spirit, in her approach to life, that she herself declared that she was doing so well that she was sorry she had not gone there sooner. And she is very active now, she changes her clothes for every meal, she puts on different earrings each time, she takes good care of herself, she gets her hair done once a week, as is appropriate for a lady of her age. She goes to various workshops that they have in the home. She has company there every morning, they meet for coffee, and they also meet for coffee in the afternoon.

Keywords: Career, plant growing, hobby, work-life balance, nursing home, elderly, gatherings, prohibitions, job

SI04

Title: At the beginning the pandemic felt like eternal spring for a 20 years old student

Narrative: "I am 20 years old and I am a student. At the beginning of the pandemic, when I was still in high school, we were very relaxed, we all thought this is going to last one month or so and we will be back to school again. Learning process was also very relaxed. I find this period really nice, I had a great time at home. We get along fine, we have a lot of space and suddenly I also had a lot of free time. This was due to the fact that we didn't have much to do for school, for each subject we got a Word document with assignments. I actually did even more than it was asked from me, I really tried to gain as much information as possible to complete the assignments. After I finished work for school I was able to dedicate my time to my hobbies. And I also had more time because I didn't spend time commuting to and back from school every day, which usually took me at least an hour and a half or two hours. So I started reading a lot, which I wasn't doing before the epidemic while unfortunately I didn't have the energy. I also started programming again, which I loved doing since seventh grade. For example, we had a problem in our class, while all professors sent all material for our studying to a class email address. And a lot of people were signed into this address and when an email has been opened, it was easy to overlook it. So I made an application which sent those emails directly to a messenger group we created, so we all instantly get a notification about new emails. And I found real joy in such small projects. We also hung out online a lot during this first lock down. 10 or 15 people at the same time on voice call, chatting, listening to music. Or we all played video games together. It was really fun. This period, the first lock down, is something that will never happen again and for me it felt like an eternal spring. I didn't mind being in lock down, while I sometimes like to spend time on my own, away from people.

But then the second lock down came. We were in school for a month or so and then we went into lock down again. This second lock down was very different from the first one. It was horrible. We had the same amount of classes as in school, only they were held online from 8 AM to 3 PM. We were in front of our computer almost all day, and after you finished all your work for school it was already dark outside. I usually get winter depression due to lack of sun, light, and it was even worse due to being in front of the computer all day. And we just didn't have the energy to follow online classes, so we played video games. I think a certain balance could be established to find a middle way between classes in the first lock down and classes in the second lock down, but I think professors, although they did their best, were very reluctant to experiment too much, while we had our final exams, matura, at the end of the year. During this second lock down my friends also started to hang out in person again, going for a walk or maybe hanging out in parks. And consequently we didn't hang out online so much any more, which kind of sucked for me, while I live further away from them, so I felt really bad, I felt unintentionally excluded. I don't know how I managed this situation. I guess I just waited for it to be over. But I must say I still felt somehow lucky, since I live in a house, we have enough space and we get along well, we were all healthy.

Now I am studying at the faculty. At the beginning we had this recovered-tested-vaccinated (RTV) rule and we had to wear masks, but now there are no specific rules. One positive thing that came out of the pandemic is that all online lectures from 2020/2021 were recorded and are still available online. So if you miss one lecture you just simply watch it online. If I miss a morning lecture, I watch it on 1,5 speed and then drive to the faculty and still be able to attend the next lecture on the schedule. So I find this online lectures really helpful, although I still prefer going to the faculty in persons, and I think almost all my fellow students think the same. It is different. It is nice being a student and hanging out with other students. And as I see it life in person will not end some time soon."

Specifically telling quotes: It is definitely an experience which will never happen again. It has turned life completely upside down. I don't want to ignore all life-changing consequences the epidemic left behind. But if I think about it more on a social level, it forced us to reevaluate our values. It made us question things like do you really have to be at work for 8 hours a day? Do you really have to be somewhere? In our life everything is going according to some schedule and everything just counts down until the next thing. /.../ And working from home could have never happened without this situation. On the one hand you have this, and on the other hand you have consequences on a more personal level, which were very negative for a lot of people. But... I'll be kind of optimistic that these are things that will improve over time. And I hope working from home will remain.

Keywords: High school, pupil, student, hobby, faculty, friends, lock down

SI05

Title: Pandemic forced a busy student to slow down and change perspective on life

Narrative: "I am 24 years old and I am a postgraduate student, I am taking this year off due to the force of the situation. I also translate, I like literature, theatre. I also work in a theatre and in a book store. A lot is going on. I always worked beside being a student and I was very busy all my days. So when the epidemic started and with the first lock down everything just stopped over the night. But I must say I consider myself privileged, while I have a supportive family and also I lived at home at the time so this didn't influence me financially. At it forced me to stop, calm down. I usually filled all of my days with numerous activities and sometimes I just didn't have time for my family or for my friends. I sometimes went to the faculty in the morning, worked during the day and then attended evening lectures at the faculty. I also worked weekends and if you think about it it is a lot. Quite a lot. I think as a generation it is expected from us to study and to also work. But if you want to gain new knowledge, you must also have time to relax. So if you think about it, it is very hard to work and at the same time find time to study. A lot of the times it was just work, work, work, be productive. Even our hobbies should be productive. But at the time of the lock down I gained more time for myself. I always wanted to sew, for example, already in high school, but I would always find some reasons not to try, there was never enough time. During the lock down I found an old sewing machine that belonged to my grandmother, I took it to the repair shop and I started to sew. When the measures softened I enrolled into a sewing class. So the time of the lock down showed me how to enjoy life more, to have less on my plate and also make time to relax and find peace. This is something that I learned during the lock down and I really appreciate this lesson. But this does not mean that the situation was always just positive.

At the beginning of the pandemic a lot of fear was present for sure. We had a baby in our house, my parents are also both over 50 years old, not to mention my granny, who lives on her own, but I worried about her a lot. So on one hand I gained a lot of free time and opportunity for positive experience, but on the other hand there was also a lot of time to have dark thoughts. Because this epidemic was something nobody experienced yet. The beginning of the epidemic was the most intense. Maybe because you are in shock you also become the most creative. And we soon found ways to spend time together, I also started enjoying things I found useless before, such as drawing, or things I never found time to do. But at the same time I was really afraid of death, especially the death of my loved ones. My great aunt died of Covid. And you think about death, because it was really a life-death situation. After a while you know more and more people who recovered from the infection and you are not afraid so much any more. But then another question came - how long will this situation last? At one point I realised that maybe things will never be the same again. And after that realisation I maybe become more passive and there was a threat I would become stuck. I somehow just got used to the situation, to all governmental measures and it all became normal. Probably this human capability do adapt to change is also some sort of defence mechanism.

During the first lock down I was studying at the faculty and everything just closed. We

thought this will last for 14 days, so we were very excited to have this unexpected holidays. I made plans with my girlfriends how we would visit each other. But then this fear came and I didn't see anybody for a long time, because every contact was a potential threat. And pretty soon we learned that this will not last only for 14 days. The faculty was closed and I think professors also faced a very strange situation, while a lot of them, especially those in their 50s or older are just not very technically skilled. So there were some funny situations when for example us students helped a professor to set up a camera, so we could have a zoom lecture. Exams and consultations were also held online. Soon after everything closed we began to socialise online. We had a Facebook group where we posted suggestions for movies. And with my girlfriends we used an app Houseparty, I don't even know if anybody still uses it. We watched movies together, also played games. But student life, parties, that was really non existent. When the faculties reopened I realised how much I needed, how much we all need some sort of human contact. When you go to the faculty you don't see it as socialising, but when you are in lock down you realise how all these, albeit fleeting contacts really matter. How much it matters to be able to go to the lectures, to see your fellow students and have a lousy student lunch together.

After graduating from faculty I enrolled into postgraduate studies. But I am not sure if it was due to all this epidemic experience, having time to reflect and also having too much on my plate again, but at the end I totally burned out and didn't finish the year. And this was a total shock for me, while I was always a very successful student. So I changed the faculty and I enrolled into a postgraduate studies in a different field, but at the end the program is not being carried out this year, so I am taking this year off. And again I am in a situation where my life stopped, although for a different reason than during the epidemic. Now I see that all I learned during the pandemic about being more calm and not so busy all the time can help me get through this period, because of course my brain seeks instant solutions. On the other hand I am also afraid what will happen with my future, since I always had a very clear image of myself being successful in something in the future. But now I really have an opportunity to implement my newly gained perspective and be able to stop, calm down and act in a calm manner. And this would be a positive outcome of the epidemic. For everyone of us this was a very difficult time, some were more lucky, some were less lucky. It might seem as a cliché, but I think we can gain something positive from every situation to be able to survive as individuals as well as society and move forward."

Specifically telling quotes: I want to emphasise again that I come from a situation where my life is not so terrible. I have support, I have a great partner. I would say it differently if I were someone who had to support herself, all alone and had no one. In such a case, if someone had told me that you can learn something even from this bad situation, I would have gone crazy. I also think that these positive experiences we are talking about, I will use this knowledge from this negative experience and change it for the better. I could also completely give up and do nothing, but at the same time I am also aware that it is necessary to maintain this empathy, that not everyone is in such a position that they could say "Well, hey, I will take this negative situation and learn

something from it.”

Keywords: Student, faculty, free time, friends, fear, death, infection, lock down

SI06

Title: Single mother pushed through hard times and made positive changes in her life due to the pandemic

Narrative: “I am 41 years old, single and I have one child, who was in the 2nd grade of elementary school when the epidemic started. I used to rent out apartments to tourists and corona turned everything upside down. Before I rented out two apartments as tourist accommodation and another one long term. Tourists changed every two to three days and it was a lot of work. Especially for example in summer and if you have a child. I was very busy. And a lot of people also bought apartments between 2017 and 2019 and they started renting them out to tourists for very low daily fee and they dumped our prices. They didn’t know what they were doing, they didn’t know they don’t actually make profit, they just liked the idea of them having a place to put on Airbnb. Sure, they realised that later on and they eventually sold their apartments, but they dumped our prices. And corona somehow put an end to that, it stopped that. When corona came and everything closed I was able to rent out the other two apartments long term as well. So this summer the smallest one became vacant and I tried to rent it to tourists again, just for the season, but still I prefer to rent it for longer periods, not just for a few days. So now I have more free time, I optimised my work, I tend to rent out the accommodation for longer stays and I make the same amount of money. Even in corona you can make positive change, you just have to keep an open mind and seek ways to improve your situation. And I did exactly that.

When schools closed in Fall 2020 it was very hard for the first three months. I was entirely alone with my son, 24 hours a day being alone with him. Well, my parents helped, but still I sometimes literally begged his father to take him for some time. But otherwise I was alone with him all the time and sometimes I was going crazy. And he was very young, so I had to help him with everything school related. He also has an official decision of placement, he had additional support and aide in school, but not for learning, but due to his character. He daydreams and he rebels, he doesn’t listen to me. I sometimes ask him for hours to make homework. So I had to deal with his behaviour at home, homeschooling him, teaching him. Although nobody said he has to know this and that, but I knew he will have to have this knowledge at the end. But after three months we somehow managed. I don’t know why, we just did.

And then in November 2021 it was made mandatory for children to self-test and to wear masks all the time in school. I refused that for my son and he was not allowed to attend school. This time it was even worse, while he was the only one in his class that didn’t go to school and it was not clear when this will end. And a lot of the times his teacher just played some educational movies to the kids in school. And since I had my son at home

I felt very responsible for his education. I asked his teacher to give me access code for these online movies and she refused to do so. I sought cooperation, I knew she cannot let my son into school, but I wanted us to work together. I really needed those movies, so I had to manage on my own. I called the publishing house which sells those books with the code included and asked for their help. I told them I don't know what to do, my son is at home and I need their help. I even said I can buy the book just to be able to get the access code. But at the end they sent me the code for free out of their kindness. To me, a total stranger. My son's teacher wouldn't do that and you really ask yourself how much a teacher - I don't want to talk in plural - really cares about a child's education.

And after four months we still didn't know when this testing and masks will end, but I knew my son will have to get his grades. It was not clear how he would be able to do that. Many teachers for example were willing to grade pupils outdoors, in the school yard. I asked the teacher if we can do something outside, at the playground. But this year they were indoors all the time. I was afraid he will have to have all exams at the end of the year, while this would be very bad for him, since in his official decision it is also stated that the learning content should be divided into smaller bits, not all at once. How will he manage final exams where you have to know everything from the whole year? And the thing was that if I chose to home school him from the beginning of the year he would have to take only three exams at the end of the year - Slovenian language, math and English. But now in this case when he was not attending school due to mandatory testing and masks he would have to take exams in all subjects. I even contacted the school ministry about that numerous times, also about masks. I was willing for him to wear a cloth mask, but at the ministry they just said that it is what it is. It was a really hard time, I felt totally alone. Fortunately those measures were lifted in April 2022 and he was able to go back to school. But if things would not get better, I was willing to go to the end, to seek justice in court. No doubt about that.

I was afraid the world will stay like that from now on. I literally became a criminal because of the recovered-vaccinated-tested (RVT) rule. I was not able to go anywhere so I started using my friend's RVT proof. But then they also started checking our IDs. So one day I urgently needed something for my apartment and I went to the store and said I lost my ID. They let me in. On another occasion I was not able to go in. I felt very limited. People also asked me if I got vaccinated, which I didn't and vaccination was understood as being socially responsible. Not my choice any more. I said to my mum I don't know what to do, I cannot go anywhere, my son is at home, I was afraid of new, more restrictions. So during this time I felt some sort of anxiety living in apartment in a city. I was locked down for three months and it felt like eternity. I was not able to go anywhere, while I didn't have the RVT proof. And for the first time in my life I started thinking about what this small apartment where I live means to me. I have a tiny balcony and a very windy and useless terrace. Isn't it better to be on a farm house? I don't need to live here, in the city. So I started wishing to have a house or a flat with a small plot of land, to be able to step outside and drink coffee in the sun. And now this wish became very clear and I am certain I will have a house or a flat with some outdoor space. Soon, not in 10 years, but now, when my son is young. I want to buy a dog for him. So when I started thinking about that I noticed how I limit myself in my head. In my mind I had the idea that I have to buy this

place, which was not something I would be able to do financially. And this idea limited me, blocked me. But then I realised no, I don't have to buy the place, I can rent it for 10 years. I will not need a house when my son moves out. I need it now. And instantly a wish became a possibility."

Specifically telling quotes: My parents understood that I didn't get vaccinated because I didn't have to, but they were very skeptical about my decision because I didn't want to let my son to be tested at school. They were worried it would last for too long, and that I would harm him because he won't be socialised. And I saw how society can squeeze you if you are the only one who chooses differently. And we heard this a lot on television, society justified that it is a social responsibility to be vaccinated. This is no longer my decision, but a social responsibility. But I was just thinking about going away, going to a farm. I said I don't need to live here, in the city. Is it not better to be on a farm and have school outside in the sun? And we have school indoors. I started to think about what actually a life is and what is not.

Keywords: Mother, single, tourism, home schooling, elementary school, restrictions, house, flat, living conditions, city, son

SI07

Title: A 49-year old self-employed enjoyed being at home with his family, managed to sort out his business, but would never want to relive the epidemic experience again

Narrative: "I am 49 years old, I work in video production as self-employed. The beginning of the epidemic was very strange. We had to wear almost full protective gear just to be able to go to the store. We were shown pictures of coffins and body bags, people were dying all the time and it was a really strange time. We were constantly bombarded with fear and horror. So it was actually quite good to be locked down, to be at home and not needing to go anywhere. It gave me a sense of security. I had a great time with my family at home, I can say love flourished again, we reconnected and I was very pleased to see what a great family I have. When schools were closed and my wife was very burdened with the whole homeschooling thing, I also helped a lot to take care of the house hold, I learned to cook new things. I didn't want to be totally useless. So I really tried to keep my wife happy and help as much as I could. One negative thing is that I gained weight. It was nice to have a bite in the evening and enjoy a glass of wine, but the belly just kept growing. And I should not gain any weight, so now I must take it off. In this sense I was not taking good care of myself, but otherwise I used this time to really work on myself. I used to do that already before the epidemic, but during the lock down I really had a lot of time, nowhere to go, no obligations. I meditated even more

and learned new techniques, I practiced breathing techniques. I really focused on my health. We also went for walks every day, maybe to the woods when it was allowed. So yes, I really used this time to dedicate to my family and my health. And it was a nice time.

I also slowed down my business even more than I already did. When I got ill a few years ago I was not able to work as much as before, so I needed almost three years and a load of money to slow things down. I am self-employed and I pay contributions based on my income. And the problem is that I pay these contributions based on income I had in a previous year. So when I got ill, I wasn't able to work so much anymore, but I still had to pay contributions for the previous year, which were high due to high income in the previous year. So I needed quite some time to sort this out and I used this epidemic to slow things down even more. Well, there was also not a lot of work to be done in the field of production, while all events were cancelled due to the epidemic. But this was not such a problem for me, while I already lost a lot of the market due to my illness. I also got 1000 Euros or so a month from the state, which was really good, I cannot complain. This money really helped me, but I must say if I were still doing the amount of work I was doing before my illness, I would consider this amount of money as merely sufficient for a week. But I just cannot work so much as before my illness. I also realised that maybe some things are more important than business. Family. Friends. Because we consider everything to be business and we literally prostitute ourselves in every possible way. And the epidemic was a sort of wake up call. I was able to look into myself, also because of my illness. I was lucky. When society slowly reopen I started working again, but since I didn't vaccinate due to not knowing how will the vaccine influence my illness, I had to test all the time. Us self-employed didn't get any information from the authorities about self-testing, so I stood at the test point every morning, then went to work, then stood in the line at the test point again. I think this was not the right approach, this is not how the things should be done. So I am happy those days are over, I wouldn't want to return to that time. At home, during the lock down, it was great, otherwise everything went to hell.

Everything just stopped. For example, I would have a fever and would call the doctor's and I would be told that I cannot come to the doctor's while I have a fever! Well, that is the reason I want to see a doctor, right? If I were in perfect health I would not need a doctor. So I was nervous in a sense, because I saw how everything came to a stop. It was not that I was not able to get to the doctor's, but everything was quite strange. You had to make an appointment and before entering the facilities you got your body temperature measured and what if I have a fever? Will I still be able to see the oncologist? And if not, when will I have my replacement appointment? I would have to wait again. And when I was at the oncology, they came and said that all operations are cancelled. I wasn't there for an operation, but what about those who were waiting for the operation and all were cancelled? I am aware that covid can also be a deadly disease, but still the medical system should be able to work as normal as possible. What if something even worse than covid happens? Would we all just die?

When I look back at those times, I have sort of mixed feelings. As I said, I enjoyed being at home and I used this time to slow down my business and work on my health. But now

I think about it and I say sure, I had a great time at home and yes, they gave me money, but I was locked down! And it was a scary time. There was a lot of fear. And when people are panicking and in fear, we are willing to do everything we are asked to do. Fear is a very bad thing. I had a lot of fear - fear for my health, fear for my family, fear for loved ones, fear for my future, for my business, fear for finances. We were all afraid and scared and fear is not freedom. Fear is the opposite of freedom. And that is why I would never want to go back to those times again."

Specifically telling quotes: As I walk around town and I see people, I don't know if we've learned anything, I'm a little afraid we didn't. It connected us for a while, but then we got a little lost. It made me realise that business, business, business... God help me. What do you get out of it? Because you don't carry anything with you when you die. Nothing. People just don't know how to live. We really don't know how to live. And we are utterly miserable. Because we don't know how to live, we are utterly miserable. And... I don't know if anyone managed to do this and took a look at themselves and was at home for a while, alone with their family and with their children. I don't know how many people realised that.

Keywords: Illness, self-employed, lock down, self care, health, business, health care, fear

SI08

Title: The epidemic came just in the right time for a 23-year old waitress

Narrative: "I am 23 years old and currently I am taking some time off my studying. I work as a waitress and I live in Germany now. The epidemic started very negatively for me, since I had my birthday a few days after total lock down in Slovenia. I had everything planned, I was looking forward to the celebration, I like to make a good party for my friends and then everything closed and I spent my birthday at home. Everything just closed after night and it was hard for me at the beginning, because I am a person who never stops, I socialise all the time. So the first month was quite hard, I had to get used to being at home. I lived with my parents and my sister at the time, I shared a room with her and some moments were very turbulent. But at the end our family relations deepened, we even managed to solve some issues, we spent more time together. And nevertheless some form of normalcy still existed, while my parents still went to work every day. Sometimes I felt like being a kid again when me and my sister were home alone during summer holidays. So we were lucky to have this sense of normalcy, because my parents still went to work.

Before the epidemic I had a very rough period and I just started therapy and then I didn't go anymore. I didn't want to move the therapy online, because somebody was at home with me all the time and I wouldn't feel comfortable to have a session and know somebody is in the next room. Because my therapy stopped I needed to find ways to

help myself. I started reading a lot of research and books about relevant topics and I learned new things about myself and then I applied them in real life situations. I really used this time to do things I love and never found time for them in my daily life. I returned to my first love, reading books. I used to read all the time when I was younger, but after I went to high school my social life was so busy I just didn't find time to read anymore. So I read a lot in lock down. I was literally forced to stop and slow things down, to become more calm. Although some moments were hard, I can say this lock down was a positive experience for me, while I was able to focus solely on myself. I asked myself a lot of questions, like who am I, what do I want, what makes me happy or unhappy. I also went to the nearby hill twice a day at the beginning when there were not a lot of people. This was my escape, my sanctuary. Sometimes I would bring a book, sometimes I would exercise. So I really used this first lock down to my benefit, and I think this would not be possible if the measures were not so strict. But because we were all in the same boat I was able to calmly stay at home without having a feeling that I am missing something. So I must say now I am better than before the epidemic. This was actually exactly what I needed and it happened just in the right moment for me. Although I must say that I had all the conditions for this to be a positive experience. I was living at home and didn't have to worry about any expenses, I had friends to support me. A lot of people were not so lucky.

Sure, there were some moments when I was fed up with all the measures and the whole situation, when I just wanted to go to a good party, but me and my friends socialised daily via video calls. We made video calls every morning, drinking coffee together, joking around, keeping ourselves in good spirit. It was nice. When it was allowed to socialise in person we also used this opportunity, otherwise we respected the measures, especially during this first lock down. I only met my best friend to walk his dog in the evening. It was allowed to walk dogs and we used this opportunity to see each other. But we were really careful to be just the two of us, that it didn't become a gathering of a lot of people, while we all really wanted to avoid the situation of getting infected and bringing the infection home to our parents. And during the first lock down the police curfew was a problem for me and my boyfriend, while we were not living together. But then in the second lock down I stayed at his place, although it was not officially allowed to not be at the residence address. It was very nice, it was winter and it was nice to stay inside, to have all the time in the world and we really enjoyed our time together. Sometimes we went to walk his dog at his parents' house and sometimes we had to return home after the police curfew. Those moments were filled with adrenalin. But otherwise it was a very nice time.

I think my work was somehow the most negatively effected by the epidemic, while I work as a waitress. We didn't know when we will be able to work, for how long we will be open, things changed constantly. When we were open we had to work under certain conditions, we had to respect preventive measures. And this was hard sometimes, while not all people understood that I am not the one who created those measures, but I must respect them. It doesn't matter if I agree with them or not, me and my employer are obligated to respect them. Sure, I understand people, they just wanted to have a drink

with their friends after being in lock down, but sometimes I felt they just lost their minds in that time. Sometimes there was just no understanding for us, workers. Because at the end of the day my employer and also me would have to pay the fine if inspection came. The fines were very high and I would not be able to afford it. But otherwise I was not bothered by those people. I am used to working with all kinds of people and it was in through one ear and out the other. There was also a lot of uncertainty, sometimes it felt that the decision makers just played games with us. Our working hours were shortened and we were not able to organise concerts, which meant a great drop in profits. Luckily the whole situation didn't influence me financially, while I was living with my parents at the time and didn't have rent to pay or any other serious expenses.

Now I live in Germany with my boyfriend. This was in a way a consequence of the epidemic, while the firm where my boyfriend worked went bankrupt due to higher prices of materials and less work. My boyfriend has some relatives in Germany, and one of them was able to employ him. I always wanted to live abroad, to have this experience and although I had a great job in Slovenia I decided to go with him. So he left a few months before me to arrange things like accommodation and actually I would also not be able to go at the time, while the borders were closed, but he had his contract, so he was able to cross the border. After some time I followed him.

One of positive changes the epidemic produced is that young people are now more politically engaged, we follow politics more than before. I think this is directly connected with the epidemic. Before we were not interested in internal politics, it seemed we cared and knew more about foreign affairs than our politics. But during the epidemic it became visible how certain people make decisions on your behalf and you cannot do anything about it. The only time you have power to actually influence things is elections and referendums. And we all were somehow forced to be up to date with the politics, while the measures and prohibitions due to the epidemic changed very often. This habit stucked with us, so now I think a lot of young people are more engaged, more interested in the politics. And this is definitely a positive change, because young are the future."

Specifically telling quotes: I had a much more positive experience than many people around me. Many people felt cramped, as if they were trapped between four walls and could do nothing. But I think that I found myself a little at this time, that I needed something to force me to stop, because I didn't know how to do that. So, from that point of view, it was perfect for me. It happened at just the right point in my life and I was ready to stop and calm down and look into myself a little.

Keywords: Youth, waitress, mental health, well-being, hobbies, friends, political engagement, working conditions, lock down

SI09

Title: 76-year old fought melancholy with structuring her days in lock down

Narrative: “I am 76 years old, my husband died and I live alone. I retired four years ago. This retirement created a great void and sense of uselessness in my life. When I was in this state the epidemic came. I was already anxious and melancholic and the epidemic just increased those feelings. I know I was one step away from depression, but I was aware I must not let this to happen. I knew I must do certain things to stop this from happening. When I retired I spent my time meeting friends, taking trips and short travels with them, I had annual tickets to the theatre, but with epidemic all those things stopped. But I had an awareness that everybody were in the same boat and this helped a little. I tried to fill my days with different activities. For example, I read a lot. I always liked to read and during lock downs I was also able to go to the library and pick up the books that I had to preorder. I also listened to the music, but sometimes some songs made me even more blue, so then I stopped that for some time. I tried to improve my cooking skills, because I was never good at cooking. I tried a few times but soon a question for whom am I cooking arose. I saw no point in cooking just for myself, so I dropped this idea. I also decided to improve my English, French and German. I learned French and German in high school, but I forgot a lot. I never learned English, I just took one class before the epidemic, so my English was very bad. So I decided to improve my language skills and I created a daily schedule, which I followed every day. I just needed to discipline myself, otherwise melancholy would set in. I would make coffee in the morning and then what? I was not able to meet my friends, I wasn't taking any day trips and melancholy would come, which is not far from depression. So I created this schedule and I took online classes every day from 8 AM to 10 AM and then from 2 PM to 4 PM. I did for example German on Monday, French on Tuesday and English on Wednesday and I did this for a couple of months. It was quite nice. I don't do that any more and I was just thinking the other day that I should resume doing it.

One of the activities that helped me a great deal during lock downs was tarot. I really admire tarot, it is considered to be a royal game. I played before the epidemic, I joined a tarot club when I retired and we met regularly for playing, I also go to competitions and I think I am quite a good player. So I continued playing it online during the epidemic, while the club games were omitted and I went to the first actual game just this Summer. Anyhow, sometimes I played for hours online. I am thankful the technology advanced so much I was able to play online and I even made some new acquaintances. We don't meet in person, but we know each other online and we play together.

I am also sort of happy to see, that all my acquaintances and friendships survived the epidemic. We all have just a few friends in our lives and all those friendships stayed. On the other hand I even deepened my relationships with acquaintances. Those sort 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.

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

Maybe I was in a specific situation, while I live by myself. If you have a family you take care of them, you do things around the household, but when you are alone all those activities don't exist. Nevertheless I am aware my circumstances were maybe better than other peoples', if I compare my situation with situation of other elderly. Many of them were for example in nursing homes, totally isolated, even family visits were prohibited. And when a person is old and maybe not so vital anymore, this has a great impact on them. Two years were just taken away from us. It is different for elderly than it is for young people, while we will not be able to make up for this lost time."

Specifically telling quotes: People were very isolated in nursing homes. And they weren't even allowed to have visitors, and this had a very bad effect on the elderly people, who are no longer so vital. Then, what else could I say, I was missing some trips. I used to go all the time, as soon as I retired, well, my friend pushed me to do that, for which I am grateful to her. We went on a lot of those two-day or one-day trips. And somehow I got through those critical months. Well, maybe I'm talking too much about sadness now, some things were also positive, but that's the way it is. Old age is not beautiful. It can be rich, you can fill your days with various things, but old age in itself is not beautiful. I mean, if you have a partner, everything is different if someone is breathing near you. Even if you fight, someone is breathing. But if you are alone, you have to have a lot of strength or will to somehow manage. You see old age is the state you get into. Some, however, cannot even reach this state. My husband died when he was not even 60 years old. In the middle of the period when he could start living without any worries. Well, he didn't get old. And that's why I can't be let say handicapped, to use this expression, because I couldn't go on a trip, because I couldn't contact my friends.

Keywords: Elderly, depression, melancholy, hobbies, retirement, loneliness, lock down, friendship

SI10

Title: Mother of four is getting divorced due to events that happened during pandemic

Narrative: "I am 47 years old and I have four children. So when all schools closed we had to establish something similar to a small firm at home. We had to get so many computers for home schooling even some small firms don't have. But we managed. We

borrowed some from the school; we also bought some after awhile, when it was clear that schools won't be closed just for two weeks. Home schooling was challenging in a way, I had to organise breakfast, lunch for all kids and I also worked, while I went back to work just a few years before the epidemic after being a housewife since the birth of my first child. But otherwise it was not so bad, I can say the kids worked and learned as they did when they were in school. We are also very much used to being together, me and the kids are together all the time, we are as one. And during this time it also became evident, how much I do for this family, for my children. I had to do everything myself, even though my husband was at home.

I never got much help from him. I did everything with my kids, they were always with me, I took them everywhere with me. When they were ill I was ill with them. He never took a sick day at work when kids were ill. When I was pregnant with our second child he was physically violent for the first time, after our third child things got worse. There was also psychological violence, I was never good enough, I was too skinny or too fat, ugly, incompetent... So nothing was ever right. But I never told anybody about this. My family didn't know and he also didn't like my family, he put them down and I suppose he didn't want them to visit me. I was raised with awareness that marriage is a compromise and that a wife should take care of her husband, so a lot of the times I just ignored those things. And then the epidemic came. Even before that we were living a very estranged life, although we still went on holidays together and everything. Then he got Covid and he isolated himself in a separate part in our house and after some time he was not welcome back anymore. After a few months he started bragging about infidelity, which was followed by violent confrontation, I got injuries, the police came. So this was in a way a turning point. A beginning of the end of a very long story. I suffered a lot, his infidelity really got to me. After some time I think I had a nervous breakdown, I was sent to see a psychiatrist and stayed on sick leave for a couple of months.

After the incident with the police I had to come regularly to the social work centre. I had to go there numerous times, but he, on the other hand, was called one or two times. They just made phone calls to him, he was not obligated to come to see them. I am not sure, why I had to go there regularly, I think it was because they wanted to make sure I was safe, I was offered help, but it was always some NGO. I was asked if I want to go to the safe house, but only two of my children would be able to come with me because of the age limit. And what? I would have to leave my other two kids behind? This was not acceptable for me. It was also made clear that if I don't make sure my kids are safe they will take care of them. How? With taking them away from me? So in a way it felt like I, the victim, am being interrogated. I think they concentrate too much on the victim.

So I recently filed for divorce. A huge burden has been lifted from my shoulders. But those things are not easy. Sure, people say "leave". But it is not so easy. Where should I go? I cannot go anywhere and he also doesn't want to leave. Wherever I go my children will go with me. But I am not able to take care for them financially. I am also not able to stay in the house alone, it would be too much for me. But I realised I am not willing to live with him anymore, I remember all the times I cried. Nevertheless it was hard. After I

filed for a divorce, I cried. I didn't get married to get divorced. When I told people about the whole thing some ask me if the divorce was really the only way. People, who knew what was happening, who saw my black eyes! But others are glad for me, they say I should have said something before. Now I am thankful for the change the epidemic brought. This separation, when he was ill, illuminated a lot of problems. I saw some things I didn't want to see before. I think it would not be possible to happen without the epidemic. And fortunately things ended positively for me. I smile more, I am a lot more optimistic. I am not afraid of anything. I will manage somehow."

Specifically telling quotes: I'll say it this way. Beating doesn't hurt as much as disappointment hurts, as realising things hurts. That is it.

Keywords: Marriage, physical violence, psychological violence, children, homeschooling, divorce, nervous breakdown



Slovakia

SK01

Title: I knew it is important not to panic

Narrative: I am Eva and I am 93. My advantage is that I have been living so long. During my life, the tuberculosis was present. I personally had scarlatina as a child, in times when penicillin was not widely available. I also read a lot and I read about various pandemics in the past, the plaque, the cholera. It is interesting that during the cholera pandemic people also revolted against anti-pandemic measures, it even led to the peasant uprising. You can see many parallels with today and the protests against the measures. So I was not that surprised by the development. I knew that it was important not to panic and comply with the recommendations. And I tried to spread it to our group of seniors, to educate them that the elevator is a risky space, it is a close space, many people use it, that they should wear a mask and gloves. I have a group of female seniors, I prepare health exercises for them. It is a very diverse group. Women came from a street, seeing a poster. They are from various backgrounds, education, nationalities. But diversity is very good, it leads to tolerance. We became very good friends. So as we were not able to meet and exercise we phoned each other, we stayed in contact and we discussed what to do, how to behave. I have a friend who is an epidemiologist, Professor Pavol Bakoss, the third son of an evangelic priest murdered during the fascist Slovak State for helping Jews. So the professor advised me about a safety and how to meet. In summer, we exercised outside, later in the cultural house in a big room so we could keep the distance. That is how I tried to keep the group together. When the vaccination started I appealed to them to get vaccinated. I also lead a group of Holocaust survivors at the Jewish community. We went online. And there was a problem with vaccination that you could sign up only on the Internet and many seniors do not have it or did not know how to sign-up. In the Jewish community the leader is a doctor so he organized vaccination in the community building. In my exercise group it was more difficult. I tried to help my women, it took me 5 days to sign-up for the vaccination those who wanted. I even signed up a woman that I have not seen in my life. She is taking care of a disabled son and was very afraid that she could infect him. She called me very happy. I did not understand. She explained to me that her father was a doctor who vaccinated children against the polio, the chincough, etc. She remembered children coming to her father dressed like to a church as it was a special occasion and the image stuck in her memory. In my exercise group we had few women who did not want to get vaccinated. I did not understand that, I tried to understand, I was angry, but then I said to myself OK, it is their decision and we exercised online. I also got help. The Post Bellum association called upon young people who could not work during the lock down to help seniors with shopping, transport to the doctor and so on. Mine has been a pilot whose flights were cancelled. It was a very empathic young man. I thought about why he is so kind and I understood when he introduced me his mother. She is a very nice person, she must have been a great teacher and she raised him very well.

Specifically telling quotes: “So as we were not able to meet and exercise we phoned each other, we stayed in contact and we discussed what to do, how to behave. I have a friend who is an epidemiologist, Professor Pavol Bakoss, the third son of an evangelic priest murdered during the fascist Slovak State for helping Jews. So the professor advised me about a safety and how to meet. In summer, we exercised outside, later in the cultural house in a big room so we could keep the distance. That is how I tried to keep the group together.” “I tried to help my women, it took me 5 days to sign-up for the vaccination those who wanted. I even signed up a woman that I have not seen in my life. She is taking care of a disabled son and was very afraid that she could infect him.”

Keywords: access to vaccination, informal organizing, self-help, social isolation, awareness raising, experience with mortal disease

SK02

Title: We turned it into something creative

Narrative: My name is Gregor and I am 44. I am an LGBT activist. I spent most of the pandemic in my flat with my dog. It is great to have a dog in times like these. It makes you to go out. During the worst lock down it was one of a few reasons that people were allowed to go out, so I am grateful to have him. When it all turned to online, I spent most of my days in a bed. I even worked from a bed. Then I realized how stupid it was. Even in normal times I struggle to balance work and life but that had blurred it all. After the first month I had troubles with sleeping and I realized I need to change it. So I have created an office corner in my flat and tried to control it more. For our activism, it worked both ways, in a good and a bad way. On one hand, we switched many of our activities online, we produced various webinars and videos that are still on the Internet, available to everybody. O 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. Sometimes we had calls from outside, like parks or parking lots, so it was difficult for them. The depression and anxiety rose. We also introduce a counselling chat for them but that is definitely just a base, not a real counselling. I know people who needed to postpone their coming outs due to the pandemic. Trans people, they feared whether they will get their treatment, prescriptions for hormones and so on. So it was not an easy time for the community. Lots of people felt lonely, me included. You would say that the community is used to an online dating and that’s true. But you

don't want to just chat for months without seeing a person, many relationships were cut off as crossing the border was difficult. I also have a queer theatre with few friends. A theatre is a living culture, you cannot do it without the audience. We had a cross-border project and we couldn't travel. We manage to have one live performance in one country, but in the others there was just a video of that play. And it's definitely not the same, the live play and a video. Fortunately, in that period we at least could meet to rehearse and to film it. But we also turned the pandemic into something creative. We created a play called Pandemic+ on AIDS based on experiences of HIV positive people. Covid-19 was one of the impulses. We discussed the pandemic and found many similarities with HIV pandemic, how there was a lack of information, the fear, people were afraid to socialize. Even the hoaxes and conspiracies accompanied both of the pandemics. The content was different, but the impact worked in a similar way. So we produced this play and we will premiere it this month.

Specifically telling quotes: "We switched many of our activities online, 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." "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. Sometimes we had calls from outside, like parks or parking lots, so it was difficult for them. The depression and anxiety rose. We also introduced a counselling chat for them but that is definitely just a base, not a real counselling. I know people who needed to postpone their coming outs due to the pandemic." "Covid-19 was one of the impulses. We discussed the pandemic and found many similarities with HIV pandemic, how there was a lack of information, the fear, people were afraid to socialize. Even the hoaxes and conspiracies accompanied both of the pandemics. The content was different, but the impact worked in a similar way.

Keywords: mental health, limited access to medical services, social isolation, online, LGBT, promotion of LGBT issues, creativity, HIV pandemic

SK03

Title: I could help those people but not my own father

Narrative: My name is Tereza and I am 49. I coordinate field workers in marginalized Roma communities. For a long time, I experienced Covid only at work. I spent a lot of time in localities, we needed to be there to help people. Of course, we were scared in my team. But we persuaded ourselves that we are needed there and we were protected, we wore costumes, masks, gloves, all that. Anyway, I told my parents that I would not see them till the end of the pandemic. I didn't want them to get infected as I was always

meeting people. I did shopping for them, we phoned each other but I did not see them much. You know, the situation in localities was sometimes difficult, many people got infected, they were sick and it was not always clear who is positive and who is not. It is difficult to be isolated in those localities. For example, in one locality there is only one source of drinking water, so anyway people were meeting there. The most difficult thing was that people often did not have enough money, that they could not afford to buy medicine. There were cases in which us, the field workers bought the medicine for our money in order to help those people. Or we tried to organize relatives. But there was a solidarity in communities. I remember that in one locality, one member of a very poor family died on Covid. The family could not afford the funeral so the people from the community contributed so he can be buried in a right way, they give 5, 10 Euros, how much they can. The financial problems were obvious, some people did not go to the doctor in time. They did not have money to get tested. It was not expensive but some people count every penny, so they were thinking whether they really need it or not. But without a test they were not allowed to see a doctor, so they got to the doctor when their health seriously deteriorated and maybe earlier, they wouldn't got that sick. Also, doctors were not willing to see patients because of Covid. But for our people, they do not have Internet access, they cannot write an e-mail asking for a prescription for medicine that they are taking regularly, like on high pressure, insulin and so on. So in one locality there was a young woman working for us, she has never used a computer before. But she learnt everything, we gave her a computer, Internet access and she was collecting the prescription needs in the community and sent them to the doctor and he wrote the prescriptions. She sort of serves as an assistant to him. He has liked the system so much that it is still working. But I had a personal experience with Covid as well. I didn't got infected at work, but I got infected finally. Once my father got very sick, he lost conscious, so I ran to him and tried to help him. When the doctor came, he said he was positive. Everybody in their house was positive. After few days their health deteriorated and three people ended up in a hospital, including my father. I visited him in the hospital. Somewhere there I got infected and everybody in my house, my daughters, the children. We were very sick, not the children, they were OK, but us adults. For couple of days I was not able to get out of my bed, I was not able to move. It was similar with my daughter. Fortunately, my other daughter felt a bit better so she was able to make us a tea and give kids something to eat. But she was not strong enough to take care of us all. Men from the family were at work, they work in the other part of the country. And than my father and uncle died in the hospital. That was a very difficult time. Fortunately, I have support in my work, from my team as well as the superiors, they give me time to catch up with everything. I appreciate it. But I felt remorse that I could help those people byt not my own father.

Specifically telling quotes:

Keywords: access to hygiene, access to health care, financial constraints, marginalized Roma communities, field work, care burden, work burden, community solidarity, self-help

SK04

Title: It has changed our community

Narrative: My name is Daniela and I am 32. I am Roma and during the pandemic I worked as a field worker in the community where I live. The pandemic has impacted my community, us Roma we are used to live together, to meet each other and the pandemic has changed it. People were afraid to get infected. They were even afraid to cough because everybody was paying attention to the slightest sign of an infection. Everybody was afraid and there was a lot of uncertainty. Even when I got infected, people knew it before myself. It was the day before Christmas, I was doing something in the garden and a neighbor asked me whether I am OK that my eyes looked differently. And really, in few hours I got ill, I needed to lay down. And of course, I infected my husband and my daughter. So these were quite strange Christmas. For more than a week we were closed in the house. Just our families brought us presents and gave them to us through the window. We gave them ours only in January. So we never had Christmas like that. Despite the fact that I am young, I was quite seriously sick, I was tired, I had troubles breathing. And I remember, that when I got sick a lady from our community called me. She was sick as well and she called me and I heard from her voice that the situation was serious. So I called the ambulance. But afterwards they called me from the hospital that she died. She had six children. And I needed to call her family during Christmas that their mother died. It was horrible for them. I felt partially responsible because if I were not sick in the quarantine, I would have probably gone to see her and would have seen that she was not OK and I would have called the ambulance sooner. At the same time, I got scared. I was sick as well so I got scared about my life. But luckily everything went fine for me, my husband and my daughter. Actually, she was sick for about three days and then it was problematic to keep her in the house, she is very social, she wanted to be with her friends. In that period, many people got infected. I believed that I would not get infected, I was young, always with people because of my work. But I got infected finally. Afterwards I was more careful with masks and gloves because before if I talked to someone outside I was not always wearing the mask, inside yes, but outside not always. I was all the time with people, we were mapping who got infected, we helped them with shopping, mostly to the old people we discussed the quarantine. But you know, if there is a big family living in a small house, it is difficult to separate someone, so we tried to help them so they got everything they needed. Also financially, it was difficult for people, they could not go to work. They do not earn much but it is at least something. When they got infected before they received their allowances, they often did not have enough money to make a big shopping. So I tried to find ways, I talked to the municipality mayor, some charities, so they could get food, medicine and all they needed. I worked very hard during the pandemic, I definitely worked more than 8 hours, people called me anytime. I did practical help, but also psychological support. It was important for them that they could call me anytime, I supported them, that they would get through it. Because the pandemic had a psychological impact on people. Many of them got depressed, all that fear and uncertainty, the anxiety, it has impacted them.

Some people started to go to the psychiatrist and took antidepressants. Afterwards, when the measures were no more in place, it has got much better. People are breathing freely, they meet each other, the pandemic is not a topic anymore.

Specifically telling quotes: “The pandemic has impacted my community, us Roma we are used to live together, to meet each other and the pandemic has changed it. People were afraid to get infected. They were even afraid to cough because everybody was paying attention to the slightest sign of an infection. Everybody was afraid and there was a lot of uncertainty.” “I needed to call her family during Christmas that their mother died. It was horrible for them. I felt partially responsible because if I were not sick in the quarantine, I would have probably gone to see her and would have seen that she was not OK and I would have called the ambulance sooner.” “I worked very hard during the pandemic, I definitely worked more than 8 hours, people called me anytime. I did practical help, but also psychological support. It was important for them that they could call me anytime, I supported them, that they would get through it. Because the pandemic had a psychological impact on people. Many of them got depressed, all that fear and uncertainty, the anxiety, it has impacted them.

Keywords: marginalized Roma communities, mental health, economic constraints, psychological support, first line workers, personal responsibility, cultural impact

SK05

Title: The state failed me

Narrative: My name is Lena and I am 32. For a chronically ill person as myself the pandemic worked both ways. On one hand, I benefited from the fact that everything went online. I have mobility problems, sometimes I get tired very easily, so for me staying at home and be online worked great. It is more difficult nowadays to get back offline. On the other hand, my health requires continual health services and the access to them during the pandemic was complicated. I need physiotherapy regularly and the center that I use was either closed or if it reopened there were long waiting lists for the procedures. The personnel was either sick or they were on leave because they feared to get infected. For example, two masseurs from the center did not work for quite a long period. So the access to these services was complicated and I did not get them as often as needed. It impacted my health as it deteriorated. I believe that state should provide adequate health care and equal access to it but the pandemic showed that there are many gaps and it does not work properly. Another example - I was looking forward to the vaccination, I read a lot about it, I followed WHO reports and so on. However, the state does not recognize my diagnosis as a reason for disability. I applied twice for the disability recognition but the state institutions acknowledged that I am only 20% disabled and that was not enough to get on the priority list for the vaccination. I have a friend who has a celiac disease and she got to the list but not me. The whole process of disability recognition is quite unfair and it traumatized me. They have a list of diagnoses

and if yours does not appear there then they simply do not recognize it regardless how much it affects your life. Now I am applying for the third time so we will see. Nevertheless, in vaccination period that has meant that I was considered to be a healthy young woman and somewhere on the bottom of the vaccination list as it was constructed on the basis of age. I consider myself a socialist, I have believed in the role of the state. But during the pandemic I was deeply disappointed by its performance and how it did not take into account the inequalities it has created. It was not just people with disabilities, but also Roma, women and so on. It made me to reconsider my position. Me and my boyfriend decided to get married during the pandemic. First, I realized that this is my closest person and I wanted him to have access to me and my documentation if I would end up in a hospital, that he could have access to our property, to have a widower allowances. But also, I felt that if I cannot rely on the state I need to rely on personal ties and my boyfriend. That it would be good to have a legally recognized relationship with all rights and duties. It is not something outspoken in our relationship but it definitely contributed to my decision. And the wedding was another story. We got it postponed for several times. There was a period when there could only be few people at the wedding and my boyfriend wanted it to be a big party. To celebrate our wedding but also the end of the pandemic, that we could meet and celebrate together again. So finally we had the wedding only this year.

Specifically telling quotes: “I need physiotherapy regularly and the center that I use was either closed or if it reopened there were long waiting lists for the procedures. The personnel was either sick or they were on leave because they feared to get infected. For example, two masseurs from the center did not work for quite a long period. So the access to these services was complicated and I did not get them as often as needed. It impacted my health as it deteriorated” “I consider myself a socialist, I have believed in the role of the state. But during the pandemic I was deeply disappointed by its performance and how it did not take into account the inequalities it has created. It was not just people with disabilities, but also Roma, women and so on. It made me to reconsider my position.” “But also, I felt that if I cannot rely on the state I need to rely on personal ties and my boyfriend. That it would be good to have a legally recognized relationship with all rights and duties. It is not something outspoken in our relationship but it definitely contributed to my decision.”

Keywords: disability, limited access to health care, deterioration of health, individual vs. public care, anti-pandemic measures, vaccination priority

SK06

Title: Vaccination divided communities

Narrative: My name is Sandra, I am Roma and I am 40. In the beginning of the pandemic I gave birth to my daughter. So for our family it was a bit positive that everything was closed, schools, work. My older son was at home, my husband as well, so we had a family

time and I had help with a baby. On the other hand, it was quite difficult for my son, online school was very demanding, he spent almost all of his time dealing with school, in the morning in front of the computer and in the afternoon doing homework. The teachers gave a lot of homework, they probably thought it would help children to catch up on but in fact it was very demanding and he needed help. Afterwards, when schools opened it continued. The teachers were giving a test after a test. Plus, the atmosphere at school was not good. The kids did not see each other for a long time, there were conflicts among them, they fell out of the routine. So for my son, he had quite a hard time. I went back to work during the second wave. I coordinate health assistants in marginalized Roma communities so we had a lot of work with testing, mapping those in quarantine, their needs, we communicated them to municipality to unsure that these needs are met, that people would receive medicine, sometimes even food. But the most difficult period was when the vaccination started. We tried to raise awareness on it, but in some communities it was difficult. People were under influence of conspiracies and hoaxes. Social networks played their role there and it was spreading within communities. Sometimes people were forced to get vaccinated otherwise they were not allowed to do activation work without it. It did not help as well. We had to solve a lot of crisis situations, people were aggressive. The communities were divided to those vaccinated and those who are not. In some communities it was a sort of stigma to get vaccinated, so they did it secretly, so the others do not know about it. It only contributed to the distrust among people that came with the pandemic. Even before the vaccination, positive people were often stigmatized, at that time it was out of fear to get infected. But it made our work more difficult. Some people did not trust anyone, not even us, they did not let us to talk to them as they knew that we were meeting people. So we faced various reactions. And it also had an impact on us as a team. We could not see each other. I as a coordinator I individually met with the assistants but they did not see each other. We communicated online or by phone. I tried to keep the team spirit, to discuss needs of my colleagues, not just at work but personal as well. We were supporting each other that we should go on, that it would end soon, the spring is coming, that one day the pandemic would be over and we just need to wait. But I think that it empowered us, made us stronger as a team. I remember the first team meeting live, it was very loud, people were talking at the same time, really as if they were waiting for the time to talk to each other. It is good that the pandemic is over, OK not over, but we are back to normal. We can do our normal work and I feel that the atmosphere in the communities got better as well. Now, people are dealing with the economic crisis, everything gets more expensive, but you can see solidarity, that they are helping each other, lending money or food. It is much better now.

Specifically telling quotes: “The teachers gave a lot of homework, they probably thought it would help children to catch up on but in fact it was very demanding and he needed help. Afterwards, when schools reopened it continued. The teachers were giving a test after a test. Plus, the atmosphere at school was not good. The kids did not see each other for a long time, there were conflicts among them, they fell out of the routine.” “The communities were divided to those vaccinated and those who were not. In some communities it was a sort of stigma to get vaccinated, so they did it secretly, so

the others did not know about it. It only contributed to the distrust among people that came with the pandemic. Even before the vaccination, positive people were often stigmatized, at that time it was out of fear to get infected." "We were supporting each other that we should go on, that it would end soon, the spring is coming, that one day the pandemic would be over and we just needed to wait. But I think that it empowered us, made us stronger as a team.

Keywords: vaccination divide, team spirit, distant education, first line workers, tension, Roma communities, stigmatization

SK07

Title: I got more mature, the society did not

Narrative: My name is Laura and I am 24. When the pandemic had started, I lost my job and I had to move back to my mother. I did not take it as a tragedy, many people around me moved back home to their parents. Plus, we had a good relationship with my mum. Nevertheless, it was not ideal. For me it was not easy to get back to this child role again, I was not used to it any more. In addition, the outside conditions were difficult. My mum is a single parent and right before the pandemic she started her own business as a masseur. These professions were hit the most, she could not work at all. It was her dream and she could not make it. So, all this has also impacted our relationship. We faced economic hardship. I believe my mum tried to hide many of her survival strategies. But I remember that it was difficult. It is quite funny how now politicians talk about how people should save energy due to the energy crisis but they do not realize that many have been doing it even before, simply because they could not pay for it. I remember that the pandemic winter we did not heat the place much. All these outside circumstances impacted our relationship, there was a certain tension. Fortunately, the relationship got better as we both found ways how to stabilize our lives. But the measures of economic help had quite significant loop holes, they left many vulnerable groups out. For example, us students, we did not have any opportunity to get a job, those student jobs simply did not exist. I was quite lucky that later on, a friend of mine helped me to find a job. But until then we were left out of any income, there were no student loans or something. It was a difficult time and it impacted my mental help. Fortunately, I started the university the first pandemic autumn. The university offered the students 5 counselling sessions for free and I used that opportunity. It has helped me, I was thinking a lot about myself, my life and the psychological sessions gave it a structure. It was also interesting regarding the student's life. In the beginning we did not see each other in life, we met only on online courses. However, it was nice, we were all eager to study, hungry for the contacts, so we tried to know each other anyway, despite the fact that we communicated just online. It was quite interesting to see how those relationships work differently in real life, when we finally met. Some people whom you found interesting online were not that interesting offline and vice versa. I noticed it also with my old friends, that gradually, as we could not be in contact and we did not have common experiences, we did not have much to

talk about. So, then we started to read the same books or watch same films and TV series and we discussed them together. We had some common experiences. Actually, this was really nice. It is something that was good on the pandemic. I became much more cautious about what I read and watch. It was not that I did not care before, but now I am more cautious about it, I try to find pieces that are valuable for me, that somehow reflect what I am going through at the moment. And it helps me in my self-reflection. This is good, I spent more time reading now than I used to do before. I have also made a very good friend during the pandemic. First, we met online at some course but later when I got back to the city where I study, we were meeting regularly. In retrospect, we had a great time. Everything was so calm, there were not many people on streets, it was like living in a countryside but in a city. In retrospect, these was quite nice slow time when the measures lifted but everything was still a bit in a pandemic mode. In fact, the pandemic made me more aware of time, that it flows. Now I know much better how to use it, what makes it to slow down or to fasten a bit. I prioritize more. I spent much time during the pandemic on self-reflection, thinking about who I am, what I want in life. Actually, I believe it made me more resilient, more adult. It is a pity, that it did not happen with a society as well. I am amazed, how the pandemic is forgotten now and with everything it has made visible, all the social problems, they are invisible again. The solidarity got lost and people are on their own again.

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Keywords: mental health, economic constraints, online study, personal growth, loopholes in state economic help

SK08

Title: You need to do something meaningful

Narrative: My name is Natalia and I am 22. When the pandemic started, I was in my first year of the university. It all happened out of the blue, we were at the university and they told us that everything was cancelled and we needed to go home. I had to figure out where to go. I did not have enough resources to stay in the city and pay for the accommodation. I did not want to go to my mum, our relationship is complicated, plus it is a small village and a small house and she lives under difficult conditions. Moreover, I had a girlfriend and we did not want to be separated. So the final decision was to go to her parents. They were OK with our relationship and they accepted us. Nevertheless, it was a bit difficult, we could have been together but still it was their place and her mother was the one who organized the household. There is this dynamic between parents and children, plus these were not my parents. So in autumn, we moved to my girlfriend's place in the city and lived there together. Nevertheless, everything was still closed, the school was online, there were just two of us without much other social contacts. For Christmas, we went back, I spent some weeks at my mum's place but it was complicated. The house is not in a good state, my mum is unemployed, it was winter, so it was cold everywhere. I literally spent most of the day in bed, also the online classes, to keep myself warm. Afterwards, I moved back to my girlfriends' parents. It was great that we could have been together, we supported each other and it was the thing that helped me the most during the pandemic. On the other hand, as we spent so much time together and were almost the only people we could talk to, we became a bit dependent on each other. We were debating back then, that it would be great to have a community, a queer community, some other people who have similar experiences that we could talk to. We did not have it at the time. Maybe for those who like to be online all the time, it was easier to find one, but I am not that kind of person. I prefer to meet people. And it even helps that you know that there is a place where you can go, you don't even need to go there. Just that it exists. And obviously, it affected my student life as well. The first term of the pandemic, some courses went online but some teachers did not communicate at all. They only started to send emails before the exam on what they expected. The next term everything was online, so it got much better. But at the beginning, I did not know what to do. It was great to have free days and I was not forced to do anything but then you need to do something meaningful with all that time, so I started to read the literature for the courses. And I found it very interesting, so I realized I have chosen the subject very well, that it is the right for me. But also, as a year class, we do not know each other. We were at the university for the first term, everything was new, we needed to get used to it, we did not communicate very much and then, during the second term everything got closed. We did not have time to get to know each other. Even till now, we do not communicate much. But it was great that during the pandemic, some older students created an online group for students of our subject where we could meet and talk to each other, to discuss life and the study. It was very helpful. When we got back to school I have tried to continue these meetings life together with few friends. So now we are meeting each other for informal meetings where we discuss whatever, related to the subject, the institute, the study, life and so on. It is great that people got more active after the pandemic, lots of things have been happening and people are coming as if they want to compensate all that year of the university being closed. But I believe it affected

us as students, our grades, the fact that we have not been to school for so long. You tend to compare yourself with the others and you have a feeling that you could have progressed rapidly if there was not the pandemic. And as a community, too. Up to now I socialize more with students from other classes than my own.

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Keywords: isolation, organizing, importance of relationships, economic constraints, queer community

SK09

Title: I am still in the closet

Narrative: My name is Viky, I am 27 and I am a non-binary person. 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 live in a very small village, the neighborhood is very misogynistic and racist. There was a pressure on me to become more feminine again which I am not really into, I do not really see a point in this kind of gender stereotypes. There is a lot of trauma that carries from my childhood. So it was opening a lot of old wounds. Coming back and building new grounds was kind of painful. And then the Covid hit and I was quite glad. I could stay at home, in my safe space, being in my cave. People couldn’t ask why I am not going outside much and I didn’t need to be afraid of being judged and those kind of social things. If I went outside, I could wear a mask to be in a way protected not just from the virus, I was not afraid of the virus, but from other people. I am fairly lonely person so I do not need to be around people. So I was back in the house, it is a big house, part of it is mine, so I have my own space. 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. But I do not really have much of choices. I have to stay here and support them. Plus, my family was really under influence of hoaxes and conspiracies, they were very anti-Covid, anti-vax. I was trying to have this normal conversation, I was trying to show them the facts but they were just o yeah, maybe. It was kind of depressing to have these conversations, so you reach a point in which you said, OK, I am done. I stopped trying. Like I am going to do what I need to do trying to protect me in order to protect them, I got vaccinated. I just pushed them to do the bare minimum. And I needed to act as a mediator between the family members, I was always the middle person trying to get everybody to calm down. A lot of new responsibilities showed up with the pandemic, I had to do a lot of mental and physical work to help my parents and my grand parents. Plus trying to get a job. It was very difficult to find a job during the pandemic. When I got back I started looking for a job cause I was loosing my mind and because of money. I started applying, I got couple interviews online, which I didn't really mind, I actually preferred it. But it was like yes, you are amazing, we going to get back to you and you have never heard from them. It was demotivating. So I applied for a PHD. I started my PHD in autumn, still during the pandemic. I needed to go there once a week, I still do. So it is not that much time to be there which I prefer. I work better if I have a quiet place, enough place around to place books and papers, I am more efficient that way. There is less pressure, no one is standing behind my back and look at what I am doing. Now I got a job in an international company and part of it happens online. They promote themselves as a cool open-minded company, diversity is welcome and all that, but in fact the reality is different, so even at work I am still in the closet. At the university it is a bit better, I guess many people now that I am queer, because of my topic. Thanks to it I got invited to participate at the development of some equality document. I guess in the beginning they expected me to bring some feminist stuff, but I opened also queer topics. But I did not feel like a spokesperson of queer students. I knew that there was a queer community at the university. I tried to be this middle person trying to communicate with the community and with the university, trying to get them at the table to express their needs to talk to each other, in which I succeeded. So doing the PHD, getting a job helped me to get through. I also learnt to crochet, I used to smoke a lot of weed. So I really did not need to think about what was going on and at the time it was necessary. Because I really could not do anything about it. I need to keep myself occupied because what else can I do, just to stay busy and doing things. I got a bunny during the pandemic and there has been a different kind of relationship between us, we do not need to have a conversation but I could be with someone who is actually alive, someone, who do not ask me stupid things or telling me stupid things. Someone who did not want anything from me and that was refreshing.

Specifically telling quotes: "Coming back and building new grounds was kind of painful. And then the Covid hit and I was quite glad. I could stay at home, in my safe space, being in my cave. People couldn't ask why I am not going outside much and I didn't need to be afraid of being judged and those kind of social things. If I went outside, I could wear a mask to be in a way protected not just from the virus, I was not afraid of

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Keywords: gender identity, prejudices, job search, pandemic social divide, relationship with parents, mental health

SK10

Title: I realized I am battered

Narrative: My name is Mira and I am 35. I survived intimate partner violence. It is not like the pandemic increased the violence, it was there before, I just did not fully realized it. My husband has some psychological issues, he has anger issue, he cannot control it. There were also threats that he will take my children, death threats to me and my family. And he has a gun so he can do it easily. He controlled my e-mails and he found out about my previous relationships and he used to use it against me, to explain his behavior, that I deserve it. So the violence was there even before. Nevertheless, I kind of believed that it will get better, that he needs to work on his psychological problems. He even started to see a psychologist but the pandemic has interrupted it. We were there together and actually it was that psychologist that later, when I called her after one incident, told me that she believes I experience intimate partner violence. I did not defined it that way before. So for me, the pandemic was about realizing that I have experienced intimate partner violence and about leaving the relationship. Partially, the pandemic contributed to it. Not in a sense that we spent more time together, he was going to work, to see his child from the previous marriage and so on. Contrary, I was alone and isolated. My children were very small at the time and all the care was on me, he did not help much. Plus he isolated us, he used the pandemic as a reason, like that we cannot go anywhere, we cannot see my parents, friends. I was really isolated with two small children and that probably contributed to my decision. Normally, I am a social person, I like to be with people and even with children, we were going out a lot, meeting with friends, my family. It was a time when I could relax, to breathe out, to be myself, not to think about the relationship. During the pandemic, I was isolated, I did not have these moments. So when the psychologist told me that I am battered, she gave me a number to a help line and I called them several times when he was at work and children were sleeping. I

prepared an escape plan, I gradually packed things and transported them to my parents and finally left with children. Nevertheless, I came back twice. Although everybody was telling me that he would not change, I still believed him that he did not want to lose another family like the previous one, that he loved us, plus the children were really small so because of them I came back. He even started to go to psychological counseling again but it did not last. But I collected the evidence, my lawyer advised me to keep all the messages and threats, I reported it also to this organization so it is recorded somewhere. My friend knows everything, where I keep things, my passwords and so on just in case that something would happen to me, someone knows everything. I was afraid that if anything would happen to me, he would raise the kids, that is frightening. I do not want to report him to the police, that would destroy his career and I don't want it and also financially with alimony it is better that he works. But I have proofs if necessary. Although, now I do not believe that he will keep his threats, that it is just a way how to frighten me. He knows that it scares me emotionally, but I am not really scared for my life anymore. Now he is fighting for a joint custody, but I do not want it, I do not want children to spend the night with him. They are still small plus with his anger issues, I am scared. What helped me a lot during this process was my family, we had a great relationship and they have helped me a lot. Plus the professional help, I did not have any problems to communicate with the organization or my lawyer, all this support was extremely useful. I haven't experienced any interruption of services or functioning of the institutions during the pandemic. It's rather now that the divorce is taking forever but my lawyer explained to me that it is quite usual. Nevertheless, it is stressful.

Specifically telling quotes: “So for me, the pandemic was about realizing that I have experienced intimate partner violence and about leaving the relationship. Partially, the pandemic contributed to it. Not in a sense that we spent more time together, he was going to work, to see his child from the previous marriage and so on. Contrary, I was alone and isolated. My children were very small at the time and all the care was on me, he did not help much. Plus he isolated us, he used the pandemic as a reason, like that we cannot go anywhere, we cannot see my parents, friends. I was really isolated with two small children and that probably contributed to my decision. Normally, I am a social person, I like to be with people and even with children, we were going out a lot, meeting with friends, my family. It was a time when I could relax, to breathe out, to be myself, not to think about the relationship. During the pandemic, I was isolated, I did not have these moments.” “What helped me a lot during this process was my family, we had a great relationship and they have helped me a lot. Plus the professional help, I did not have any problems to communicate with the organization or my lawyer, all this support was extremely useful. I haven't experienced any interruption of services or functioning of the institutions during the pandemic.”

Keywords: intimate partner violence, services for survivors, social isolation, leaving the abusive relationship, social support

United Kingdom

UK01

Title: Formerly isolated disabled woman finds a new sense of community during the pandemic.

Narrative: “My name is Alice and I am a 52 year old woman living my husband, dog and two cats in a small village in Oxfordshire. For most of my life, I have suffered with a very rare form of epilepsy which only 3 people in the country have. Due to this I am under the care of a specialist London hospital and am supposed to travel there every six months for appointments with my neurologist. I had brain surgery in 2003 to try and pinpoint the area of the seizures but as a result I suffered a stroke that really weakened one side of my body. Consequently I had to give up work as a PA in a large company as I could not cope with the long hours. I eventually built up my hours working again through volunteering at a charity shop and then working as a TA at a primary school. I can now no longer work however so spend a lot of time at home. My husband works full time in IT so I have carers come in to help me Monday-Friday 9-5 and Sundays for a few hours, and then he cares for me the rest of the time. My husband was made redundant just before the 2020 lockdowns so he had to find a new job during the pandemic which was hard, however he has now found one that means he works from home. While it is very convenient that he can work from the home office, I do miss the days when he went to work! I think it was nice when we could chat about our days in the evening, rather than constantly being in each others pockets.

My experience of the pandemic was different to others I think in that even before lockdowns, I was so restricted in what I could do that it didn't feel like a very big deal. I had to shield for the majority of the pandemic but again this was not different to the norm so I didn't feel particularly hard done by. The only things that were really affected were not being able to see my parents and the halting of my medical appointments. My parents and I faceted and spoke on Zoom however it was not the same and I was very sad to lose that part of my routine. My mother died last year and the strict visitation rules were very difficult to cope with for myself and my family.

Most of my medical appointments were either stopped or moved to phone appointments which has been difficult. When I have had to go into hospital, they were very reluctant to allow my carers to come with my which was very scary as I need them not only for physical and medical support but also emotionally as stress brings on seizures. I also couldn't go to a vaccination centre for my Covid jabs due to the stress and noise setting off my epilepsy, and so had to arrange for someone to come to my home and administer the injections. Something else which was a shame was that a group I used to regular attend, a women's group for the mental health charity MIND, was stopped during Covid and hasn't restarted. They did however continue to call once a week to check how I was getting on which was something I really looked forward to.

We had to move into a bungalow 5 years ago because I could no longer be in a home

with stairs as I had fallen down them repeatedly. I was very sad to move as I had always been in the same area which was close to lots of amenities, and the new area we moved to was quite isolated. Although it was easier to get around the house, the roads and pavements are very poor quality so I found it difficult to get around in my wheelchair and was scared to walk in case I tripped and it caused a seizure. I broke my ankle twice during the pandemic because of this which was very difficult. To be honest, I hated living here. In the early stages of the pandemic however, I received a note through the door saying that a few people in the village were setting up a WhatsApp group in order to support those who were vulnerable or who caught Covid with their shopping, prescriptions and just generally looking out for each other. I thought it was a lovely idea, and so joined the group. As I was shielding, it was useful to know there were people I could rely on if I was desperate or if my husband caught Covid, which at one point he did. This was difficult because I rely on my husband for everything so even though he was very unwell with the virus, he still needed to continue to look after our pets and cook our meals because I couldn't. I don't feel like there was much support therefore for carers or family members who became ill.

Since the inception of the WhatsApp group, I have managed to meet so many people in the community through social events such as socially distanced carols at Christmas, outdoor parties for VE day and Jubilee events. Prior to the pandemic, I only knew my direct neighbours who we would say hello to, but otherwise felt as though I was very alone in my immediate area. Another local village was holding a coffee morning so I decided to attend and see if I could meet any more people, however I found that people stuck to their own cliques and I didn't feel very welcome. I therefore decided that I would take the initiative to set up my own community coffee morning that I would run once a month and would build upon the great community building work that we had done since 2020. I spoke with the landlord of the local pub who was happy to lend me the space and we have now been running it for several months with 15-20 people attending each time. A lot of people in the village are elderly and experienced hardships during the pandemic so it is a lovely space to come together. The community has really changed since Covid and has gotten so much better, and I can now say I like where I live. For me, the restrictions put in place from the pandemic and the fact I had to shield did not dramatically affect my life, as I was very restricted in my movements anyway. Therefore, I think the fact that the community was able to unite and I have made so many new friends has been a really positive experience, and has changed my life for the better."

Specifically telling quotes: "To be honest, nothing has changed for me. I could barely go out and do things anyway so being forced to stay in the house was something I was used to."

" I can say now, since the pandemic, that I like where I live and I've made lots of new friends, whereas to be honest I hated living here before."

Keywords: Disability, community, isolation, friends, loneliness, mobility

UK02

Title: Peter is able to return to education as a mature student due to the course moving online.

Narrative: “My name is Peter and I am a 34 year old man living in Oxfordshire. I live with my wife and work as a firefighter, a role I have been doing for nearly 10 years. My pandemic experience was slightly different to other people as I was classed as a key worker and so continued to go to work as normal, even throughout lockdown periods. I travelled to work for my normal shifts and in this regard very little changed. This was also good as my wife was working from home and I was able to get out of the house so we weren't in each other's way. At work we had to put in new procedures such as social distancing and mask wearing, as well as reducing the number of people working on each shift to a minimum to reduce the risk. Reducing the number of firefighters on shifts meant that sometimes I got extra days off, so I was very lucky in that I got more time away from work but continued to have the same wage.

In lockdown periods I felt that it was especially important to maintain a routine, something that was easier for myself than others due to me continuing to travel to work. Exercise is very important to me and I used the time at home to go for walks and runs, however I was also very lucky in that we have a gym at work that stayed open and so, unlike other people, I was able to continue going to the gym as normal and just wipe down equipment afterwards. The gym is a big part of my life and exercise is important for my mental health, so I think I would have suffered had I not been able to continue doing this.

For many years I had been considering doing a degree. When I was younger and did my A Levels, I did pretty rubbish and so it wasn't really an option for me then. Now that I have a lot of experience from work and have done several other courses and diplomas, I thought it might be time to apply to do a Bachelors degree, however I never had the time to properly look into it. I also knew that the course I was interested in was quite a lot of money and would require me to travel to London at least once a week, something that would cost me around £60-70, so was not really feasible. I was also worried that my employers would not allow me to take the time off to travel and do the work, and I was concerned about whether I could handle the workload on top of full time work and life commitments. When lockdown was announced in March 2020, I thought maybe I could use the extra time I had to put together an application, and I was especially interested when the course leaders said that the first and perhaps the second year would be ran online, meaning that I could avoid having to travel every week. I was also able to save quite a lot of money through the pandemic which I then was able to put towards the degree. I was accepted and started the course in September 2020 and am now in my second year. I definitely think that if it were not for Covid, I would not be doing the degree now. Only because of the time it afforded me at home, the money I was able to save and the move to distance learning was I able to pursue education again.

I think one of the key difficulties of the pandemic, as everyone found, was not being able to see family and friends. My parents live locally but my father is vulnerable so I couldn't see him. He went into hospital in 2020 for a heart attack and we weren't able to be with him which was very hard. I think however the pandemic has made us re-evaluate our

priorities and what is most important, and we now spend more quality time together which is definitely something positive.”

Specifically telling quotes: “The last few years, I've been thinking about doing a part time degree. And the pandemic essentially just gave me time to sort of stop and think about whether I could do it and financially, whether I could afford it. Yeah, that first lockdown, I've started looking into it, whether I could do it, and it basically became apparent that it was now going to be online for the first year or two, which was very beneficial for me as I would have had to go into London once a week during term time, which was, you know, considerable cost, that's probably 60 or 70 pounds a week, and I wasn't sure if I'd be able to afford that. Whereas once they told me it'd be online for the first year or two, I could sort of afford it essentially.”

“So [the pandemic], it's just sort of made me think more about my aspirations, I suppose. And like, the potential for my career in the future, which I hadn't really thought about until I'd started it. I thought about okay, I might do a degree, but I hadn't really thought, where's that gonna take me? Which I'm definitely thinking of now and how, you know, it might improve my life in the future.”

Keywords: Mature student, further education, finances, university, work/life balance, time

UK03

Title: Mark sets up his own Facebook volunteering page to deliver essentials to vulnerable people in his local area

Narrative: “My name is Mark and I am a 36 year old man living in Oxfordshire. I have worked at my local supermarket for 6 years and I live with my mother who has just finished cancer treatment. At the beginning of lockdown I was living with both my mother and father, but sadly my father passed away during the first lockdown in April 2020 due to a form of sepsis, which was incredibly difficult for myself and my family. In March 2020 when the first lockdown began, I saw on a local Facebook page that a woman with two young children, one of which had a muscle wasting disease so was very vulnerable, was struggling to get access to food and essentials. I decided I wanted to help, and delivered two big bags of food for free to her door. The woman was so appreciative and told others of my good deed, which started me off on volunteering. I've always been the sort of person who fixes a problem when I see it, and I saw a gap in how people were failing to be supported in the pandemic. I'm fit and healthy and was still leaving the house as I was a key worker, so I decided that I was very well placed to help vulnerable people. Word had been spread by the first woman I'd helped and people had started to get in touch asking for help, and I also started posting on local Facebook groups offering my services for delivering essentials on my bike. I started a Facebook page dedicated to my service and at the height of the first pandemic I was delivering around 20 prescriptions a day and was doing it in full PPE to protect people.

I think that I have helped over 2000 people since I started volunteering, and have made lots of friends in the community of both people I have helped and other volunteers in the area. Personally, I feel as though doing this work has given me a sense of purpose and direction in my life that I did not have before. I am very proud of what I've done, and I have found that helping others has definitely helped me with my own mental health and in dealing with the grief of the loss of my father. The pandemic for me has been completely life changing. I think that Covid has really strengthened people's sense of community and their desire to help others which is a great thing.

While I love helping other people, I did at times find balancing work, my volunteering and my home life quite exhausting. My employer was supportive of my work however I found myself being very tired at work. My fiancée was also very supportive, but worried that people might be taking advantage of my kindness. I decided however that I was not the person to judge who needed help and who didn't. In terms of the pandemic more broadly, I think that I have found that I am very resilient and a tough cookie. It has been hard, I am a very sociable person usually so would have found it very lonely had I not continued to work and volunteer. I also had some family issues, not only in regards to my father's death but also my brother who has a substance abuse issue and had to move back in with myself and my mother. He was very aggressive and I had to protect my mother from him, relying on a support network of our neighbours to let me know if there were any incidents while I was out of the house. I was also hit by a taxi when delivering blood to a GP surgery in February 2021 which forced me to take a break as I had a twisted ankle and bone bruising. I still made sure to deliver the blood however before I sought medical attention. My bike had to be scrapped, but a charity heard about my volunteering work and kindly gifted me a new bike to carry on once I recovered. Since the first lockdown, I have only taken short periods of time off for my father's passing, my accident and for my mother's cancer operations.

The great thing about my volunteering is that anyone can do it. I didn't need any resources, just my bike, Facebook and people's willingness. I was also able to utilise the Good Sam App which was an app developed by the government to connect those in need with volunteers, and I think this is one of the UK government's triumphs during Covid. I have been named volunteer of the year 2021 and nominated for a Make a Difference Award by the BBC which is a great honour. I have also been asked to speak at local schools to inspire children to help others. None of these things would have happened without Covid, and I will forever be thankful for the way in which my life has changed. One day I hope to maybe start a charity, as volunteering will now always be a part of my life."

Specifically telling quotes: "While there are still people that need help in Covid I won't stop, so I'm probably never going to stop."

"The pandemic kind of made this wartime spirit rise up in me, I knew I needed to help"

"I think I've always been a tough cookie but Covid really brought out my resilience"

Keywords: Volunteering, key worker, prescriptions/medication, vulnerable/shielding, care responsibilities, cycling, mental health.

UK04

Title: Lucy learns to prioritise self care, distance herself from her family and appreciate her alternative care arrangement

Narrative: "I'm Lucy and I'm a 37 year old woman living with my 5 year old daughter and my best friend. I am divorced and my ex-husband has my daughter once a week. I work full time as a PA for an accountancy firm and I have been able to continue doing this throughout the pandemic, going into the office daily as usual. I have found that the pandemic has largely been about flexing around changes and learning what does and doesn't work in my life. My friend is self-employed and her work was flexible around home-schooling my daughter, which was amazing as I could continue to go into work. My ex had my daughter on a Wednesday however he worked at the same time so he did no home-schooling with her and deferred everything to me, including contacting the school and submitting evidence that she was learning at home. He has no real active role beyond the absolute minimum and acts as though he is doing me a favour, refusing to do anything for our daughter which inconveniences him. This caused me constant stress as all of this responsibility was placed upon me and my friend.

My employer was very understanding of my circumstances and we agreed that it would be best that I continued to go into the office as it would be very hard to do from home, especially due to my daughter being there. The opportunity to work from the office and maintain my routine helped me massively with my anxiety, and showed me that normal still existed.

I found however that I am now perpetually, chronically busy and forms of self-soothing that I had fostered during the pandemic has 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. This carving out of time is a task in itself, but allowing myself the time and space to be creative or meditate is very therapeutic for me. I also made sure to continue exercising regularly. I have always enjoyed being active but this routine was very important to me during the pandemic, and I made sure to run 3 times a week and set myself challenges. I have found that these challenges give me a sense of purpose, self-worth and validation, and are very motivating for me. I also enjoy the community of people who run and the social side, which was lovely to still have during Covid, even if it was just nodding at another runner whilst I was out.

In general I find some forms of socialising difficult such as playdates or activities that revolve around drinking, and so it was a sort of relief that I didn't have to continue with these. There was also a massive relief in that I did not have to see my family. At the time of the first lockdown it was a period in which my relationship with my mother was at its most fractious, and it was greatly affecting my mental health. In this way I benefitted from Covid as it afforded me the space to be away from my dysfunctional family. The pandemic forced this separation and gave me a chance to realise what I needed for my

own wellbeing, and, subsequently, allowed me the confidence in the decision to distance myself from them.

I think the pandemic sharpened my focus in terms of how fortunate I am to have my friend. My job couldn't have happened at home and so it was amazing to be able to rely on someone else to support me and my daughter. I have learnt to accept that my day to day is wonderful and reflect on the fact that I am actually alright and I am making good decisions. You can't control anything so you need to roll with the punches and do the little daily things to look after yourself. The pandemic afforded me the chance to cut my family out and showed how being able to choose your family, however unconventional, is a massive blessing. I have learnt to set boundaries in my life and assert them, and am generally more content knowing that the choices I have made have led me on a path to happiness for both myself and my daughter."

Specifically telling quotes: "I was afforded the luxury of the office...Had I not been going in I would have struggled but going into work became this sort of signifier in my head that normal still exists. People still exist, you know, work still exists."

"the hugest thing for me is the realization that it afforded me the chance to cut my family out. And I am a bit cautious about who I say it because it is like, what I always say to people is that if you can't understand why I would want to do something like that then you're lucky. Lucky and privileged to never know the trauma of having grown up in a completely toxic family relationship. The pandemic forced space and then you realize it, and I think, yeah, that to me is like the weird timing...no matter how much time passes, I'm not missing my family. And that's nice. Like, that is a good thing for me because it means that there's distance that I can define the way I want to live my life and make a life that I want."

Keywords: Childcare, co-parenting, divorce, family relations, mental health, anxiety

UK05

Title: Marissa re-evaluates her priorities in life after furlough and employment changes, however still has financial concerns

Narrative: "My name is Marissa and I am a 27 year old woman living in Witney. I work for a luxury travel company, where I've worked since September 2019, and I've been renting a flat with a friend since September 2021. I was furloughed from my job from March to October 2020 at which time I was forced to move back home to my parents house. In October of that year I moved back to Witney and into a shared house with other people. When I returned I was seconded to a different department as there was more demand for destinations closer to the UK, however I was very anxious about returning to sales role. I found working in sales and with clients stressful as I always felt like my performance was placed under a microscope, and the only reason I was happy to continue was due to the positive affirmation I received from colleagues and management that I was doing a good job. Through furlough, the amount of contact I had

with management was severely limited and I didn't hear from my manager for 4 months, meaning that I lost total confidence in my ability to do the role and had no support from the company. There was also lots of new things to adjust to on my return which was overwhelming, such as new software systems and remote training which I struggled to engage with. I had felt such an intense degree of uncertainty during furlough however that I was just glad to still have a job.

I then changed my role to be non-client facing which I was more comfortable with and reduced my stress level, however it was fairly monotonous work. I became dissatisfied in the role as I felt there were no opportunities for progression or a pay increase, and I felt as though I was being fobbed off by management when I requested more seniority. I have since moved role again and now work with our products, deciding what excursions, hotels and tour operators to work with which is a much more varied role. Through the various changes in my employment throughout the pandemic I was able to re-evaluate my values and understand where my interests and passions lie.

On a daily basis I like to go for walks before breakfast, at lunch and after work as well as going to the gym, so I now find the confines of the office quite stifling. I have now returned to going back into the office a few days a week which is good to stay in touch with colleagues, and I am now very conscious of using electricity at home due to the rising cost of living. Financially I have struggled somewhat, which has forced me to prioritise the ways in which I want to spend my time both from an emotional and financial perspective. I find myself constantly weighing up what is most important to me and have to be very aware of my outgoings. Moving away from my sales role meant that I reduced my salary dramatically as I no longer received commission, and in line with the cost of living crisis this has been a great source of anxiety for me.

I think my life is very different to how it was pre-pandemic. I have never been in better shape than I am now and I've never been more conscious about my health and what I put in my body, which I think is a very positive change. I exercise now around 5 times a week and my lifestyle is now more built around this than socialising, which it was before Covid. I find exercise a great way to process my thoughts and put things in perspective, allowing me to silence the inner critic. Throughout the pandemic I have set myself training goals and qualified as a personal trainer which has been really productive.

In terms of socialising, I am still a bit anxious about doing things socially. Because I am quite health-conscious I drink less alcohol than I used to and this means I worry about how people will perceive me at events that are based around drinking. I've found I've got closer to some people and have drifted further apart from others due to the way in which I would rather interact with friends. I would much rather do an activity such as go for a walk or do a picnic than go out for drinks, which I think is a big change to before Covid, especially with people in my age group. Due to my financial concerns and the recognition of the aspects of my life which I want to afford time to, I am also happier to reject certain types of social plans.

I think the positive aspect of the pandemic is that it has allowed me to reassess my values and priorities, learning what I enjoy doing and the ways in which I want to use my time productively and to really engage with what I'm doing, whether that is spending time with people who are important to me or trying to reach my personal, nutritional or

employment goals. The time I spent in my parents house during furlough, while difficult, was also a great time for bonding with my mother and my sister which I would have never had a chance to do otherwise, so I will always be grateful for that time. I think also there has been a societal shift in that people are open to discussing deeper topics as everyone has struggled with their wellbeing and therefore there is a unity between everyone in this regard. I think I am now much more likely to recognise the signs of poor mental wellbeing and would feel far more comfortable to approach people and check in on them, which I might have been reticent to do before, especially with male family and friends.”

Specifically telling quotes: “thinking back, it was quite a strange time. Because I didn't know if my company was going to even survive the pandemic. And then if they were gonna make some big redundancies, whether I'd even have a job. So at that point, I think I was just really grateful to still be in a job. So I wasn't thinking about big career moves, because I was just thinking, I just want to have a job at the end of this.”

“I guess, like moving back in with my mom for a bit, I would definitely say brought us closer together. And actually, in hindsight, I would never would have got that chance again to live at home. So yeah, I think that was a really nice time. And I lived with my sister as well. She was back at that point before she moved out, so that's the last time we'll all be living together. So actually, in hindsight, that was a pretty nice time.”

Keywords: Furlough, priorities, exercise, health, socialising, finances, mental health and anxiety

UK06

Title: Amber uses lockdown periods to tutor children, start a small creative business and reflect on how she wants to live her life going forward

Narrative: “My name is Amber and I am a 27 year old women living in London. I had been living and working in London for two years prior to Covid and moved in with friends of mine 6 months before the first lockdown in 2020. Before the lockdown I was teaching in a primary school in London every day and had a great routine. From March-July 2020 during the first lockdown I barely worked at all. I spent two weeks at the beginning planning work for my class as we didn't know how long the pandemic would go on for, however this work was never used. I was asked to look after some of the key worker's children for a few days too, but didn't do more than 3 weeks work that whole time. I really hoped that the children in my class would be able to continue learning from home so I made them each a pack of work and uploaded lots of lessons to the website. My school however has lots of socioeconomically disadvantaged children as well as refugees, young carers and those from abuse households, and 90% of the children did not have access to internet or devices to work on. Out of 29 children, only 2 of them did any work and that was not consistent. The Family Services Officer made sure to check in on the children who were most vulnerable but I as the teacher was not permitted to

contact any of them due to GDPR. I found this very difficult as I really connected with my class and I worried greatly about their wellbeing. I believe that my purpose is to be a teacher and not being able to do this made me feel as though I had lost a part of my identity.

The second lockdown was much better than the first. The government provided funding to our school for laptops and 4G routers and these were then handed out to the children most in need as was proven by a needs survey we undertook. All of my students were then able to access my lessons and every single one of them logged in every day.

Prior to Covid, I was used to my life being go, go, go, so being able to slow down was a big adjustment for me. I felt very happy with the class I was teaching in 2020 so in January I had started taking on additional tutoring. When Covid hit, the tutoring moved online and I was able to earn a lot of extra income and stay busy, working around 10 hours a week. I built a nice routine around this which was great for my mental health. I also had really wanted to take up painting and not working gave me the time and space to be really creative. I enjoyed it so much that I decided I wanted to make it into a business, and started both an Instagram and an Etsy to sell my work which was mostly female nudes which I found really empowering. There was a real business boom on Instagram during the pandemic and people were really keen to support small businesses which was great. The pandemic allowed me to gain extra space in my head and slowed down life in a good way, allowing me to take up painting and reading which I now think are important parts of my identity. I really missed travelling during the pandemic too which meant that I have since tried to really prioritise this.

In general, I benefitted financially from both my tutoring and art work, and was able to spend time on myself and create room for creativity in my life. Since life has gone back to normal I feel as though I no longer have time to pursue my interests however, and have stopped both my business and tutoring as I find my new class of children far more stressful than before due to them having very complex needs. The transition of returning to work was okay but it was quite hard to get used to the new timetable as all classes had to move around the school at different times to ensure social distancing. Neither the children or the teachers could mix which was quite isolating and caused behavioural difficulties in the children. The children who struggled before, especially those with difficult home lives, found it very hard to readjust. The pandemic really highlighted which parents were invested in their children's education and those who were neglecting them, and the difference in education level was very stark. Being a teacher during Covid was difficult. I caught Covid but still felt responsible for my class and like I needed to set them work, so couldn't really take the time to recover. The culture around teaching is such that you feel guilty when you can't be there and you feel pressured to provide guidance to whoever is covering for you, which means that you are often incentivised to go into work unwell, which was dangerous to the children and other colleagues during the pandemic.

I think my anxiety could have been a lot worse but I pre-planned a lot of my life in order to reduce the potential for worry. I carefully managed my routine and did a lot of self care which helped. At the beginning of the lockdown I was alone in the flat which was a bit difficult, but my housemate was there we had a lovely time bonding and doing activities together. I went for walks with local friends and found that I wasn't lonely at all.

It was difficult recognising peoples boundaries around the restrictions however, and this caused some tension between friends as everyone had different expectations about how careful you should be. Navigating the rules of testing etc was also very difficult in a shared space and it was hard to know if you were abiding by the regulations. At the beginning of the pandemic I was in a long term relationship, but I believe for me that the pandemic was well timed as it allowed me to decide that the relationship wasn't right and end it, as I realised I would rather be by myself than have to be quarantined with him, which was one of the few choices for couples at that time."

Specifically telling quotes: "I think having that time to yourself has definitely inspired me to make sure I have time for myself. So for example, I wasn't really reading much. I read a lot more during the pandemic. And now I'm trying to make that a defining characteristic of me that I am a reader. So definitely that and the art started there. And as much as I don't do it now, it's still part of me, and it's still something I do every so often and my house is filled with these relics of what I did create during that time. Yeah, so I think in that in that in the terms of like, slowing down, and making sure you're doing what you want to do, I think that I still want to have that legacy in the decisions I make."

"I worried at first but then I kind of realised it's out of my control. I can't do anything. I think the thing I struggled with in that first lockdown was that I felt like, my thing is being a teacher. My purpose was being a teacher. And I felt like that had been taken away from me a little bit. Especially not having an engagement with them. And that was what made me wake up every day. So it was a bit of a weird feeling for a while."

Keywords: Teaching, education, roommates, relationship, painting, tutoring, finances

UK07

Title: C regains control in her life due to the ability to work flexibly and from home

Narrative: "I am a 35 year old woman living in Oxfordshire with my husband and two young daughters, aged 3 and 4. I work as a social worker for looked after children, which means that they are children who have often suffered trauma and abuse but are now in fostering or have been adopted. Prior to the pandemic, I was expected to be in the office 9-5 and travel around the country for visits and meetings. Since Covid hit, I have been working from home and with a much more flexible timetable which has been great. Before, the culture at work was such that if you worked from home management thought that you weren't doing the work and you were skiving, so it was seen as a 'treat' to work from home. It was often deemed unnecessary by managers and subsequently refused, which was difficult for a lot of people. There was an expectation that we needed to be visible in the office, and so even when we travelled across counties for visits to check on children's wellbeing, we would then have to return to the office before going home, which meant a lot of time wasted travelling. I would often return to the office and it would be empty as other colleagues were travelling, and so it was very pointless to be there. On a normal day pre-Covid, I would have to wake me 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. I have no commute, and therefore spend a lot less on petrol which is great. I was able to save money, and sold a lot of my work clothes. I also found that my diet and nutrition improved as I was able to control what I was making for lunches etc, rather than buying on the hoof when travelling around.

We have a much stronger team atmosphere now as during Covid we had daily team meetings to check how everyone was managing their workload and their general wellbeing, which was much more support than we had felt previously. I found that my colleagues and I had a greater concern and interest in one another's lives, and recognising those of us who needed extra support and care. Social work as a profession is very mental health focused, but it is more often directed towards our clients rather than ourselves. We are now having training on secondary trauma and reflective supervision sessions about how it feels to carry the weight of responsibility of these children's wellbeing, especially during Covid when the children we looked after took far greater risks than others.

The team I work in about 90% women, as is most social work departments, and about half of us are part time. Those who are part time are all women and do so due to childcare responsibilities, whereas the full time workers are men, older women with grown children and young women who still live at home or in shared accommodation. All of the part time workers requested to continue to work from home to ease the burden of care, however those without care responsibilities, or men whose wives worked part time to care for children, requested to return to the office. At the minute there is no expectation for me to return and I hope it stays that way. The department was able to save huge amounts of money on reimbursing mileage and heating/powering facilities and offices. The removal of expectations to physically be in the office and in meetings meant that we were all afforded more time to work on our caseload.

I was lucky in that I was able to see my parents and in-laws as they were in our childcare bubble, and after a while still went out on visits to check on the children in my caseload. My husband works in construction and so continued to go into work, and so not a great deal of our life changed. Our marriage was preserved by this and our life did not feel disconnected from the outside world. Arguably my life is smaller now, but I am able to manage my work better, spend more quality time with my children and do things for self care such as crafting and reading."

Specifically telling quotes: "Working from home has given me back control. I've always been quite boundaried in terms of leaving my work at the office but that always meant that I could not always be as responsive as I wanted to be. Now my laptop is here I'm permanently switched on to the work which, for me, is really good. I can do an exercise class at lunchtime or take my laptop in with me to sort the washing, these things are real

benefits to me.”

“People with caring responsibilities were suddenly trusted to do their job. I feel so much more in control now, I'm happy to do extra work whereas I would never have wanted to stay late in the office. I'm so much more productive and I feel like my work/life balance has actually improved.”

Keywords: Childcare, flexible working, social work, mental health, work from home, mother, responsibilities, work/life balance

UK08

Title: B, a 48 year old woman, uses the pandemic to take on a career change and become closer with her family

Narrative: “I'm B, a 48 year old single mother living with my 16 year old autistic daughter. I am self-employed and also now work doing an apprenticeship. I was fortunate during the pandemic in that I had a fairly easy time of it, as I was used to working from home and my daughter liked the routine and time away from socialising, so we did not suffer too much.

My daughter was 14 when the first lockdown hit and she's now 16, so she missed out on a lot of important milestones during the pandemic. A lot of experiences that would have helped her gain independence were missed, but she has managed to cram in a lot of activities this summer to make up for lost time. Her transition back to school was also very stop/start as when other students got Covid they had to close the school down, meaning that in one term she was more often at home than she was in school. This meant that it was hard for both of us to get back into a routine.

In terms of the positive aspects, there are some things that we did during the pandemic which have improved our lives and we will continue going forward. Prior to Covid I was out of the house a lot, but when the Stay at Home legislation was brought in I noticed that the house could be made more homely so I took time to decorate and reorganise my home which has improved my working environment. I also spent a lot more time outdoors and camping which my partner and I greatly enjoy and have done many times over the last couple of years. My cooking skills have also greatly improved, so much so that I often now choose to stay at home and cook where I would previously have chosen to eat out. I also used to go to the gym but now I've been doing online training which is a lot easier to access and something that I will continue to do. My co-parenting situation carried on throughout the pandemic however we changed the way we organised ourselves. To avoid too much chopping and changing (and passing on of germs) we decided to make the blocks of time our daughter spent in each place slightly longer. This was helpful to me as that meant I had longer blocks of time with my girlfriend rather than more frequent shorter blocks. This care arrangement has continued since restrictions have eased.

During Covid, I began doing a weekly call with my sister and my elderly mother who lives alone so that we could all keep in touch. We all got to grips with the technology and,

although we are separated geographically, we all felt as though we were more a part of each others lives and so we have continued to have these calls and stay in touch. I'm very grateful for these calls, as this is time that I might not have otherwise put aside but is so worthwhile.

During the lockdown periods, I undertook some courses from home in cybersecurity and, as a result, I got an apprenticeship role which I have been doing since November alongside keeping on some clients in my other business. Cybersecurity is a more futureproof business and is something that I've wanted to move into for some time. The time afforded to me during the pandemic allowed me to undertake both the initial courses to learn the necessary skills for the role, and the time to complete the lengthy applications for the apprenticeship. I have continued with my self employed work as it allows me the ability to flex and adapt, and will be necessary to maintain as the cost of living crisis continues to worsen, but am now pursuing work in a field which I really enjoy. When I returned to an office environment for the apprenticeship I found the noise levels hard to adjust to, especially as people continued to do zoom calls in the office which was quite disruptive to working, however I am enjoying spending time with others.

Now I'm a lot more busy again which is negative in a way, and there are a lot more expectations placed upon me. It has been hard to meet up with some of my friends, as I used to keep a monthly arrangement with a group of friends but this has become increasingly hard to organise since Covid disrupted life. In some ways we're still taking precautions for the virus because my daughter had her GCSE exams this year, and we had to be very careful that we didn't catch it and jeopardise her exams. My daughter's anxiety levels were very high during the pandemic, and only this week has she decide that she would no longer wash the groceries when we brought them home. She has also only just stopped wearing her mask, as she continued to wear it everywhere. She was very concerned that I would catch Covid, however since I did catch it this summer and was not severely ill, this has eased some of her concerns.

While in some ways it feels as though the pandemic is over, there are still physical reminders of it all around us which remind me that although everything has changed, we are getting towards a new normal."

Specifically telling quotes: "In some ways the pandemic was a relief. I thought God, I'm so knackered with working, being a parent, having all these responsibilities and Covid meant not being able to do anything which was actually quite nice."

"I do feel that Covid is one element of a reprioritisation however in the last three years my partner had cancer, I lost my best friend and we had Covid, so it is a combination of these things. Life doesn't happen in a vacuum but I feel like there are constant reminders of Covid which are reminders to live in the moment and live for now."

"I do feel grateful for some things. I feel grateful that it's enabled me and my sister, my mom to have these calls. You know, my mom's not getting any younger so in that way the pandemic has given me something, you know, something quite valuable, actually. That's time that I might not have put aside, I might not have done it. Not because I wouldn't think it was important, but just because you're running around like headless chicken most of the time. Yeah, so that is one thing that is so worthwhile to me, I value that such a lot."

Keywords: Education, apprenticeship, co-parenting, single parent, autism, family, career change, cooking

UK09

Title: Ally, a 40 year old woman, struggles greatly with the effects of Long Covid and the effects it has upon her ability to care for her son.

Narrative: “My name is Ally, I'm 40 years old and I live in our own 3 bed semi-detached house with my husband and our 3 and a half year old son. I am White British and identify female. At the time of catching covid I had an 11 month old and was on permanent maternity. I had given up my part time job in 2018 because I had Hyperemesis gravidarum in pregnancy and I knew that I wanted to be a stay at home mum once the baby was born until he was 4 so would not be returning to work. I contracted Covid in March 2020 and my son was 1 in April 2020. It has been incredibly hard to cope. From contraction until November 2020 I really just tried to 'push through it'. I knew I wasn't well but didn't know why. I would spend my Monday-Friday looking after our little boy and when my husband had the weekend off, I slept for 2 days. We did that on repeat and in November my body caved and I ended up bed bound. With me not earning, we struggled financially and my parents had to pay for us to have our baby in childcare. I saw very little of him from November until the following Spring, when he turned 2. It was around this time I made the transition from bed bound to housebound. By this time “long covid” was in the media so we put 2 and 2 together and knew this is what was wrong with me.

I was well enough to make hospital appointments (which my Dad had to drive me too, I can no longer drive). I started using a walking stick and/or a wheelchair. All tests were clear leaving me feeling abandoned. My mum came to my house every day and did my washing, changed my bed sheets, cleaned the house and walked our dog as well as caring for our little boy if he wasn't at his Childminders. My mum is 76 and this was/is a huge thing for her to have to take on. My husband then got home from work and he had to cook me my dinner and look after me in the evening, although I was mostly asleep. We have lived like this on a daily basis until the present day. I can do slightly more these days but it's still very limited and changes from day to day. Occupational health put in a banister up my staircase and provided me with a perch stool and a chair to sit on in the shower alongside grab rails. I only shower once a week because it's too draining. I would say I am about 80% housebound these days. The other 20% I can only leave the house with either a mobility scooter or very short distances to walk with my stick. I have to wear earplugs because I get sensory overload with varied different sounds. I wore sunglasses for about 18 months (inside the house) because I had dreadful light sensitivity. Often, I could not look at the TV or my phone. I coped by meditating every single day. That's all I was capable of doing. I couldn't read, I couldn't listen to podcasts or audiobooks. I just lay in my bed, in the dark, day after day, meditating. I honestly think it saved my life. Without my mums help, I also don't think I would have coped. Financially I applied for

PIP, but there was a huge backlog and I only started receiving payment at the end of last year 2021. My parents helped my husband to pay our bills. We live hand to mouth and there is nothing left over at the end of the month.

I have not felt supported throughout the pandemic. GPs/long covid clinics offered nothing of any help or use. We were very much on our own. The medical gaslighting was real. In the earlier days, I had to tell them about Long Covid. 9 out of 10 GPs that I came into contact with hadn't even heard of it, despite it being in the mainstream media for at least 6 months. I had to email my GP practice with articles and research, begging them to read it and circulate it. I made a formal complaint about one GP because she was so dismissive about what I was experiencing. I learnt very quickly that I could not rely on them to help me, so I would just ask for referrals. Around the 12 month mark "long covid clinics" were starting to appear. I was referred but it was all done via telephone and I couldn't speak on the telephone due to the brain/sensory problem I was having. A 5 minute conversation on the phone interacting would lead to a huge crash in health and I'd be in bed for a week. My brain couldn't cope with conversation. The long covid clinic said to me, word for word, that "I was too poorly to access their services and I should give them a ring back when I'm feeling a bit better".

I then requested to see a neurologist who I hoped would help my brain issues so that I could access the long covid clinic. I told him everything that I was struggling with; inability to read, watch the tv, drive, have coherent conversations, play and care for my own child and he said there was nothing that could be done and I should see the long covid clinic again.

Any tests that I had came back normal and all I kept hearing again and again and again was "This is very new and we still don't know anything about it". I heard that in month 6 and I still hear it to this day."

Specifically telling quotes: "I coped by meditating every single day. That's all I was capable of doing. I couldn't read, I couldn't listen to podcasts or audiobooks. I just lay in my bed, in the dark, day after day, meditating. I honestly think it saved my life. Without my mums help, I also don't think I would have coped. Financially I applied for PIP, but there was a huge backlog and I only started receiving payment at the end of last year 2021. My parents helped my husband to pay our bills. We live hand to mouth and there is nothing left over at the end of the month."

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Keywords: Long Covid, parenting, medical care, disability, finances, care, grandparents, resistance.

UK10

Title: Busy working mum is more protective of her boundaries and prioritises self-care since the pandemic

Narrative: “I am a 31-year-old mother of two and run my own design studio. My husband is also self-employed and works in the construction industry. We live in the south of England with my mother-in-law. When you last spoke to me things were really difficult, but it couldn't be more different now.

It was incredibly tough for my business during the pandemic, we made a loss and ended up taking on debt for the first time, however things are going well now. The pandemic is still hanging over us, but I'm not worried any more. I have taken control of the finances and we are working to clear the debt. I am pleased over all that we took the government loans. It was a measured risk and allowed us to keep going with a stripped back team.

One of the biggest challenges with the business during the pandemic was trying to balance this with looking after my two children and support my parents-in-law. Normally my husband and I shared things really equally with the kids, but his business was able to continue as usual during the pandemic, so I effectively took on all the childcare. Our youngest was born right at the beginning of the pandemic and our eldest was 7 at the time. We were also living with my parents-in-law and my father-in-law was very ill, so we had to be very careful about protecting him from the virus and I felt like I was trying to support everyone. I was juggling everything and trying to keep things in control. My anxiety levels went through the roof. I felt like I could never please everyone and this came with a lot of guilt.

The dynamic at home has changed a lot since then. Now my business is back up and running, my husband and I are back to both having one day off a week to look after the kids, which is much easier. I'm more protective of my time and boundaries than before the pandemic. I've really dug my heels in when it comes to ensuring things are shared equally and that I have time for myself. I realised I had been supporting everyone else, but hadn't given myself space to breath. It's not actually helpful for everyone else if I'm stressed and taking everything on. I've been reflecting on my standards and have relaxed a lot since then. Trying to keep on top of things like housework became an obsession for me during the pandemic, it felt like one thing I could potentially control, but I'm acknowledging it's just not possible and I'm more flexible now. Recently I've found coping strategies like taking time out, going to the gym and making regular time for swimming. This has been much easier now that my husband and I take it in turns to do bedtime routines with the kids.

Being able to have friends and family visit again has also made a real difference. It frees me up to do things since they can spend time with the children and it gives me time to relax. Now the children are a bit older things are easier too since they need me less. My

oldest is in school and the youngest is in nursery. Sadly we lost my father-in-law during the pandemic, which has obviously had a huge impact on the family. My mother-in-law is more keen to be at home and values her time at home more now. This means that my husband and I are more free to have quality time together in the evenings, since there is someone at home to keep an eye on the children. My mother-in-law now also picks our daughter up from school regularly, which frees us up to concentrate on work. This extra time and headspace has meant I could join a three year skills and mentoring training programme to help boost my business, which is something I've wanted to do for a long time.

The pandemic has also changed us in other ways. We are more keen on spending time as a family unit and it's something we prioritise more. We also realised how important routine is for us and that's something we've also kept going. I've also tried to get more involved with the community and put down roots in the area. I joined a local climate action group for mothers and have joined the board of trustees at a local charity. I want to feel like I've done the best I could since I often feel quite hopeless about the future."

Specifically telling quotes: "My anxiety levels were through the roof" " I feel like I can never please everyone"

"I haven't given myself space to breathe. It's not helpful for everyone else if I'm stressed and taking everything on"

"I've really dug my heels in"

Keywords: work-care reconciliation, mental health, self-care, intergenerational care, self-employment, overload, boundaries



[when applicable] **Acknowledgement**

This deliverable benefits from the [name report] produced by the RESISTIRÉ network of national experts, including: [list names and countries].

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[For national expert reports:] Author, A. (year). Title of report. RESITIRÉ: Gendered inequalities caused by outbreaks: the impact of Covid-19 policies [Online publication]. website link.

